

## 22 – Artifacts

Ward pulled his pack over to put the hemograph away, and as he did so, he shifted the soft blue pouch containing the ball of lead, and it vibrated, rattling against the glass of his broken lamp. “Huh.” He lifted it out of the pack, and the vibration intensified. “Something’s going on with this thing,” he muttered, digging his fingers into the opening and pulling it wide. He poured the ball into his hand, and the cold metal globe shivered with vibrations so rapid that it almost felt like it was floating on his skin. It felt like it was pulling to the left.

He was aware of Haley and Nevkin staring at him, both waiting for answers. “Just a minute, you two.” Ward turned his hand toward the left, and the vibrations in the ball grew more powerful, to the point he had to hold it tight, lest it find its way off the edge of his palm. It tugged him toward the corpse of the lizard-man, and when Ward stepped toward it, following the pull, it vibrated more intensely. “This ball wants me to bring it over to—” Suddenly, he realized what it wanted. The ball was trying to get into the cloud of mana. He knelt before the corpse and held the ball in the swirling motes, and they flowed into it like iron filings to a magnet. Not just a few or a couple hundred, but almost half of them.

Thousands and thousands of mana motes surged into the metal ball, and when they stopped, the ball was slightly warm, and rather than flat gray, it shimmered with an inner blue glow. It was beautiful.

“Holy cow, Ward! Did that thing absorb the mana?” Grace was kneeling beside him, eyes glued to the softly glowing ball.

“Oh, gods!” Nevkin cried. Ward turned to see the young man standing right at the edge of his barrier, all his weight on his good leg. “I think that’s a mana-well. I’m such a fool! I should’ve realized.”

Grace snapped her fingers and jumped up, clapping her hands. “The kid’s right! I knew I’d read about things like that! They hold mana and can be used to enchant artifacts! I think you can use them in addition to your own mana, too, so you can cast spells that require more than you could normally cover from your personal pool.”

“Like a battery.” Ward smiled, gripping the ball. It was perfectly still now—no vibrations whatsoever. He supposed it made sense that it was a “mana-well,” and it sort of helped him understand that line item on his hemograph report; according to it, he had a “mana well” inside him ranked at “copper.” He didn’t know what that ranking meant, but he supposed it was some kind of indicator of how much mana he could invoke from his personal supply.

“Ward, can you do me a favor?” Nevkin pulled a slender, polished white case from his belt pouch. It looked like it was made from ivory, about the size of a smartphone, if a bit thicker.

“What?”

“My father gave me this. It’s an artifact left to him by the last person in our family who was sensitive enough to mana to use it. She outgrew its use and passed it down to my father’s father. Do you see these pale crystals on the top?” He pointed to three smooth, transparent stones on the top of the ivory case. Ward nodded. “If I can get mana to flow into them like you did that mana-well, it will activate, and I can get the artifact out. It should help us with the next creatures in the copper cage. With it, I might not need you to shoot my opponent.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Do you trust this guy?” Grace stood between Ward and Nevkin and folded her arms, scowling. Ward shrugged but didn’t answer aloud.

“If you could, if you could roll that mana-well to me, I could use it to activate my artifact.” Nevkin licked his lips, panting raggedly, clearly still in pain.

“Don’t you dare!” Grace hissed.

“Why don’t you toss that thing to me, Nevkin, and I’ll activate it for you.”

“It’s not that easy, I’m afraid. It’s bound to my b—” He winced and shifted, reaching back to press against his bandages. He looked back to Ward, his eyes bloodshot. “My bloodline.”

“I dunno, Nevkin. This thing seems pretty valuable—”

“Are you truly going to deny me?” Nevkin hissed. “We helped to earn that orb!” He gestured to Haley. “I’m not asking to keep it! I just want to use it for a moment. Would you rather I die? Those creatures are fast—are you certain you can slay yours and mine before I’m mauled so badly I can’t recover?”

Ward stared at the young man, lying prone, his leg wrapped in bloody bandages, his face and tattooed head drenched in sweat. He looked bad, and Ward, despite his ingrained distrust of people, found himself empathizing with his situation. How would he feel? The story about the family heirloom seemed a little like bullshit to him, but . . . “Haley, does that make sense? Can an ‘artifact’ be tied to a person’s bloodline?”

“Um, I don’t know, Ward. I’ve only ever dealt with common enchanted devices like glowstones and other utility items.” Ward looked at her, trying to gauge her opinion on the matter. Her eyes were wide with concern as she stared at their downed companion.

“You better send this right back to me, kid.” Ward started toward the barrier.

Again, Grace tried to intervene, “You idiot. You’re truly going to give that treasure to him? He’s a strange guy, Ward! He’s snide! He’s conniving! Do you—”

“Hush,” Ward growled. To cover, he addressed Nevkin, but actually meant the words for Grace, “Listen, I’m not sure I trust you, but if you got massacred ‘cause I wouldn’t let you borrow this item that I can’t even really use yet, then that’d make me a real heel, you know?”

“Thank you, Ward! I won’t let you down. I think everyone will be happier when I’ve unlocked my artifact!”

“What does it do?” Haley called, making Ward feel like an idiot for not asking the same thing.

“I . . .” Nevkin frowned and held up the box. “I don’t know exactly. I just know it helped my ancestor ascend all the way to Primus.”

Ward rubbed his thumb over the mana-well as he held it in his palm, pleased by how it seemed to thrum with possibility. “I’ve heard that before—‘Primus.’ Where is that?”

"It's the name of the seventh Vainglory world," Haley answered.

"Listen," Nevkin said, seeing Ward's mind still wasn't made up. "I can't see mana the way you can. I can see the glow in that mana-well, however. I'm pretty sure I can use it to activate my artifact, but I won't be able to refill it. It takes a sorcerer to do that. So you see? The well isn't something I can use long-term. Once it's empty, it would be useless to me. I'll give it back, Ward."

"Don't make me regret this, kid." With a twinge of regret, Ward knelt and rolled the heavy, glowing, billiard-ball-sized mana-well straight to Nevkin.

"Thank you!" Nevkin cried as he caught it against his chest and then lifted it with a gleam in his eyes. He immediately held it to his small ivory box, staring intently for several seconds. Ward held his breath as he watched.

Haley cleared her throat. "Nothing's happening."

"Patience. I'm trying to find the right position." Nevkin's voice was shaky, and Ward could tell the kid was ready to collapse. Frowning in concentration, Nevkin gently rotated the mana well on the box, moving it from one gem to another. Then, he flipped the box and held the well against what looked like carved lettering. Suddenly, one of the gems on the box began to flash with a faint pink light. "It's working!" Nevkin's voice rose excitedly, cracking almost comically.

Ward frowned as he heard a high-pitched note, almost like something you'd hear from a flute, begin to warble out of the box. The note continued to grow in volume, and in a matter of seconds, a second note joined it, creating a weird, discordant harmony. Ward saw that the first gem was steadily glowing now, and a second had begun to flicker. Nevkin looked mad with giddiness as he watched, cupping the mana-well and box before him like a miser clutching his precious jewels. A few minutes later, a third note joined the first two, and the box began to shake in his hands.

"I've done it!" Nevkin gasped, and Ward watched the box's three gems blaze with pink light. Nevkin struggled into a sitting position and set the mana-well in his lap, cupping the box with both hands. The discordant notes were loud, and they echoed through the chamber as the pink gems pulsed brightly.

"I don't like that sound, Nevkin!" Haley yelled.

"Nonsense! It's beautiful! It's amazing!" He turned to Ward, and a grin stretched his lips madly. The kid was usually reticent and spoke in soft tones. He'd never exposed his teeth like that before, and, for the first time, Ward noticed that, while straight and white, they were all a little too pointed. He'd seen pictures of people who did that—filed their teeth to points. In Nevkin's mad leer, they were certainly off-putting. Ward could see the sweat on his head, the glee in his eyes, and how his hands shook as he fumbled with the box. "Thank you, Ward! I'm sorry I lied."

"You lied?" Haley cried.

Ward looked at her, saw the flush of anger in her cheeks, and shook his head, chuckling. "I had a feeling he was full of shit. That's no heirloom, is it? Did you find that right before coming into this room?"

“Yes. I lied because I feared you might steal the artifact. I thought if you believed it was a family heirloom tied to my bloodline—”

“I’d let you activate it. Yeah, I figured. Whatever, kid.” Ward sighed and sat down, staring at the ceiling, wondering how long they’d have before the elevator came down again.

“Well? What is it?” Haley called out.

“I don’t know. Let me get this case open . . .” Nevkin trailed off as he held the case up, examining it from every angle.

Grace sighed and sat down in front of him. “I knew you shouldn’t have given him that mana-well.”

“Spilt milk. I don’t think he can see mana—that much was true. You’ve never seen him gather it, have you?” Ward lay back on his left elbow, watching Nevkin, curious to see what he’d pull from the box.

“Aha!” Nevkin said, and with a soft click, the music emitting from the box ceased, and Ward could see him gently lift the lid, looking within. “What have we—What is—Argh!” Something flew out of the box, attaching to Nevkin’s chin and scurrying up toward his lips. He slapped at it, trying to hold it back, his hands blocking Ward’s view. He struggled and groaned, then screamed as he flopped back. Ward just caught a glimpse of something that glinted metallicly in the light as it slipped into his mouth. Nevkin continued to groan, thrashing and flopping.

“Nevkin!” Haley screamed, running to the other side of her section to get a better look at his face. Ward couldn’t see much beyond Nevkin’s kicking legs, so he leaped up and stepped toward the barrier. Nevkin continued to thrash, and it was clear that his coughing sputters were spraying blood and gobs of flesh. Was something ripping his mouth apart? Before Ward could wonder much more, Nevkin fell still, and his screams ceased.

“Nevkin? What happened? Are you okay? Ward, you should throw him your healing potion!”

“No,” Nevkin growled, and his voice was different. It was rich and resonant. It echoed through the chamber with a finality that left no room for argument. “I am not injured.”

“But the blood—”

“My old tongue has been removed. I understand the artifact now.” He sat up, spat one more gob of flesh upon the stones, and smiled a macabre, bloody grin. He lifted the empty ivory case and tossed it to Ward. Then he scooped up the mana-well. “Thank you, Ward. This will come in handy.” His voice was less resonant now that he spoke in a normal tone, but it was still different—richer, deeper.

“What happened?” Haley asked. “What’s the artifact?”

“I need that ball back,” Ward said at the same time.

Nevkin grunted and clambered to his feet, struggling not to bend his injured leg. “I have acquired a rare and powerful artifact, Ward and Haley.” He opened his mouth wide and stuck

out his tongue. Haley gasped, and Ward cursed—the kid’s tongue moved like a natural, fleshy appendage, but it gleamed like silver. He laughed as he pulled it back in. “The case labels it the Warlock’s Silver Tongue. It’s quite robust, as you can no doubt hear from the strength of my voice. I shouldn’t struggle to utter the few words of power I’ve learned. Tell me, Ward, do you know any of the words?”

Ward folded his arms and scowled. He could already tell the little prick wasn’t planning to give him back the mana-well. He reached for his pistol, drawing it from its holster. “I don’t like being stolen from, kid.”

“Kid? Hah! You think you can threaten me with that pistol, Ward? Imagine squandering a gift like you have! Such a talent with mana manipulation, and you haven’t learned a single word? In any case, be at ease. I will borrow this power well to deal with the creature that emerges from the cage. Thanks to my new tongue, I may be able to utter some words now, but unlike you, I wasn’t born with the gift to harvest mana. I’ll use this to good effect.” He lifted the glowing ball of metal in his left hand.

“Shoot him, Ward. Shoot that thieving, lying, sneaky little rat!” Grace pounded her fists against the invisible barrier that held her in Ward’s section of the room. “If I could get over there . . . if I had a body . . .” her muttered threats trailed off.

“Nevkin, you should have asked Ward. He would have let you borrow it.” Haley sounded angry, but her voice rose in a questioning note, probably expecting Ward to say something to confirm the statement. He didn’t. He was pissed, but he wasn’t pissed enough to blast the kid. Anything might go in these catacombs, but Ward wasn’t someone who could kill a young man for taking an item he didn’t know how to use, especially if he was promising to give it back. Still, if the little shit hadn’t made that promise—

His red-tinted thoughts were cut off as the pillar began to turn and the copper cage descended from the ceiling. “After the fight then, Nevkin.” He turned to Haley. “Don’t forget to get into the cage as soon as your lizard dies!”

“Right!” She’d already begun her dance, powering up her fists. Ward watched her for a few seconds, then looked up at the cage slowly descending from the ceiling.

Despite his irritation at the kid, he asked, “Nevkin, you good? You sure you got yours?”

“I am good.” Something in his tone made Ward look at him again. He’d picked up his pack, slung it over his shoulder, and stared at the cage as it lowered, squinting through his spectacles.

“What are you gonna do?” Ward asked, a sinking feeling in his gut making him want to do something—anything—to get Nevkin to look his way and stop whatever he was up to.

“As you see,” Nevkin said, pointing, “the cage is now clear of the ceiling and an opening there lies. Farewell, Ward and Haley. Learn this lesson well—in Vainglory, power, and the initiative to use it, will see you to glory.” With that, he lifted the softly glowing power well and uttered sounds that echoed through the room, shaking Ward’s eardrums like those the monks fighting in Tarnish had spoken. It was different this time, however. Ward didn’t wince in pain, and he could hear actual words inside those sounds: “*Thravik-thragh.*”

“Hold on—” Ward started to say, but Nevkin had burst into a cloud of shimmering silver smoke that streamed up toward the hole in the ceiling and out through it. In a flash, Ward caught a glimpse of Nevkin as the smoke disappeared, and then he could only see darkness through the hole again. “That little asshole,” he growled as the cage full of monsters descended to the ground with a metallic *thunk*, and the doors began to rattle open.