

## 17 – Unexpected Reunion

When they stepped through the copper door, they found themselves in a circular, stone-walled room with a slightly vaulted ceiling. Nothing remarkable was in the smooth basalt space other than the two men sitting near the center. They both wore armor made of chain links over leather clothing, and Ward recognized them immediately as the men he'd had words with earlier near the entrance. Of course, this came as a bit of a surprise—he'd thought both of them had fallen to their deaths.

"But—" Nevkin started to say, stepping forward, only to be interrupted by the first of the men, the rough-faced fellow with a dark beard and hard eyes.

"Well! Finally, some company. How'd you get in here?"

Nevkin turned toward Haley and Ward, looking toward the doorway they'd just come through, but his face took on a puzzled expression. Following his gaze, Ward turned to see a smooth stone wall; the copper door was gone. "It's g-gone," Nevkin stammered. Ward sighed and stepped past him, sizing up the two men and looking them over. He saw some bandages around the second man's wrist, some rips in his clothes—they'd been through something. The first man, the mean, decisive one, looked pretty healthy, and his thick, meaty arm kept flexing slightly, bringing his palm against the handle of a broad-bladed axe hanging at his waist.

"We came through a door." Ward moved closer to the two men, still gripping his pistol in one hand, his knife in the other. He wasn't a psycho; he had no intention of jumping the two guys, but he also didn't trust a damn thing about the catacombs, and he'd seen these two fellows drop thousands of feet into an endless abyss. "What's your story, boys? Didn't you fall to the center of the planet?"

"Nah, it looked like that," the guy still sitting on the floor said—the one with smooth cheeks and a little friendliness in his eyes. "We both ended up falling into a pool of icy water. We had to swim up to a ledge and then got jumped by—"

"Karl, they don't want to hear our life story," the mean one growled. "So, a door, huh? Well, you can see we ain't leaving through no door." He swung his hand around in a circle, indicating the smooth stone blocks lining the entirety of the room.

"Yeah. Unfortunate." Ward let his eyes drift around the space and over the two men as he slowly advanced, edging his way to the far side of the room, wondering what was going on. Were the catacombs trying to pit them against each other? Unlike the room with doors that would only allow three to leave, he didn't see a sign or plaque or anything like that. If some kind of challenge was occurring, he didn't know what it was. He could see the mean guy slowly letting his gaze drift from Haley to Nevkin and back again. What was he thinking about? Ward was pretty good at reading people, and, to him, it looked like he was contemplating murder. "The hell is going on here?"

The guy on the floor, Karl, looked at Ward and smiled while arching an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

Ward had known plenty of criminals in his day and knew damn well that there were all kinds. There were the overt, violent types, like the guy pacing around, hand twitching and tapping his axe, sending hungry glances at Haley and Nevkin. Then there were the scheming, friendly types who liked to lure people in, get 'em comfortable, and then cut out their livers. He felt like Karl

was that kind of guy. What did he have to base it on? Not a lot, he had to admit, but he'd seen the way Karl followed mean-guy around. He'd watched him panic and try to save him when the rope started slipping up top. He could tell they were old friends, and sadistic creeps didn't stay friends with "good guys" for too long.

"There must be some sort of puzzle or—" Nevkin began, but Ward cut him off.

"These two know exactly what's going on here." He glared at Karl. "Don't you?"

"What? Me and Jon got here just a bit ahead of you all. We're just as confused by all this as you—"

"Cut the horse shit." Ward's trigger finger twitched where he held it against the frame of his pistol. He was still pointing it at the floor, but his nerves were shot, and he could tell he was in that mood, a certain frame of mind, that often got him into trouble. If that guy with the axe, Jon, made a move with it—

"Horse shit?" Jon whirled on him, snarling. "Care to explain?" Ward frowned. Was he being literal? Did they not have horses here? Did Ward need to explain his crude phrase? Jon stepped closer, crowding toward him, putting Karl behind him. He gripped the handle of his axe but left it in the loop on his belt. "You think we're lying about something?"

"Why don't you tell us what happened when you came in here? Some kind of message? What's your buddy sitting on?" Ward was bluffing, but he found it odd that, in the face of potentially hostile people, especially someone speaking so bluntly as Ward had been, Karl was still sitting in the same spot.

"Oh, this?" Karl's face reddened as though he'd been caught sneaking a cookie. He slowly stood up, and it wasn't lost on Ward that his hand had drifted to the short, thick-bladed sword he had sheathed at his belt. "Come here and read this for your big friend, pretty." He winked at Haley, still offering that friendly, guileless smile. As he stepped back, Ward could see that Karl had been sitting on an inscribed copper plaque. Haley started forward eagerly.

"Haley!" Ward said, but too late. She got close, eyes on the plaque, and then Karl was behind her, wrapping her up in a bearhug and pulling her back, away from Ward and Nevkin.

"Let go of me!" Haley growled, kicking her feet. Unfortunately, Karl was much bigger than she was, and his arms held hers pinned to her sides. Ward had seen enough. He lifted his .357, pointing right at Jon's face.

"Let her go, Karl, or I'm gonna blast your pal."

"Think so?" Jon started to bob and weave in place, bending his knees and ducking his head in a surprisingly effective attempt to keep Ward's gun barrel out of his face. Ward wasn't some rookie who thought he had to shoot a guy in the face, though. Jon might be moving his head around a lot, but his chest was a hell of a lot easier target. Even easier was his center of mass, which was hardly moving at all. Ward lowered the barrel and blasted the guy right in the gut.

Chaos ensued in the explosion of gunpowder and the echoing report that rang out in the stone chamber. Jon doubled over with an "Oof!" Karl began to wail in pain as Haley's hand wormed its way behind her and, charged with her special brand of martial arts, began squeezing him

between the legs. Nevkin whipped out his rapier and dove forward, charging toward Karl's blindside.

Ward wanted to save his bullets, so he holstered his pistol and swapped his knife to his right hand, and then he saw a flicker of light reflecting on metal, and Jon's axe ripped through the air, right toward his face. He might have taken it in the forehead, too, if Grace hadn't shoved him, screaming, "Move, idiot! He's not dead!" Ward knew all kinds of weird things could occur in a man's brain during combat, but the thought that came to him as Grace saved him from an axe between the eyes was to wonder if this meant he wasn't crazy, that she had to be real. Could a figment of his imagination make him stumble out of the path of a flying axe?

Karl's wail of agony had risen another octave, and he was thrashing his arms in a windmill fashion as Haley kept her deathly, hot-handed grip on his family jewels. Ward barked a short laugh when he saw what Haley was doing to him, and the thought crossed his mind that she had matters *well in hand*.

"Are you crazy? Quit laughing and do something about this guy!" Grace was standing behind Jon as the big, armored man squatted low in a fighting stance. He'd replaced his thrown axe with a knife a lot like Ward's, and though he pressed a hand to his belly, clearly in pain and bleeding from the gunshot wound, he looked angry enough to skin someone alive. Ward hated the idea of a knife fight, but he wasn't sure he could swap back to his pistol before the other man lunged and stabbed him.

"Come on, then," he growled, lowering his hips, holding up his knife, and circling him. As they squared off, Ward was pleased to see Nevkin finally do something, lunging forward and perforating poor, screaming Karl's kidney. He figured he just needed to keep Jon's attention a few more seconds, then the three of them would be able to—

Jon interrupted Ward's mental strategizing. "Ung!" He sprang for Ward, hacking his knife in wild, windmilling swings. He hacked down, and Ward wove back, barely dodging the blow. Jon swung the knife up, grazing Ward's ribs as he twisted away. Jon was swinging so madly that when his arm raised at the end of the slash, Ward saw an opening a mile wide and drove forward, punching his eight-inch blade forward in a swift jab. He felt the knife strike metal, hitting Jon's chain armor, but he was thrusting as hard as he could, and though the armor stopped the blow, it caused the stab to skitter upward, and Ward kept driving. Hot liquid rushed over his knuckles as the blade sank into the other man's neck.

"Yes!" Grace cheered, pumping a fist in the air.

Ward stepped back, jerking his knife out and pressing his other hand to the stinging gash in his side. Jon had dropped his knife, holding both hands to his neck, trying to stifle the flow of blood, to no avail; it oozed and pumped out between his fingers. Ward glanced at Haley and Nevkin and saw them standing over an unmoving Karl. Then Jon collapsed, his face ashen and his eyes rolling up in their sockets. "Shit, that escalated fast. What a couple of assholes."

"Why'd they grab me? We didn't threaten them!" Haley was visibly shaken, her hands trembling with adrenaline.

"The answer lies in this text." Nevkin stepped over to the copper plaque. After adjusting his glasses, he read aloud, "A room of stone built just for thee, with an exit awaiting a group of three. With more or fewer in stone wall's view, the exit shall fade, the walls ensue."

As Nevkin read, Ward turned in a slow circle, examining the walls, and sure enough, a copper door sat in the center of the wall behind him. "This place is a goddamn nightmare."

"Do we need to hurry? What if more people are let into the room?" Haley stepped away from the growing pool of blood around the perforated Karl. Ward looked down at his opponent, at the bloody pool that had spread out around him, forming a pattern on the stones that looked almost like a crimson cape billowing away from his neck.

"That's a good question."

Nevkin frowned and leaned closer to the plaque. "I would have hoped for another reward chest, considering it made us fight for our lives again."

"Did it, though?" Grace spoke to Ward, even though she was addressing Nevkin's words. Ward looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "It seems there might have been a peaceful solution. What if extra people had hidden somehow? It says, 'in stone wall's view.' It doesn't say only three can be alive. Anyway, the two thugs made the decision easy. You should loot them, Ward."

Ward looked down at Jon, then over at Karl. Neither man had a pack, but they had armor and clothes that were in a hell of a lot better shape than his. Jon was about the same size as he was. "Either of you object if I take this guy's shirt and armor? Mine's shredded."

"Not at all. You should take this one's sword. It's a heavy chopping blade, but probably a good choice for a man your size, especially if you aren't well versed in the art of the blade." Nevkin knelt and began to unbuckle Karl's sword belt.

"Not well versed, huh? Well, I guess you've got a point." The room had begun to smell. The air was thick with a coppersy, cloying scent that only a lot of spilled blood could cause. Haley's hands were still trembling, and Ward frowned at her, a little concerned. She hadn't acted that way after the fight with the frog creatures. "Hey, kid." When she looked at him, he nodded to the corpse at his feet. "Can you help me get this guy's armor off? We should hurry." It was true; he wouldn't mind the help, but he was trying to occupy her, trying to get her to stop thinking about the guy she'd helped to kill.

"They . . . they were going to keep me and kill you two."

"She's not wrong," Grace piped up.

"I know, Haley." She hadn't yet moved, and Ward suddenly felt stupid asking her to help strip a dead man. "Hey, go wait by the door; I got this." Jon's armor was made up of interlocking rings sewn to a thick leather lining, and Ward had a hard time getting it off the guy, especially as he tried to keep the blood off it. Some of it couldn't be helped, though, even though he dragged the body a few feet away from the pool. After finding and unbuckling all the straps and wrestling with the body, he finally held up the blood-spattered, damaged armor.

On the second inspection, Jon's shirt wasn't really in any better condition than his. The armor had slowed down Ward's bullet, but he'd still bled freely into his undershirt. Worse, the shirt was soaked in sweat and grime, and Ward couldn't stomach putting it on. He ripped the sleeves off, though, and used them as rags, trying to clean up the armor a bit before putting it on. When

he'd finally gotten it on, he saw Nevkin standing nearby, looking impatient, holding the sword belt for him.

Ward walked toward him, shrugging his shoulders, trying to adjust the heavy armored shirt. It was too small for him; his shoulders were broader than Jon's, and he couldn't get the straps along the side very tight. Still, he felt a hell of a lot more secure in it than just his tattered work shirt. Ward took the sword belt and slung it around his waist. It was a big, thick belt meant to be worn over the armor. It had a dozen notches, and he could see by the wear which one Karl had used. Ward's waist was two notches wider. "Those guys were smaller than they looked."

"You're just a big man." Nevkin shrugged and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

Ward grunted and worked to fasten his pistol holster and knife sheath to the big sword belt, cutting the leather with his knife to make the slits larger. "Wonder where their other belongings are." He walked over to the wall and picked up the axe Jon had thrown at him. It was a decent-looking weapon, about the size of a hatchet, but with a blade nearly twice as broad, clearly not meant for chopping wood.

"The one who grabbed me mentioned falling into water," Haley murmured.

"Yes," Nevkin nodded to Haley, "likely they lost some items there."

"Hard to believe they swam in this stuff." Ward slapped a hand against his metal-covered chest. The armor had added a lot of weight to his burden, but at least it made the narrow pack straps more comfortable.

"Now, you look like you might handle a little more trouble." Grace nodded in approval, walking in a slow circle around him. "It doesn't fit you perfectly, but we can worry about that when you get out of here."

Ward was just about to suggest they walk through the door while they still could, but then his eyes caught the flickering, ghostly sparkle of tiny clouds of mana drifting up from Jon's corpse. He frowned, thought about it, and then said, "I need to do something before we go. I need to figure something out. It'll just take me a couple of minutes."

Nevkin shook his head. "Every minute we delay is a risk—"

"Yeah, I know. Go ahead without me if you want." Ward took his pack off and dug around for his hemograph.

Haley moved closer, folding her arms over her chest. "I'll wait, Ward."

"I think I'll—" Nevkin cut his words short when he saw Ward lift the little copper and glass device out of his pack. "Wait, as well."

Ward sat down next to Jon's body near his head and away from the pooled blood. He put the hemograph in his lap, and then, after wiping the blade again and again on the leftover scraps of Jon's shirt, he quickly nicked his finger again. Haley leaned close. "What are you doing?"

"I have to check something."

“It’s a hemograph. He’s reading his vital statistics.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of those!”

Nevkin shrugged, but he, too, leaned close. “I’ve seen better. My master has one that was built by a crystalsmith on Primus.”

Ward pressed his blood into the depression in the metal and stared at the inky fluid beneath the glass:

<b>Bloodline:</b>	<b>Basic Human (h)</b>
<b>Accumulated Mana:</b>	<b>3.1</b>
<b>Mana Well</b>	<b>Tin + 2.0</b>
<b>Mana Sensitivity:</b>	<b>Bronze</b>
<b>Mana Pathways:</b>	<b>Tin</b>
<b>Vessel Capacity:</b>	<b>Tin</b>
<b>Vessel Durability:</b>	<b>h + 3.21</b>
<b>Vessel Strength:</b>	<b>h + 2.09</b>
<b>Vessel Speed:</b>	<b>h + 1.53</b>
<b>Longevity remaining:</b>	<b>~42.33%</b>
<b>Anima:</b>	<b>NIL</b>

Staring at the numbers, some things began to come together in Ward’s mind. It said he had three-point-one accumulated mana, but his “vessel” durability, strength, and speed had all gone up by nearly a full point. It meant that he’d “accumulated” more than that from the corpse back by the stairs, and his body was already making use of it. Did he have room to accumulate more?

Nevkin and Haley continued to talk, and Ward could feel Grace behind him, watching intently, but he ignored them all. He closed his eyes and held his hand out, touching the cloud of mana motes lazily drifting about in the air above Jon’s corpse. He steadied his breathing and emptied his mind, opening himself to the unseen universe, willing himself to be part of something bigger. Suddenly, he could feel the motes dancing around his hand, and then, like tiny, cold explosions, they sank into his flesh, sending tingles of euphoria up his arms and into his chest.

It was over before he knew it, and Ward opened his eyes with a sigh. Haley was leaning very close, staring at his hand. “What are you doing?”

“He’s gathering mana. My master . . .”

Ward tuned him out, hastily sticking his finger in his mouth, sucking until the blood began to flow again. He held the digit out, watched as a bead of blood appeared, and then smeared it onto the hemograph’s sensor. One of the numbers shifted on the display:

<b>Accumulated Mana:</b>	<b>6.8</b>
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“It seems like you can gather a little more now than you could before!” Grace whispered into his ear. Ward frowned and rubbed his ear on his shoulder. He stood, tucked the hemograph into his pack, and then pointed at the door. “Thanks for waiting. Shall we?”