

### 3 – Crash Course

Ward snorted again and raised a thick brown eyebrow, locking his pale eyes with Grace's strange, fiery ones. "The hell do you mean the lowest world? The hell is Vainglory?" Grace might not have realized it, but at that moment, Ward decided she wasn't real. As far as he was concerned, something had snapped in his noodle, and he needed to start figuring things out, needed to get himself straight.

Grace stepped to the edge of the boulder and dropped down out of sight. Ward felt some relief when she vanished. Maybe his delusion was fading. "Well?" her voice rang out clear as a bell. "Come down and walk with me, and I'll explain on the way." Ward walked over to the edge and looked down to see her standing on the charred ground. From this distance, he could see the ash was mixed with dirt, and little sprouts of green were poking forth here and there.

"Why?"

"Why?" She frowned and gave him that glare again. "You just want to keep adding questions, or would you like to get some answers? Let's move, old man!" She turned and started lightly springing over the ashy loam, her delicate feet somehow remaining clean with her passage.

"Old man?" Ward grumbled, then sat on the edge of the gigantic boulder and slid down the edge, dropping five or six feet to the ground. The drop further convinced him that he was in the midst of a delusion—he landed easily, his knees bending to absorb the impact, and not one of his joints protesting. "No way." He dropped into a squat and stood up, then repeated the movement three or four times—not one click or twinge of pain from his bad knee.

"Are you coming?" Grace called, and Ward looked to see her a good thirty yards away, standing between two blackened tree trunks and waving. He stood and started forward, determined to get some answers from the feminine delusion.

As he approached, she turned and began walking again, albeit more slowly. He caught up, and she spoke, "There are seven Vainglory worlds. They're called that by common consensus because the first explorers to work through some of the challenges named them so. Vainglory, boastfulness, you get the idea? If they survived, they returned to other settled worlds and bragged about their accomplishments, and so the seven worlds and their suns became Vainglory." She squinted and pointed at the suns over Ward's left shoulder.

Ward opened his mouth and took a breath, but before he could ask another question, she kept speaking, "Cinder is the lowest because the challenges are the easiest; the rewards are the smallest."

"We're in another solar system?" Ward chuckled, shaking his head. "I like sci-fi, but I don't think I'd dream something like this up. I wonder how bad the coma is. You reckon everyone's just standing around my bed waiting for me to die?"

"Everyone, Ward? Whom do you mean? Your sister? I suppose your brother-in-law might come to the hospital . . ." She stopped speaking, and her eyes flared with brighter flames as she scowled at him. "Ward! Stop with the nonsense! You're not in the hospital! You're on Cinder, and I'm stuck in here," she jabbed a sharp pointer finger into his chest, "so you better get with the program!"

“Okay, lady.” Ward shook his head, grinning wryly. “Can you explain why we’re here?” He paused and rolled his eyes. “I get it, you jumped into my body ‘cause I was dying, but why are we *here*? Why aren’t we still in the old ballroom under Seattle?”

“Well, I told you there would be a cost . . .” She folded her hands before herself and looked up at Ward almost guiltily. Ward might have called the look demure if not for the fire in her eyes. “You see, I was in a good host back there, but we were stuck on Earth! The mana on Earth is so thin, Ward! We could hardly get anything done. I tried to get her to bargain with me a little, to give me a little anima so I could open a portal to a better place like this, but she was scared and stingy. I was almost grateful those cultists took her. The rite they performed, with the old book and the blood sacrifice—it made the portal a lot cheaper. I would normally need more anima than a single person could spare to make it work.”

“Come again?” Ward frowned; something about the offhand way she’d mentioned the anima gave him a queasy feeling in his gut. Something wasn’t right.

“Well, my people can’t interact with mana, which I hope to teach you to find, but we can use anima, which many, many types of people can share with us. See? I help you, and you give me some anima—just a little—and we both win. I believe that’s called a win-win.”

“You took some of my anima? What the hell is it?” Ward, for some reason, held his left hand to his chest.

“You’ll hardly notice it’s gone.” She sighed at Ward’s stare and threw her hands up in exasperation. “Fine. Fine, let me back up a little and try to explain. Mana is out here.” She spread her arms, gesturing toward everything in sight. “Some people with the right talents and a suitable vessel can find mana and gather it into themselves, using it for magic. People like me, well, we can’t use mana, but we can use anima, which is in here.” She stepped closer and gently tapped her manicured red nail against Ward’s sternum.

“And you took some of mine to get me out of trouble?”

“Basically.”

“But what is it? What does anima mean?”

“There are many words with anima as their root. But it’s, well, it’s your soul. Forget that for now, Ward. The important thing is that I brought you here, where the mana is rich, and I’m going to teach you so much. I’ve already given you a lot: I healed you and freshened up that old flesh of yours.”

“Freshened up?” Ward held up his right hand, still clutching the polished walnut grip of his snub-nosed Smith & Wesson. He stared at the back of his hand and the wrist sticking out of his jacket. Something was off. He snatched his left hand up in front of his face and spread his fingers wide, slowly turning his wrist. Was he losing it, or were there a lot fewer wrinkles around his knuckles? Was his skin thicker and more vibrant? “Did you, uh, did . . .” He couldn’t bring himself to say it, afraid he’d sound hopeful and sad, exposing himself to ridicule.

“Make you younger? I’d say I shaved a good ten years off you, old man. Back in your thirties again. Does it feel good? Think how great you’ll feel after you harvest some mana, and we get to work improving that weak flesh of yours.”

“No way . . .” Ward yanked his coat open and jammed the pistol into his shoulder holster, then he shrugged out of his raincoat, letting it fall to the charred ground. He pulled his shirttails out of the top of his trousers, noticing they felt significantly looser and roomier, and started to unbutton his shirt.

“What are you doing, Ward?” Grace had hopped atop a burned stump and stood on her painted toes, looking down at him with a narrowed eye, wrinkling her nose.

“Gonna see if you’re full of shit or not!”

“By getting naked? Why don’t you just snap a selfie?”

Ward froze, then slapped himself on the forehead and dropped his half-unbuttoned shirt. He jammed his hand into his pocket—the one that wasn’t full of extra bullets—and yanked out his phone. He held it before his face, and it clicked and opened, displaying his home screen, though several lines of distorted static repeatedly ran through the image. Had he fallen on it and cracked the panel beneath the glass?

He had four text notifications, but before he touched them, he looked at the top of the screen and saw he had no service, no Wi-Fi—no anything. His battery was at thirty-two percent. Ward touched the text icon, noting the four messages were from his partner, Tony:

*10:17 – Huh? A hole in an alley?*

*10:19 – Are you drunk, man?*

*10:24 – Ward, my man, you need to let me know if this is a prank. Like, now.*

*10:32 – Okay, calling the watch sergeant to send you backup. If this is a prank, or you’re drunk or something, I’m gonna forward your text to the entire department.*

“Jesus, Tony!” Ward sighed and shook his head. “He waited fifteen minutes to call for backup.” Thinking of the minutes, Ward glanced at the time on his phone and groaned when he saw it said 11:47 PM. “My phone thinks it’s midnight.” He glared at the blue sky, then turned back to the phone and touched the camera app. He held the lens in front of his face and couldn’t stop the idiotic grin that exposed his teeth. “You really did it! You really took ten years off.”

“I don’t like to lie!” Grace frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. Ward barely heard her; he was looking at the taut skin around his neck, the absence of age spots, the dark stubble along his jawline, and the lack of gray in his eyebrows and short, thick hair. He grinned wider, looking at his teeth, and was sure they looked a bit whiter than they had that morning. “Is this permanent?”

“Well . . . You understand how time works, right?” She suddenly sounded very concerned.

“Huh?”

“I took ten years off, so, you know, as you continue to age—”

“Oh, right, right.” Ward laughed idiotically and put his phone back in his pocket.

"If you listen to me and follow my guidance, there's a good chance you'll be even younger looking soon. There's a good chance you might never have to worry about aging again."

"All right, lady, you're starting to get my attention. I don't see how I could dream up such a goofy scenario." Ward leaned over, snatched up his jacket, and hung it over his shoulder. He took a good look at her, the tapered cut of her slim-fitting dress slacks, the black blazer, clearly tailored for a perfect fit, and her spotless, starched white shirt, buttoned to the collar. She certainly looked sharp. Would he dress her like that if she were a figment of his imagination? He couldn't imagine it.

She grinned slyly as though she could read his thoughts. "Starting to believe?"

"Let's just say my doubts are moving in new directions." In all honesty, Ward didn't know what to believe. He was a forty-four-year-old man; he'd had plenty of dreams, and this wasn't like any dream he'd ever had, nothing close.

The air was warm but carried hints of odors that seemed new to him, though he couldn't place how. The ground was crunchy where the ash had solidified, but beneath it was a layer of springy loam, and when Ward bounced his weight up and down, his shoes squeaked as they broke through the crust. He could feel sweat building in his armpits and along his brow. He was aware of his breathing, his heartbeat, and the weight of his coat on his shoulder. In short, everything seemed too real to be a fantasy.

"Are you ready to follow me?" Grace hopped down from the stump, and Ward sized her up. She wasn't tiny, but she wasn't a big woman. Maybe five-five, he figured. She winked at him as his eyes came to rest on her face, and Ward looked away and cleared his throat. "Relax, Ward. I told you. I'm in your head! Hah!" She turned and started to saunter away through the ash, passing by a tremendous, blackened fallen tree. Ward figured it had to be a couple hundred feet long, and Grace looked antlike when she walked in its shadow.

He got moving, trudging along in her wake, and called, "Where are we going?"

"East!"

"Why?"

"Well, Cinder burns in an east-to-west progression. We're in a place that burned not too long ago, so if we go east, we'll get to parts that have recovered more."

"It burns?" Ward's eyes drifted around the blackened hellscape.

"Slowly. There's a band of fire that stretches from pole to pole, and it moves around the globe, burning. It takes a long time, though. Centuries."

"I don't . . . That doesn't sound possible. Sustainable." More doubts sprang to life in Ward's mind.

"You need to stop thinking about things in terms of Earth, Ward. The universe is a big, mysterious place, and when you account for things like mana and anima, which you humans have very little understanding of, things can get pretty weird." She hopped up the side of a hill,

hardly disturbing the ashy soil, and Ward followed after her, trying to make sense of her words. He was about to ask more about mana when he noticed he was stepping into one of her slender footprints, and a new thought occurred to him.

“I thought you said you were in my head? Not real for other people.”

She paused at the top of the slope and looked down at him, frowning. “The footprints?”

“Yeah,” he grunted.

“Ward. I’m very real for you—you see me, hear me, feel me, and your brain will fill in things like footprints in ash. If we stand here and chat for a while, then you turn back to look at your progress, you’ll see that only your footprints remain.”

“Can we?”

“So eager to test me?” She frowned and folded her arms over her chest again but didn’t move. “I know you’re wondering about mana and anima.”

Ward nodded as he finally got to the top of the slope. When he looked past her, further east, he supposed, he saw a long, gentle slope dotted with slender, burned stumps, but farther, almost as far as he could see, he saw more green. “Yeah, I was. Also, are we almost out of the burned area?”

“Well, lucky for you, we came in near the edge. We could have been hiking through ash for weeks.” She sighed and kicked her slender, pale foot through the ash, digging up a furrow, sending a puff of gray into the air, and scattering loose, dark soil over the top of the outer crust. “Okay, eyes up here.” She pointed to her face. “Listen to me for a few minutes, and then we’ll confirm that I’m not corporeal.” Ward complied, looking into those dancing flames buried behind her red irises.

“So, mana. Obviously, you’re familiar with the idea of a soul; imagine that the universe has a soul. That’s natural mana. Now, I’m not telling you to start attending church again, Ward. Soul is one word, but others consider it more of an essence—a driving force. It’s an elusive, mysterious *stuff* that some people can interact with more than others. More than that, it’s richer in some areas than others, and no one knows why, not really. Some species in the universe are older; they’ve evolved more and did so in an area rich in mana. Those species have a real leg up on humans like you, Ward.”

“So, the playing field isn’t level.”

“Not in the slightest!” She grinned and punched him in the shoulder, not hard, but enough to jostle him. “You’re catching on quickly! Don’t worry, though—not everyone has a helpful little devil like me.”

“Devil?”

“Oh, don’t let the word scare you off. Call me an alien if you want. The point is, I’m in your head and will help you figure things out. There are ways to make you tougher, to open you to mana, and to give you the means to make use of it.”

“And you’re helping me because . . .”

“Because I think it will be fun. Also, you gave me some anima, and, Ward, it was so, so, so good! Plus, I’d be stuck on Earth if it weren’t for you. Who knows, if I help you get strong enough, you might make it to the next world or, heck, old man, maybe all the way out of the Vainglory System!”

Ward frowned, rubbing at his stubble, enjoying the rough texture on his fingertips as he contemplated. There was no way his brain was coming up with all this shit. Something had to be happening outside his mind, and he couldn’t think of any reasonable explanation. Was this lady legit? He looked at the ash near his feet and saw the divot she’d kicked out was gone, the area smooth and untouched. “Yeah, but there’s gotta be more in it for you—”

“Hush!” Grace held a finger to her lips, then slowly turned in a circle. “Oh, dammit! Shit! Time to run, old man!”