

5 – Mana

Grace, who'd wandered a few feet away and was busily poking at a tuft of green grass that had managed to take root in the thinning ash layer, turned toward him with an arched eyebrow. "All what?"

Ward had seen a witness or suspect play dumb before, and he wasn't buying it. "Quit playing games, all right? Explain this thing to me." He held up the metal and glass tablet.

"It's just junk, Ward. I told you those scavs won't have good tech. It's called, I believe, a hemograph or vitalscope. It uses glyphs—written words of power—to force the ambient mana to perform an analysis of your blood." She sighed and stood, stomping toward him. "Thing is, Ward, you got this off a dead scav, and I doubt it's a very good one. I doubt it's calibrated to read a person like you, a person from Earth, properly." She peered over his shoulder at the chart and clicked her tongue as she perused the numbers.

"It identified me as human, which seems to contradict what you just said—"

"Identifying a bloodline is different from understanding it! These are very basic details. I've read texts about hemographs that could tell much more about a person." She paused and made a soft humming sound. "Well, I like that it thinks you have 'bronze' mana sensitivity."

"Is that good?"

"I've no idea, but it sounds better than 'tin,' doesn't it?"

Ward frowned and tapped his finger on the display. To his dismay, the action scattered the strange liquid, erasing the table. "I, uh, couldn't help noting the 'NIL' where my anima should have been."

Grace stood and arched her back, looking away from him as she stretched. After a moment, she said, "Don't worry about that. I'm sure a more sophisticated device will be able to read your anima more accurately."

Ward grunted, shaking his head, his suspicions further piqued by Grace's nonchalance. Still, he put the device in his pack and decided to put off worrying until he'd met more people and gathered more information. He was coming to terms with his new reality. Everything was too real, too visceral to be a fever dream, at least in his experience. He'd had normal dreams, he'd tripped on surgical meds, he'd been knocked out, and he'd even had heat stroke—nothing ever felt like this. He leaned back, bunched his raincoat up for a pillow, closed his eyes, and waited for time to pass.

Sometime later, after Grace had determined they'd waited long enough, she roused him, and they began marching back toward the scene of Ward's encounter with the scavs. He tugged the lapels of his raincoat tight, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and shuffled after her toward the setting sun. Things had cooled down a lot as the suns dipped toward the distant horizon.

He'd dozed off a bit while they waited, which had gone a long way toward helping to convince him he wasn't suffering from a delusion. He'd had wild dreams, far more vivid than any he could recently remember, and it didn't seem like something that would happen if he were already dreaming this whole scenario up. He couldn't recall his dreams clearly, but he had the

impression he'd been flying or maybe floating on a big blue river. He remembered lots of laughter and camaraderie and just feeling damn good. When he'd rolled off his rock and shaken himself awake, Grace had been smiling at him, and he wondered if somehow she'd experienced his dream, too.

She paused and turned, waiting for him to catch up, and he saw that her pale hair was tinted blue. Ward turned to look at the sky and caught his breath. "Jesus."

"It's something, isn't it?"

He didn't just see a moon in the sky; he saw several. One was close and enormous, the source of the blue light, but further toward the horizon was a smaller, bright yellow moon, and in between them, clearly more distant thanks to the perspective of looking past the blue moon, was a bright, green-blue marble. Still further, Ward was sure he saw other moons or maybe distant planets. They were colorful and too large to be stars. At least, he thought so. "Three moons?"

"Two and some of the other Vainglory worlds. The blue and green one is Oceana, the fourth."

"The fourth?"

"Vainglory world! Remember they're ranked in difficulty?"

"Right." Ward shook his head. "What does that mean, again?"

"There are challenges that an ancient culture built on these worlds. They involve mana and have valuable prizes. That's why I brought us here. I figured you could prove yourself, and while you're at it, you could *improve* yourself!" She grinned, turned on her heel, and resumed her walk toward the distant sunset. Only a sliver of colorful orange and red streaks touched the sky on the horizon by the time they stopped in front of a high, sturdy pile of stones shaped like it was meant to cover a body. The scavenger had toiled long and hard to cover up her brother's corpse.

"Almost dark," he grunted.

She turned to frown at him. "Wasn't there any sort of light in that pack?"

"Yeah, I think so." Ward shrugged out of the stained, brown canvas backpack and unfastened the buckle at the top. He'd dumped the two packs of the dead scavengers and tried to consolidate the things he wanted, but most of it was junk in his estimation. Still, he found a little copper rectangle with a single glass panel, and behind the glass, he could see a bulb. It was weirdly shaped, almost like it had been blown by hand—a custom creation. On the back was a little copper crank. "Hmm," he muttered as he began to turn it.

The mechanism inside the lamp whirred and clicked, and he could feel it getting tighter and tighter as he cranked. When it got to the point where he feared he might break the little lever, he let go. The bulb began to tick and flicker, rapidly brightening, and soon, a warm, yellow glow shone from the glass window.

Grace nodded. "It's good that you have a light, but for what we're about to do, you might have an easier time in the dark. Let's start with that poor bugger you shot first, the one who isn't buried."

"All right." Ward led the way around the cairn and then up the slight slope to the crumpled form of the dead scavenger. "What's the deal with this anyway? Who has a brass, cranking flashlight?" Ward held up the little lantern.

"Vainglory is a crossroads system. Many portals and mana pathways lead through it, and you'll find all sorts of tech and strange people here." She squinted at his lantern. "Can you turn the light off, or does it have to wind down?"

"I don't know." Ward lifted the lamp and scrutinized the back side. Sure enough, beneath the crank was a little brass switch. When he flicked it to the side, the gears inside the lamp stopped ticking, and the bulb faded to a faint orange glow and then winked out.

"Good! Now sit down here beside the corpse, face it."

"All right." Ward sat down on the hard-packed ash and crossed his legs before himself. He was about a foot away from the dead scavenger, and some smells were beginning to emanate from the body. He wrinkled his nose and silently hoped they'd soon be gone from the scene. Grace flopped down beside him and began to take exaggerated breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. When Ward looked sidelong at her, marveling at how bright the blue from the moon had become, she took another deep breath and pointed at him.

"You too!" She made him take five deep breaths, in and out. "You're trying to ground yourself, to *center* yourself. Push troublesome thoughts from your mind and be in the moment. Feel the air, see the moonlight, taste the copper and decay in your breaths." Her casual acceptance of the dead body smells struck Ward as strange but also comforting; the body was part of his reality now. "Watch the scav's body, Ward; really see it." She grew quiet after that, and Ward did what she asked; he watched the body.

Time passed, and Ward tried to stay in the moment, to be present for the sights and smells and feelings around him, but his mind began to wander, and, for some damn reason, he started to think about his ex-wife. She'd left him nearly nine years ago in a cliché of all clichés, dumping him to start a relationship with an old high school flame she'd reconnected with through some online class reunion site. Ward wouldn't admit it to anyone, not even his sister, but it had pretty much gutted him.

"You're letting your mind wander." Grace sighed, hopping up. "You don't see anything?"

"Nothing. Just a pile of shadowy lumps."

"Oh well! It was probably too much to be optimistic. I'd hoped you have some affinity for mana. It would have made things a heck-ton easier."

"Heck-ton?"

"I'm trying it out. You don't like it?" Grace wrinkled her nose.

"It's . . . no, not really. What do we do if I can't see mana?"

“We’ll have to try to solve some of the easier challenges to get you some infusions. Hopefully, that will wake something up.” She turned and started to walk back to the east, and Ward followed.

“And if it doesn’t? Wake something up?”

“Well, I’ll probably be hunting for a new host.” She turned to grin, but Ward wasn’t listening. As soon as he’d turned to follow her, he’d seen, over her shoulder, the cairn where Lizzy’s brother had been buried. Drifting out between the stones, he saw tiny motes of flickering, glowing, pale blue dust.

“Is that it?”

“What?” Grace stared at Ward briefly, followed his gaze, and then looked back at him.

He frowned. “You don’t see it?”

“No! Describe it!” She rushed toward him and grabbed his arm, looking into his eyes as though she could see what he was seeing by peering into their depths.

“Like, I don’t know, tiny floating particles of blue dust. It’s seeping out of the gaps in the stones—”

Grace squeezed and jerked on his arm in excitement as she interrupted him, “Mana!” She pulled his arm, turning him, and pointed at the other corpse up the slope. “Nothing there?”

“Nothing.” Ward could barely make out the darker shadow of the body slumped against the charred ground.

“He must have traded all his anima or nearly so.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll explain later, but come here, let’s see if you can do anything with what you can see.” Again, she tugged his arm, pulling him close to the cairn Lizzy had built.

“If you are ‘in me,’ why can’t you see what I see?” Ward held his hand out over the stones, passing it through the fine, blue dust.

“Because of my nature, I can interact with anima, but not mana. There are all kinds of people in the universe, Ward.” She hopped atop the cairn, and Ward frowned.

“You shouldn’t sit up there.”

“Hmm?”

He pulled his hand out of the mana cloud, not having felt anything. “It’s disrespectful.”

“To . . .” She frowned and looked down. “To him? The scav? He doesn’t care.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, because he’s dead.”

“To Lizzy, then. To me.”

“Goodness! Sensitive!” She hopped down to stand beside him again. “I’m in a good mood, though, so I’ll be easy. You don’t know how good it is that you can see the mana. And you’re not even concentrating! My last host had to meditate in a perfectly calm space to catch a few glimpses. Your gift is pretty rare among humans. I knew I felt something about you . . .” She trailed off, looking from Ward’s eyes to the cairn and back again. Her brow creased, and he couldn’t tell if she was trying to guess what he was thinking or was still trying to catch a second-hand glimpse of the strange blue dust. “Did you feel anything when you put your hand in it?”

“No.”

“Not surprising. Manipulating mana is much harder than seeing it, but you can’t do the one without the other.”

Ward frowned and tried to make sense of her words. “You mean I couldn’t work with it if I couldn’t see it?”

“Exactly.”

“And some people can’t see it?”

“Many people.”

“And why couldn’t I see it on Earth?”

“Because it’s so *thin*, well, and it’s quite possible I woke something up in you when I bound myself to you.” She shook her head. “Let’s not get bogged down in the details. Come on, put your hand back into it.” Ward frowned but didn’t object. He reached his hand, palm down, fingers splayed wide, into the nearest little cloud of blue, sparkling dust and held it there.

“Now what?”

“Now close your eyes and try to tune out everything. Everything but your hand. Really focus on it, Ward. See if you can detect anything unusual—tingles, itching, heat, cold; everyone describes it differently.”

Ward tried to follow her instructions. He closed his eyes, steadied his breathing, and focused his attention on his hand. He stood there for a while, breathing slowly and trying to calm his mind. The world was tranquil where they stood, with only an occasional insect chirp or a faint rustle of ash in the breeze to disturb him, so he couldn’t complain about distractions, at least not physical ones. The problem was that his mind kept wandering, a faint, nagging worry that he was completely nuts, living in a delusion, taking the lion’s share of his focus. When he shook that off and pushed it down, another question clawed its way into his conscious thoughts: was he dead?

Ward had to consider the idea. Was he on a crazy trip triggered by a chemical dump in his brain as it died? Ward wasn’t a religious man, but his mom had made him go to church as a kid, and

he had to wonder if he was in some kind of purgatory or hell. It sure didn't feel like heaven. In a way, he found the idea comforting; at least he still existed. "I think, therefore, I am," he muttered with a soft chuckle.

"Ward! You won't get it if you don't focus!" He felt Grace snake her fingers up to his biceps, and he had a second to wonder what she was doing before she gave him a vicious pinch.

He snapped his eyes open and jerked his arm out of her grasp. "Ouch! Dammit!"

"You need to stop with the bologna about being dead." In the dim, blue light of the moon, her eyes flared brightly, and Ward could clearly see the flames dancing behind her irises.

"Why are there flames in your eyes?"

"No, no, Ward! We're not going to start off on another tangent right now. Come on, focus, put your hand back in the mana, and really try to close down all your other thoughts. Remember when I showed you how to ground yourself earlier? Focus on being here, on experiencing the present, and just shut out those annoying worries; dismiss them—they'll get you nowhere."

Ward rubbed at his arm for a second, frowning, but then he sighed, took a deep, cleansing breath, and put his hand back into the blue cloud. This time, he didn't close his eyes. He found it easier to focus on the mana and close out his other thoughts if he could watch it. At first glance, it was like a cloud of dust, but when he studied the motes and how they danced around and interacted with his hand, Ward began to see that there was nothing really dust-like about them.

Each little mote moved independently, and it wasn't on any sort of breeze. Sometimes, when they touched his hand, they'd linger for a heartbeat and then start to move again. Sometimes, they slid along his skin, navigating around the tiny hairs on the back of his knuckles. Sometimes, they bounced right off, zipping up into the greater cloud of motes. At first, he'd thought they sparkled, but he realized that wasn't true; the effect was created by the different shades of motes dancing around each other. Some were bright, pale blue, and some were darker. The darker ones seemed to move more slowly, and as Ward watched one of them, he saw it wink out of existence.

He caught his breath as understanding came to him. The motes of mana started out bright and pale, full of energy, and, as they aged or maybe seeped through some invisible membrane of the universe, they faded, slowed, and then were gone. Ward let his hand drift a little, and the motes danced or slid or bounced against his flesh, and, for the first time, he thought he could feel them. The faintest tickle of coolness that might have been a breeze or, if he closed his eyes and imagined it, a person gently blowing on his hand.

"You felt it, didn't you?" Grace's voice was hushed but quick with excitement.

"Shh." Ward closed his eyes, trying to focus on that feeling, that tickle along the back of his hand. The more he became aware of it, the more he noticed it, and the stronger the sensation became. It went from a faint, prickling, breezy sensation to a tingle that danced over his knuckles and into his palm. He snapped his eyes open and watched as first a few, then a dozen or more of the tiny, dust-like motes seemed to sink into his hand.

Tingles of sensation ran through his skin, over his hand, up his arm, and into his chest. It was cool and electric at once, like the shiver of pleasure you might feel as a lover whispers in your

ear, only multiplied tenfold. Again, he caught his breath, too stunned and excited to react, too afraid he'd break the spell.

Almost as soon as it started, though, it stopped; the motes no longer sank into him, and the sensation faded. He tried moving his hand in the cloud, but they almost seemed repulsed by him, pushed away like his hand was a magnet with the wrong polarity. He was still messing around, trying to see what had changed, when Grace grabbed him by both biceps and pushed him away from the cairn. She was staring intently at him, her fiery red eyes locked on his. Ward took a step back, but she pursued him, still staring. After a moment, a slow grin spread on her lips, revealing perfect, white teeth.

"You did it! I can see a glow! Faint, very faint, but it's there!"

"A glow?"

"In your eyes. A faint pale, white glow. The barest minimum, but you did it!" She lifted her head and howled a literal, wolf-like, high-pitched howl.

"Jesus, you trying to bring the whole neighborhood running?"

"Only you can hear me, silly." She danced on her tiptoes for a moment, gesticulating with her arms and knees—some routine the kids were probably doing these days. Then she snapped her fingers and pirouetted, still wearing that huge, silly grin. "This is great news, Ward!"

"So my eyes are glowing? What does that mean?"

"Hah! Glowing. Don't get ahead of yourself. They have a very faint shine, the palest white."

"And?"

"And, I bet that's all your body can hold, sad vessel that it is. Still, it's a start, and it means that you have potential."

"Right. Other species can do better, huh?"

"Other species, other individuals. We can get around your limitations. There are ways to infuse your body with mana, which often triggers evolutions. We can also try to find some artifacts to enhance you. Oh, Ward! If we can keep you alive long enough, we're going to have such fun!" She skipped away from the grave toward the east. "Come on! Let's get closer to the edge of the ash. Then you can have a rest."

Ward glanced at the grave, at the thick blue mana dust dancing in little clouds around it. He wondered what it was, really. It had come out of Lizzy's brother. Was it part of him? He let his eye wander up the hill to the shadowy lump of the other scav's body. Why hadn't he had any? What had Grace said? He traded his anima?

Ward didn't like the sound of that. Hadn't she tricked him out of a piece of his anima? He shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around things. Was a soul what he thought it was? Did it have anything to do with life after death, or was it something else, some "essence?" Hadn't she said anima becomes mana when people die? So, did that have something to do with moving on?

Going to heaven or hell or whatever? What would that mean for a guy like that scav with no anima when he died?

“Coming?” she called.

“Gimme a minute,” he grunted, dropping to a knee and shrugging the pack off his back. He pulled the “hemograph” out of the top pouch, and while Grace groaned and turned to trudge back toward him, he sucked on the tiny cut he’d given himself earlier. It took a minute, but his saliva loosened the scab, and soon he tasted coppery blood. Ward pressed the little cut against the sensor on the front of the device and watched breathlessly as the iridescent liquid shifted and slowly formed into writing:

Bloodline:	Basic Human (h)
Accumulated Mana:	h + 5%
Mana Well	Tin + 1.1
Mana Sensitivity:	Bronze
Mana Pathways:	Tin
Vessel Capacity:	Tin
Vessel Durability:	h + 0
Vessel Strength:	h + 0
Vessel Speed:	h + 0
Longevity:	~40%
Anima:	NIL

Ward stared at the chart momentarily, trying to remember what it had said the last time he’d viewed it. He was fairly sure a new line had been added—the “mana well.” More than that, he was sure he’d only had “h + 2%” next to “Accumulated Mana” before. “Grace,” he called. “We should talk about these numbers.”

“When we camp! Follow me!” She barely raised her voice, so Ward had to strain to hear her, and she kept moving. Ward sighed, stuffed the hemograph back into his pack, and started after her, trudging down the slope. He easily found his footing in the bright blue light of the primary moon. He’d learned a lot, he supposed, but he had a million more questions, and he wished he could trust Grace to answer them. He wasn’t sure she’d lie to him, but she certainly had a way of omitting details. “Maybe I’ll meet someone I can talk to soon.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Grace said, suddenly much closer than he’d thought.

“Huh?”

“This might only be Cinder, but there are plenty of dangerous people in this world. Approach anyone with caution, especially if I tell you to run.”

“Because I can trust you?”

“Because you can trust that I want my host to survive.” She winked at him and turned to skip ahead again. “Now come on! We’ll find a spot for you to sleep. I bet you’re tired.”

Ward nodded and picked up his pace. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m pretty damn tired.”