

44 – A Good Mood

“Hemographs?” Ward detected a note of scorn in Mr. Frine’s voice. “I have one, but it’s been collecting dust for nearly a decade. Only sorcerers take any stock—” His eyes bulged out behind his spectacles, and he looked at Ward as though he’d just been caught with his fingers in someone else’s pie. He’d clearly forgotten who he was speaking to for a moment. “There goes my mouth, running away from me. Of *course!* I have a wonderful model here. Let me go and fetch it!”

Ward didn’t mind the slip; if anything, it would help him if he decided to try to buy the hemograph, assuming it proved to be better than the one he’d gotten from the dead scav. Frine bustled into the back room, and Grace cleared her throat. “Seems like ‘normal’”—she made air quotes—“folks don’t use those things.”

Ward leaned forward on the counter, resting his chin in his hand. “I guess it wouldn’t tell you a whole lot if you weren’t gathering mana, changing things up from time to time. Everyone would just be a ‘basic’ human with ‘tin’ or ‘tier-one’ readings.”

“Well, make sure this guy doesn’t fleece you; sounds like he hasn’t been able to sell this thing—” She clamped her mouth shut as Mr. Frine returned, carrying a small, polished wooden box about the size of a big hard-cover book. He set it down on the counter in front of Ward and rubbed a soft cloth over the rich, cherry-colored wood, brushing off some dust and exposing bright brass hinges and an inset brass knob. “It’s a little bulkier than some, but the artificer who traded this to me swore it was worth its weight in gold to a sorcerer like yourself.”

Ward chuckled. “My, but your tune has changed.”

“Well, to be fair—”

“Now, Mr. Frine, I’m a fair man; let’s both speak as though we understand that neither of us wants to get fleeced. I’m willing to admit that I don’t think you’re an idiot if you’ll do the same for me.” He stared hard at the little man until he slowly nodded.

“Fair enough.” He touched the little burlled knob. “Twist this to open the lid.” He demonstrated, turning the knob until a *click* sounded, and then he lifted the lid to expose a smooth expanse of faintly green-tinted glass, beneath which Ward could see the tell-tale liquid that would spell out his readings. “All of the enchantments are on the interior, beneath the aetherflux.”

“Is there a needle?”

“Ah, yes.” He tapped his fingernail on a small brass circle in the upper left-hand corner. “If you depress this little button, allowing your finger to descend beneath the surface level, a needle will rapidly take a sample. I tried it once when I first acquired the device, and it stung, but nothing worse than the prick of a pin.”

“No way to clean the needle?”

“Why would you need to? The device carries a rather heavy charge of etheric spark. It would surely kill any germs or bacteria—nothing alive could exist within it for more than a few seconds.”

Ward was unreasonably relieved to hear the man mention germs and bacteria; he'd been afraid the strange steam-age society hadn't developed an understanding of such things. "Etheric spark?"

"Energy derived from the ambient mana in the air. It's what powers most devices like this."

"Mmhm." Ward nodded, reaching for the box, turning it left and right, examining all the corners. He tilted the cover on its little hinges, ensuring none were loose. It appeared to be very well made. He gestured to the brass circle. "May I try it?"

"Of course." Mr. Frine looked at the device and then at Ward. He gestured toward the back room. "I'll unpack some stock to give you a little privacy."

"Much appreciated." Ward watched him leave, then touched the brass "button" with his finger. "Here goes," he muttered, more than a little leery of sticking his finger into the weird mechano-magical device. Grace leaned close but held her tongue as he slowly depressed the metal disc. His pointer finger had sunk into the box about a quarter of an inch when he felt a strange, static tingling. He spasmed at the sensation and pulled his finger out.

"You chicken!" Grace laughed. "Come on, Ward, just do it fast. Push it down; don't think about it."

He sighed, ignoring her, and put his finger back on the metal. "Three, two—" Grace reached out and jammed his finger down. The metal sank, it *clicked*, and something stabbed his finger. It felt exactly how he thought it would: like someone stabbing a needle into his flesh.

"Shit!" he cursed, yanked his finger out, and the brass disc snapped back into place, plugging the hole. Despite his hasty withdrawal, the box came to life. The screen lit up with faint luminescence, and the aetherflux began to shift and roil as something like ticking gears sounded from within. "That was an asshole move." Ward stuck his finger in his mouth and watched the liquid swirl.

Grace stretched out atop the counter, her nose an inch from the edge of the box, watching. "I thought it was funny."

"You think it'll show as much as Maggie's?" The aetherflux had begun to glow and separate, forming lines and whorls, the component pieces of words and letters shifting toward each other.

"No idea, but I hope so. I like the green color of this one; it's pretty."

Ward snorted, but before he could think of a response, the glowing, liquid numbers and letters displayed his readings in a neat, orderly table:

FIRST READING DETECTED – STORING RESULTS IN COGNICRYSTAL FOR FUTURE COMPARISON.		
BLOODLINE:	AWAKENED HUMAN	AETHERBORN TRACES LYCAN TRACES [UNKNOWN] TRACES
ACCUMULATED MANA:	92	

MANA DISTRIBUTION:	NATURAL	NO ALLOCATION ENCHANTMENTS DETECTED.
MANA WELL:	TIER 3	31% TO NEXT TIER ENHANCED REGENERATION - MINOR
MANA SENSITIVITY:	TIER 4	BLOODLINE DEPENDENT
MANA PATHWAYS:	TIER 2	BLOODLINE DEPENDENT
VESSEL CAPACITY:	TIER 2	BLOODLINE DEPENDENT
VESSEL DURABILITY:	TIER 2	52% TO NEXT TIER ENHANCED HEALING RATE - MINOR ENHANCED BONE DENSITY - MINOR
VESSEL STRENGTH:	TIER 2	39% TO NEXT TIER
VESSEL SPEED:	TIER 2	36% TO NEXT TIER
LONGEVITY REMAINING:	65%	TIER 2 DEPLETION RATE - (APPROXIMATE)
ANIMA HEART:	TIER 1	CLOSED PATHWAYS DETECTED
ANIMA:	NIL	

“Ward,” Grace said, her voice hushed, “you need to buy this.”

“Are you seeing all this? What the hell does ‘Aetherborn’ mean? What about ‘Lycan’? As in lycanthrope?” Ward had watched his share of goofy werewolf and vampire shows.

“I, um, I don’t know.” Grace pointed to the extra details in the third column. “Maybe those ‘traces’ have something to do with these ‘enhanced’ things.”

Ward was still scanning the report. “Look next to the ‘anima heart’ reading. ‘Pathways detected.’ That’s interesting, right? You think it has something to do with how a person can regain anima?”

“I *hope* so, but, Ward, I promise you I’m not holding anything back when I say I don’t have a flippin’ clue.” She sounded sincere, and Ward wanted to believe her, but he found her almost innately difficult to trust. He supposed it had a lot to do with how they’d met and how she’d initially lied about his anima—supposing the story she’d most recently spun about her uncle was even the truth. He tuned her out and regarded the data on the hemograph.

It was certainly easier to read and provided more information than the one he’d gotten from the scavs. He wanted it but didn’t want to spend the rest of his glories. Ward still had more than four thousand, but he’d need to give a thousand of those to Frine when he picked up his bullets. After that and settling up his debts at the inn, he figured he’d have around three thousand remaining. It *sounded* like a lot, but he’d burn through it pretty fast if he didn’t have more income. Thinking of income, he remembered the little pouch of stolen jewelry he’d found under the floorboard. That little windfall made him feel better about potentially squandering a chunk of glories on the hemograph.

“Mr. Frine?” he called.

The curtain swished, and the little artificer approached almost immediately. “Satisfied with its quality?”

Ward had been around the block enough to know better than to gush about how much he liked something he wanted to buy. "It's lacking a few details I'd been hoping for. You say you traded for this? You didn't craft it?"

"That's right. I'm afraid those devices are a bit beyond me." He frowned. "Are you saying you're not interested?"

"Well, I think it'll do in a pinch." Ward shrugged and sighed. "What were you hoping to get for it?"

"Such enchantments don't come cheaply, Mr. Dyer. Even the aetherflux is something I'd have to order in from Port Granite—none of the alchemists in this town could produce such a high-quality mix." He leaned toward the hemograph, and Ward closed the cover, obscuring his readings. Mr. Frine covered his interest by reaching up to scratch a bushy gray sideburn. "I'd need to see five thousand to recoup my investment."

"Five thousand? Glories?" Ward scoffed and pushed the device toward the little man. "I'll do my shopping in Port Granite, I suppose." He turned toward the door, but Frine spoke up, waving a hand as his voice rose in protest.

"Now, wait just a moment, Mr. Dyer!" When Ward turned back toward him with an arched eyebrow, he continued, "I'm not making any glories with this sitting on a shelf in the back. I suppose I can offer a discount for a repeat customer."

"I'm listening." Ward stepped back to the counter.

"Well, the goods I traded for this might have had a retail value of nearly five thousand glories, but, in truth, they only cost me closer to three to produce. Could you see your way to paying that much?"

"Three thousand?" Ward rubbed his chin. "How about this: Let's knock three hundred off that—ten percent—considering you haven't been able to sell this device for, as you put it, 'nearly a decade.' Now," Ward held up a hand, forestalling Frine's response, "with us both agreeing on a value of twenty-seven hundred, I'd like to offer my old hemograph to you in trade; if you'll give me a thousand glories in credit for it, we can shake hands right now."

Frine frowned, placing his small, dexterous hands on the hemograph and pulling it toward himself. "You're offering me an old hemograph and seventeen hundred? Is that right?"

Ward shrugged. "That's seventeen hundred more than you had yesterday, right? Not to mention, you'll still have a hemograph in stock on the off chance another sorcerer stops by."

"It works?"

"Oh yes—perfectly; it just doesn't provide some of the detail this one does."

"And you'll still pay a thousand for your bullets and the extra alchemical fire?" His tone made Ward reconsider the deal; in hindsight, a thousand glories for twenty bullets, enchanted or not, seemed like a lot.

Ward swallowed the thought and nodded, holding out his hand. "Deal?"

Frine frowned but nodded, clasping Ward's hand. "I'm not particularly pleased by the bargain, but, as you said..." He trailed off, and Ward chuckled.

"Listen, that's how you know we made a good deal; neither of us is perfectly happy. You think I like the idea of leaving nearly three thousand glories in your shop?"

"Yes, yes. I'm well-versed in the dilemma of good sales. Well," he pulled the device toward him, "I'll hand this over when you pick up your bullets, hey?"

"Right. I'll bring my other hemograph at that time. One moment." Ward lifted the cover on the hemograph, ensuring the aetherflux had cleared away his reading—it had. "Excellent. All right, see you tomorrow, Mr. Frine."

The little man nodded. "Tomorrow."

When Ward stepped outside, his new "grimoire" tucked under his arm, he took a deep breath and smiled, savoring the fresh air, the bright sunshine, and the hint of woodsmoke on the breeze. "I like it here."

"Why wouldn't you? Everything's going your way."

"Everything?" Ward scowled at her, unwilling to share his good mood with his oft-times unwelcome passenger. "I mean, I guess you're right, other than the fact that you stole my chance at an afterlife."

"Are you *ever* going to let that go?"

"It's hard to forget, Grace. I suppose if I find out you haven't been lying to me about anything else, and we figure out a way to fix the issue...yeah, I guess I could let it go."

"Whatever." Grace hopped down the steps to the cobbled street. "What's next?"

"Let's see about a nice, roomy new backpack."

"I saw an outfitter's shop on the way back to the inn."

"You mean *I* saw an outfitter's shop." Ward followed her down to the street, then turned left, moving toward the store he had in mind.

"It's called *teamwork*, Ward; no need to claim credit for every little thing."

Ward nodded, whistling a tune, the origin of which he couldn't recall, and, despite everything, including his missing anima, he smiled, savoring his good mood.