

“Hemographs?” Maggie narrowed her eyes, but they still shone brightly in the sockets. “I know a thing or two, aye. Do you have one?”

“I do, but I didn’t think to bring it with me. It was only during our talk that I realized how helpful that would have been.”

“Well, Ward.” She carefully pushed her chair back and stood, gathering her mug and Ward’s. “I have one here if we have need of it. What was it you were wanting to know?”

Ward was desperate to understand so much that he had difficulty formulating his response. Finally, as Maggie put the mugs in her deep, copper wash basin, he simply said, “I don’t understand much at all, to be honest. As I told you, I’m from a world with very little mana. Hemographs aren’t a thing, there. I can see my numbers changing as I absorb mana, especially after I found the refinement in the catacombs, but I don’t *understand* any of it. Am I stronger and more durable? It seems like it. What’s the deal with bloodlines? Why is it telling me my longevity in a percentage, but everything else is just a flat number? Why—”

Maggie cackled, tilting her face upward and reveling in the deep belly laugh. “Oh, child! You sound like me when I first stabbed my finger with my gran’s hemograph.” She turned away from her wash basin and walked over to the trunk where she’d earlier retrieved her grimoire. “They’re all a little different—hemographs. Quirks of the artificer who created them, different varieties of glyphs, different catalysts, and a range of reagents used in the aetherflux—no two are alike.” She lifted out a narrow wooden device about the size of a board game box with a grunt, then carried it over to the table.

When she set it down, Ward saw it was well-crafted, with dovetail joinery and lots and lots of delicate, intricate symbols carved into the wooden frame. A pale blue sheet of stained glass sat inside the frame, and, just like in his hemograph, Ward could see some kind of liquid shifting beneath it. He expected Maggie to sit back down, but she moved around the table, back to her kitchen, and lifted the top from a ceramic container. “We should have a cookie if we’re going to be giving blood to that infernal box, hmm?”

Ward pressed a hand to his stomach. “I couldn’t say no to a cookie.”

“A big lad like you? I should think not.” She took two fairly large, dark cookies out of the jar and, as she returned to the table, asked, “Do you like molasses?”

“Man, it’s been a long time. I’d say so, yeah.” Ward took the offered cookie and took a bite, enjoying the rich, sugary flavor. “This is delicious, Maggie.” She watched him, smiling with her lips pressed together as he went for another bite, and Ward suddenly froze. His eyes sprang wide, and he pulled the cookie away from his mouth. “Don’t tell me—”

“Hah!” She laughed, slapping her knee, before taking a huge bite of her own cookie. “There’s nothing funny about the cookies, Ward. You should be a little more careful, though!”

“Yeah,” he grumbled, setting the cookie on the table beside the board.

“Oh, don’t be churlish! If it were a potion or poison, I would’ve been sure one bite would be enough. Go on, now, don’t waste it!”

Ward shook his head. "I won't. I'll eat it while you explain this thing." Ward gestured to the wooden hemograph.

"Oh, I'll explain, but we need a few ground rules first. If we're going to talk about what the hemograph says, we'll need to use it. Now, I could just insist that only you do so, and then I could explain what it says about your blood. However, I believe you'll gain more from the experience if I show you what it says about my blood, too. That means we will be gaining some rather intimate knowledge of each other. Do you swear that what you learn about me will not leave this humble little home?"

"Yeah." Ward nodded. "Of course!"

"Very well. Then, you can rest assured I'll not spread the word of your blood's secrets, either." She touched something on the side of the box, and, with a *snick*, a needle erupted from the top left corner—from Ward's perspective. From some hidden pocket or another, Maggie produced a small rag and a tiny bottle. She unstopped the bottle, dabbed some of its contents onto the cloth, and then wiped the needle. Ward could smell the tell-tale odor of potent alcohol. "Who shall go first?"

"Um, I can, if you like." Ward cleared his throat and pulled his sleeve back, reaching a finger toward the needle. "Do I just touch the needle? I mean, how much blood does it need?"

"It'll sting, but let it sink into your finger, and hold it there until the aetherflux begins to shift."

"Aetherflux?"

"The liquid behind the glass."

"Ah, makes sense." Ward was a little leery about sticking a random needle in his finger, but he'd lost some of his twenty-first-century squeamishness after everything he'd been through since arriving on Cinder. After seeing what healing salves and tonics could do, he wasn't so sure simple infections or even sickness were anything to worry about—besides, hadn't he just seen Maggie wipe it down with alcohol? With that in mind, he pressed the needle into his flesh, grimacing only slightly as he held it there.

"Good. Hold it steady. It takes a moment." As she spoke, Maggie leaned close, peering at the tinted glass, watching the inert "aetherflux" beneath it. Ward could feel something where the needle sat in his finger—a tingling, itching sensation—and he imagined it was siphoning some of his blood into the device. "There!" Maggie pointed to the glass, and Ward saw what she meant. The liquid was swirling and coming alive with neon-blue color.

"Wow. That's a lot prettier than mine. Can I remove my finger?"

"Yes!" She looked excited—gleeful, even. Her demeanor reminded Ward of a child receiving a gift. "You don't see other people's reports often, do you?"

"Hah! No, traveler, I certainly don't. Look! The letters are forming." She was right; the liquid shifted and separated, and the glowing portions soon formed the lines and curves of fanciful script—letters and numerals. Ward's eyes opened when he saw the detailed report:

**BLOODLINE:**

**AWAKENED HUMAN (3) POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONS DETECTED**

<b>ACCUMULATED MANA:</b>	<b>140</b>	
<b>MANA WELL:</b>	<b>TIER 3</b>	<b>28% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>MANA SENSITIVITY:</b>	<b>TIER 4</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>MANA PATHWAYS:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>VESSEL CAPACITY:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>VESSEL DURABILITY:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>49% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>VESSEL STRENGTH:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>35% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>VESSEL SPEED:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>33% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>LONGEVITY REMAINING:</b>	<b>~65%</b>	<b>TIER 2 DEPLETION RATE</b>
<b>ANIMA HEART:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>CLOSED</b>
<b>ANIMA:</b>	<b>DEPLETED</b>	

“This is a lot more than my hemograph displayed—” he began to say, but Maggie cut him off with a gasp.

“Your anima! What happened? Ward, don’t you know how vital it is? Did you trade it away for some—”

“I didn’t trade it willingly,” he sighed. “I was near death, and a...*being* sort of tricked me out of it to heal me.”

Surprising Ward, she turned and spat on her cluttered floor. “Bah! Scoundrel! Leech! Vile, beguiling, trickster! Was it a djinn? A succubus? A Fae temptress? Too many creatures have evolved to thrive off our vital force! Oh, Ward! You must travel to one of the higher worlds. Perhaps, even Primus—I’ve heard from travelers that the academy there has knowledge of such things. I’m afraid I don’t know much about the anima readings other than knowing it should *not* say ‘depleted.’”

“Yeah, I get that.” Ward sighed and shook his head. “Can you tell me what anima does? I know it’s important; I know it has something to do with a person’s ‘soul’ or ‘spirit,’ but I’d like to see if what I’ve been told is...accurate, I guess.”

Maggie shrugged. “Depends on who you ask—which priest or mage or,” she chuckled, “old crone. My gran taught me about how precious it was, about how there were creatures hiding among us that could drain it, sometimes promising gifts or miracles and sometimes just taking it, leaving you a husk of yourself. You’re right to think it has something to do with your soul, though, most will agree. It’s anima that protects it from influence or capture and sees it through to the afterlife.”

“Yeah, I was told that when you die, the anima pushes your spirit through to the next life or whatever and that what’s left behind becomes mana. That’s why I can see it drifting out of dead bodies.”

“My gran told me something similar. The anima pierces the veil for our spirits. There are those who know more than I, traveler. You should visit Port Granite—there’s a library and more powerful sorcerers than we.” She gestured to Ward and then back to herself.

“All right.” Ward looked back at the hemograph’s report. “What about this? What’s an ‘anima heart’? Do you know what it means by ‘closed’?”

“Only what my gran told me. The heart is what holds your anima.” The old woman shrugged and nibbled her cookie. “Mine’s closed, too, and my gran told me that was good. She said it meant it was safe.” She looked almost teary as she locked her bright blue eyes with Ward’s. “I’m sorry you lost your anima, child.”

Ward smiled and reached across the table to rest one of his large hands on hers. It was tiny and bony but warm. “Listen, Maggie. I’ve come to grips with the theft, and, yeah, it stirred up my anger, but I’m determined to fix this problem. I just need to learn everything I can as fast as I can. Can you explain some of these other things to me?” He gestured to the hemograph.

“Well, my dear, poor traveler, your other numbers are quite impressive! You’ve ‘awakened’ your bloodline potentials and that’s why your other measurements are almost all at least tier-two. If you look at the right-hand column, which provides some extra information, you can see that some of your attributes can be increased—those are the ones that give you a percentage toward the next tier.”

“I improve those by harvesting mana, right?”

“Exactly! As you gain mana, it will gradually feed your vessel, increasing how much mana you can hold and making you stronger, healthier, and faster.”

“And the ones ‘tied to my bloodline status’?”

“Those cannot be improved until you improve your vessel another way—absorbing mana won’t do it. The refinement potion you found is an example of that. You can see your ‘mana well’ and ‘mana sensitivity’ readings are higher than your other attributes, likely due to a lucky trait you inherited from an ancestor.” She tapped her finger on his longevity reading and chuckled. “You’re already aging at a tier-two rate and have sixty-five percent left. You’ll be a very old man when you die if you don’t get murdered or fall off a cliff.”

Ward sighed, reaching up to scratch his head. “I guess that’s good, but I have to weigh that against the fact that I’ve got no anima, so it’s hard to get excited.” He stared at the numbers for another minute. “I think I understand all those attributes except for this one.” He tapped his finger on the “Vessel Capacity” reading.

“That means you won’t be improving your tier rating for the other ‘vessel’ attributes beyond the second tier.”

“Even if I improve them to one hundred percent?”

“That’s right. Until you improve the tier rating of your vessel capacity, you’re bound to that tier.”

“Right. I guess I get it.” He frowned and stared at the report one more time, and then he realized there was something new after the “bloodline” reading. “What does it mean there are three ‘potential evolutions’?”

Maggie smiled and stood, walking over to her kitchen area. “That’s a mystery for me, too, my traveling friend. My report says something similar, but I’ve never grown beyond ‘awakened,’ and none of my...colleagues in the area know more about this stuff than I do.” She rummaged in a cabinet, and then Ward heard the clink of glass. She returned to the table with two cork-

stoppered bottles. When she handed one to him, he was surprised to find the glass very cold. “Some of my own honey mead. I keep it cold with an artificer’s device—a ‘chillarium,’ he called it.”

“That’s...fantastic!” Ward pulled the cork and sniffed the concoction. It was heady with alcoholic vapors but also spicy and sweet smelling.

“Now, you’ve shown me your readings, so it’s only fair that I do the same. It will give you a better understanding of your own.” Without further ado, she jabbed her thumb down on the needle.

Ward winced and tilted the bottle to his lips. Before he drank, though, he paused and locked eyes with Maggie. “This isn’t a potion or something, is it?”

“Hah! No, dear man, it’s just a refreshing beverage to numb your nose for the walk back to town in the cold weather.” As if to prove her point, she took a long drink from her bottle and sighed with satisfaction.

Ward shrugged; he’d already consumed two other offerings. He tilted the bottle back to his lips and took a long pull of the icy drink. Despite its honey scent, it was barely sweet at all, but it was smooth and refreshing with a distinct herbal aftertaste. He could taste the alcohol and had a feeling Maggie was right; he’d have a heavy buzz on his walk back to town. Grinning, he picked up his cookie and took another large bite. As he chewed, Maggie took her finger away from the needle, and the magical liquid in the hemograph began to glow and swirl, forming the characters that made up her report:

<b>BLOODLINE:</b>	<b>AWAKENED HUMAN</b>	<b>(1) POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONS DETECTED</b>
<b>ACCUMULATED MANA:</b>	<b>11</b>	
<b>MANA WELL:</b>	<b>TIER 4</b>	<b>77% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>MANA SENSITIVITY:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>MANA PATHWAYS:</b>	<b>TIER 2</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>VESSEL CAPACITY:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>TIED TO BLOODLINE STATUS</b>
<b>VESSEL DURABILITY:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>99% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>VESSEL STRENGTH:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>99% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>VESSEL SPEED:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>99% TO NEXT TIER</b>
<b>LONGEVITY REMAINING:</b>	<b>~ 12%</b>	<b>TIER 1 DEPLETION RATE</b>
<b>ANIMA HEART:</b>	<b>TIER 1</b>	<b>CLOSED</b>
<b>ANIMA:</b>	<b>100%</b>	

Ward stared at the numbers, noting the differences between them and the report for his blood. He was about to start asking questions, but Maggie filled the silence, “When I harvested enough mana to improve my mana well, the hemograph labeled me ‘awakened,’ but my ‘vessel’ readings never went beyond tier-one. So, you can see how I managed to improve my vessel to the maximum of tier-one potential, but I never broke through to tier-two.”

“What about your mana pathways?”

“Those improved to tier two when my ‘mana well’ reading reached tier four. It allowed me to cast much more difficult spells than before without harming myself.”

“Mmhmm. I guess the only other differences are that you have one ‘potential evolution’ and, of course, you still have your anima.”

“That’s right, Ward. I suppose you can see how lucky you were to be born with a higher mana sensitivity, hmm? Not only that but the refinement potion...” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Oh, I won’t allow myself to be jealous! I’m too old for all that! Ward, I wish you luck, but it’s about time I tended to my chickens.”

Ward nodded and stood, still clutching the remainder of his cookie. He drained the rest of his cider before setting the bottle back on the table. “That was delicious. Thanks, Maggie. I might be in town for a little while. If so, do you mind if I come by to chat about this stuff?” He gestured to her grimoire, still sitting on the table.

“I’d appreciate it! Next time, bring *me* a sweet treat, and I’ll brew you something even nicer!” Her chuckle sounded more like a cackle, and Ward couldn’t help laughing along with the crazy old woman. He was almost sorry to have to leave, but Maggie was busy, and he had things to do and people to meet, so he pushed his chair back under the table.

Stooping low, he turned toward the door. “Thanks again, Maggie. Stay warm.”

“You too, young man! Get yourself a nice warm coat!”