

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 21: Greatbone Mine

When the wagons creaked to a halt that evening and the wooden door at the back rattled with the efforts of someone to remove a heavy lock, Victor sat up, painfully, to get a good look outside. His efforts were largely wasted, though, as a man, broad in girth, stood in the doorway. He set down a basket of hard rolls and a bucket of water with a ladle and said, "If ya don't share, I'll beat the snot out of three of you at random." Then he collected the disgusting bucket full of piss, shit, and vomit the prisoners had been sharing and slammed the door shut. Victor had started to open his mouth to voice a complaint about his stomach wound, but only a croak had escaped his throat.

"That's no way to get yourself seen to," the old man said to him with a wink. Victor snorted and waited his turn for a hard roll. When it came his way, it was truly hard. He couldn't eat it until the water bucket made its way back to him, and he drank a few ladles. After he'd lubricated his mouth a bit, he was able to suck on the roll until he could scrape it off by fractions with his teeth. When he'd finished his meager dinner, he looked at Pel and cleared his throat.

"Hey, how long have we been out of the city? Out of Persi Gables?"

"Oh, that's a funny one. We were auctioned off in Gelica. We've been in the wagon two days since." This threw Victor for a loop. How long had he been out since that fucking monster destroyed his Core?

"How far is Gelica from Persi Gables?"

"Oh, hmm. Maybe a week with a mount. You really got put through the grinder, eh, Victor?"

"You're damn right, my man. You're damn right."

"Hey! Hey, big Vodkin! Can you knock on the door? This guy has a badly infected wound - we should tell the wagonmaster," Pel called out to the big, furry guy near the wagon's door. The Vodkin studied him for a minute. His impassive black eyes blinked twice, then he nodded and thumped on the door three times. After a minute, the lock clattered around, and then the wagon's door opened.

"This better be good, you mongrels!" The large shadow of the wagonmaster said; Victor couldn't make out his features in the dim light.

“Sir! Pel, here! Um, this guy you’ve had passed out back here? He has a badly infected wound, but he’s awake. You might want to put something on it if you don’t want him to croak before you get paid.”

“Bah, which one is he? Send him out here.” Victor could see his head dipping down so he could peer into the dim interior of the wagon.

“He’s chained, sir,” Pel supplied.

“I am not crawling in there. Come here, old man. I’ll give you the salve.” He motioned, and Pel eagerly scrambled to the door, bowing and scraping obsequiously when he got close to the wagonmaster. “Wait a minute.” The shadow departed for a moment, and Pel crouched in the doorway, then sand crunched under boots, and the wagonmaster was back. Pel came scurrying back into the wagon as the door slammed, and he squatted in front of Victor.

“You want me to put it on?”

“Uh, no. I’ll do it; thank you, Pel.” Victor took the little clay pot in the palm of his hand. He unscrewed the lid, catching a whiff of something pungent, then lifted the hem of his shirt to expose his swollen, bloody, pus-filled wound. He took a generous dab of the cream and rubbed it along one corner of his injury. He’d expected it to sting but hadn’t quite been ready for the lance of fire that shot through to his spine. He squeezed his eyes shut, inhaling through his nose, then took another dab and continued to spread it along the cut. He dabbed some around the puckered holes where the thick thread used to stitch him up stood out from his flesh. If he had a knife, he’d cut those stitches out - they looked disgusting and seemed too loose to be doing any good. By the time he was done, his eyes were red and bloodshot, and sweat was pouring off his brow.

The little clay pot was still half full, so he capped it and stuck it between him and the wagon wall. His stomach had stopped stinging, and the throbbing ache had subsided a lot, so he had a good feeling that the ointment was doing what it needed to. “Better?” Pel asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“Yes, Pel. Thanks again for speaking up.” Victor took a deep breath, and for the first time since waking up, he didn’t feel like he was in excruciating pain. When he lay back and closed his eyes, though, he found he couldn’t sleep, and as the night wore on, he grew more and more uncomfortable, alternating between sweating and shivering. At one point, Pel came over to him and felt his head.

“You’re feverish, Victor. Can I ask you a personal question?” Victor, sort of delirious, just nodded his head, staring glassy-eyed at Pel. “Do you have a Core? Have you cultivated and gained levels? I’m not familiar with your race, but someone with Energy and a few levels should be resistant to sickness.” Victor could only laugh at the statement or try, but it came out more like a croaking cough.

After that, the night became a blur of strange memories, dreams, and sweat-soaked reality. Victor was vaguely aware of the passage of time, with the wagon moving again and the sun shining between the boards in the ceiling and then stopping again. He'd never be sure exactly how many days passed that way, but sometime after the third or thirtieth day, he snapped out of his fever and ravenously drank from the water bucket that had been left beside him. Pel noticed his movement and scurried over. "Victor! You live! I spread that ointment on you twice more! Your wound looks a lot better," he said and held a finger to his lips, showing Victor a tiny sliver of sharp metal in his other hand, "I cut them nasty stitches out too." Victor lifted his shirt, noticing that his stomach was sunken and his ribs were protruding, but that the wound was just an angry red, raised scar now.

"Thanks, Pel. I owe ya one."

"No, you don't, Victor. I caught a glimpse of some of the threads around you in one of my dreams, and I'd rather you didn't bind yourself to me. No offense, my friend, but I saw a lot of bloodshed in your path."

"You can see the future?"

"Not that neatly, no. I see potential, and I can see some of the paths you've taken and some of the paths you might take. It's not easy to explain. My class is Augur, but I'm rather hobbled at the moment." He shrank back to the wagon wall and pulled his knees to his chest. Victor didn't know how to react to what he'd said. Was he doomed? He shook his head and decided not to dwell on it; he already knew he had a shitload of problems - it was nothing new.

That evening he ate his roll, drank a lot of water, and then slept like he'd never slept before. When he woke, the wagon was moving, and he felt a lot better. Pel was scraping something into the boards of the wagon with his small, jagged scrap of metal, and Victor watched him for a while. Eventually, he asked, "What are you doing, Pel?"

"Oh!" he jumped, startled by the question. "I'm, well, I'm recording our experiences here. In case we disappear or die, at least some part of our life is written here on this board. I've put all our names here and written a little about where we all came from and what we've been through. For you, Victor, I mentioned that you came from Persi Gables and that you recovered from a terrible injury."

"Could you change that? Or add to it? I was summoned, against my will, from a town called Tucson, and I'm a fighter. Can you mention that? I'm a fighter, Pel." Victor didn't know why he cared what Pel wrote about him on the floorboards of a wagon in the middle of nowhere, but he did.

"Of course! I'll be your chronicler, Victor." He busily went back to scratching into the wood, and Victor smiled. The wagon stopped early that day, and when the door was flung open, Victor realized why - they'd arrived at the mine.

“C’mere, Pel!” the wagonmaster hollered, and Pel hurried to the door. “Take this key, unlock the rowdy ones, and then bring it back to me. Listen, you mutts! Once you get unlocked, you will slowly, one by one, exit the wagon and line up before me.” Pel took the key and started unlocking the manacles from the three or four prisoners that the wagonmaster had deemed risky enough to warrant them. Victor had no idea why he’d been locked in - he was weak as a baby and not ready to fight anyone, let alone break out of a wagon. After Pel unlocked his manacle, he rubbed his raw, itchy wrist for a few minutes before slowly, shakily crawling out of the wagon behind everyone else. (e)

When he dropped down onto his bare feet, Victor noticed that the dusty dirt was hot, hot like it was back in Arizona. He had to squint his eyes against the sun, but as they slowly adjusted, he saw that the wagon had pulled to a stop on the crest of a big dusty hill. There was a dirt road back behind the wagon leading down the hillside, and as Victor followed it with his eyes, he saw a vista, unlike anything he’d ever witnessed. The road led down into a green expanse of tall grass that stretched as far as his eyes could see. When he turned to where the other prisoners were lined up on the other side of the wagon, he suddenly realized that he wasn’t on a “hill” per se - it was a pile of mine tailings. The dirt road continued down the side of the mountain of packed dirt into a deep open-pit mine that was stepped like an inverse pyramid. He saw people walking up and down the different levels of the pit, carrying buckets and other tools; they looked like ants from this vantage. At the bottom of the pit, a massive black archway led into the ground, and Victor could see carts and beasts of burden moving along a wide road that went into the darkness. “Holy shit,” was all he could say as he shuffled over in the hot dirt to line up with the others.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” the wagonmaster asked. Victor looked at him for the first time and wasn’t surprised to see he was a Vodkin. Victor had guessed as much because of his size. That was one thing the asshole that broke his Core didn’t take away - Victor still had his racial advancements and was nearly as tall as the big wagonmaster.

“It’s cool, but I’m not looking forward to working in it,” Victor muttered.

“Hah, I don’t suppose you are. No, I don’t suppose you are.” The Vodkin turned and looked down the road that led into the mine. “Alright, here he comes. Stand up straight. Look healthy. If you don’t get bought, I’m going to take you somewhere far worse, believe me!” The seven prisoners straightened and stood in a line. Victor didn’t really do anything to try to look more appealing. He still hadn’t made up his mind that he could do anything about his predicament. He wasn’t sure there was anything that could be done for him. He’d been scared to look at or feel his Core since that first time he woke, and he didn’t know if there was any hope for him when it came to Energy use. All that said, he didn’t really give a fuck if these assholes wanted to buy his contract so he could work in their mine. Fuck them.

A cart gradually made its way up the steep slope from the mine, and when it got close, Victor was intrigued by the animal pulling it - it looked a lot like a giant monitor lizard. It was almost as tall as a pony, but it was a lot wider with big fat legs and strong, clawed

feet. A red-skinned Shadeni man was driving the wagon, and when he jumped out, Victor could see that he wore some fancy clothing. He had shiny black boots with silver-tipped toes and a gray suit made of flowing, cool-looking material. He looked very comfortable in the heat. He strutted up to the wagonmaster, and Victor noticed he had a leather cord coiled up and hooked to his black leather belt.

“Well, what’ve you got for me, Glethwid?”

“Foreman, good to see you. Take a look, take a look. I have some strong laborers in this group. None with strong Energy auras - one less thing to worry about, eh?” The Foreman hummed to himself as he pulled out a little lens and held it to his eye. He looked closely at each prisoner through the lens, pausing on Victor for a long time.

“What’s this one’s story?” He gestured at Victor. “Someone did a number on him, eh?”

“Bought him off an auction out of Persi Gables. Non-native, obviously, hardly any Energy aura. He’s got most of a five-year contract left - plenty of muscle on him. I’m sure you’ll get more than your money out of him.”

“Hmm, I’ll be the judge of that.” He moved to the far end of the line and started carefully going over each of the prisoners, asking to see their hands, making little teasing comments, or asking questions about their past. Victor couldn’t figure it out at first but eventually decided the guy was trying to see if anyone would be more trouble than they were worth. A little voice in his head said he should mess with the guy and try to piss him off, but then he thought about how the wagonmaster said the next stop would be worse. So far, people who’d said something was rotten in this world hadn’t lied to Victor; he decided to play it cool. “Well, big lad, aren’t you?” Victor didn’t respond, just stood still under the man’s scrutiny. “Not much of a talker?”

“What should I say?”

“Have you always been so weak with Energy?”

“Most of my life, I didn’t know what Energy was.” Victor wasn’t sure why he was being deceptive, but something told him that the less this guy knew about his Core or his abilities, the better.

“What’s your name?”

“Victor.”

“Can you dig, Victor? Let me see your hands.”

“Sure. I’ve dug plenty of holes.” Victor held up his hands, and the man turned them over to see the calluses on his palms.

“These aren’t digging calluses, Victor. Are you scared of the dark?”

“No.”

“You’re an odd looking man, Victor. Where are you from?”

“Tucson.” Victor shrugged.

“Huh, never heard of it. Do you have people that are looking for you?”

“Uh, probably, but they don’t have a clue where I am.”

“Well, welcome to Greatbone Mine, Victor.” He turned to the wagonmaster. “I’ll take them all.” Turning back to the group of prisoners, he raised his voice and announced, “This is the greatest amber-ore excavation site on this continent. You’re going to see great things in this mine and be part of something even greater. You’ll have to earn your freedom here, but if you work hard, I’ll be fair to you. Now, get into the wagon.”

Victor clambered up into the mine wagon behind Pel and sat on one of the side benches so he could look into the massive excavation while the wagon slowly trundled along behind the giant lizard. The mine truly was incredible in its scope. He was admiring the size of the long, stepped slopes leading down to the bottom, imagining how many trucks could drive down it side by side, when he caught sight of the giant bones sticking out of the side of the excavated hill. “What are those bones from?”

“Nobody knows, new employee. Nobody knows. We’ve dug up a lot of very “great” bones here. That’s where the name comes from!” Victor could hear the smug laughter in the man's voice; clearly, he was his own biggest fan.

“Is it true that there are ancient ruins in the depths?” Pel asked.

“Oh, yes, old one. Yes, indeed. We’ve run across quite a few ancient structures in the vast depths. I doubt you’ll all get that deep. Well, depending on how you perform and where your talents are. We’ll see. Now, I’m going to smoke a pipe before we get down there in the dust and heat, so sit back and enjoy the ride.” He pulled a white pipe that looked like it had been carved from a piece of ivory out of “somewhere” and then proceeded to tamp in some sort of leafy substance and light it up.

Victor inhaled the sweet smoke that wafted his way and looked out over the wagon's side at the huge excavation and the massive black tunnel at the bottom. He might be here to do slave labor, but he couldn’t help feeling a little excitement at the mystery of finding ancient ruins in the depths. He imagined finding an ancient dwarven hall or something like out of a fantasy VR, and a little spark ignited in his heart. He smiled; maybe things weren’t completely hopeless. Then it hit him: that spark had been more than excitement. It had burned and was warming him physically. He could still feel it, and it wasn’t his heart; it was further down, more toward his center. His Core.

Chapter 22: Lam's Furies

Victor still hadn't taken a look inward to his Core by the time the wagon trundled to a stop at the bottom of the long, hard-packed gravel road. He was afraid of what he'd find; right now, he had a little hope that something good was happening, and he knew that if he looked and still just saw his shattered remnant of a Core, he'd fall into a pit of despair that would be tough to climb out of. Meanwhile, the foreman shouted for them to get out of the wagon and line up in a more literal sort of pit. He wondered just how bad a turn his life had taken by coming here; he didn't know it would be all that bad, but he figured it would be. The asshole that had destroyed his Core for him sure thought he was sending Victor someplace shitty.

"I said, line up, shoulder to shoulder. No talking!" The foreman's voice had risen in volume noticeably, and Victor thought he heard some irritation bleeding into his "I'm too cool for this place" demeanor. Victor hopped out of the wagon and hustled over to the hastily forming line. Once again, he stood next to Pel, towering over the little blue man. The foreman consulted a clipboard and spoke quietly to an Ardeni man wearing khaki-colored pants and a long-sleeved shirt. He had Orange hair cut very short under a wide-brimmed hat, obviously designed to provide maximum protection from the sun. Victor looked around; they were at the bottom of the enormous open pit, and as they'd descended, it only grew larger in perspective. Victor saw hundreds of people moving around down there, carrying buckets, pushing carts, and leading animals. Even with so many people working busily, the space seemed enormous. The entrance to the colossal tunnel had to be almost a mile away.

"Alright, listen up. I'm going to call you up here one at a time. We'll go over your contract, so the imperial auditors don't give me any headaches, and then I'll give you your first assignment. Don't waste my time with questions - there'll be someone at your worksite to fill you in." He looked at his line of newly acquired workers for a moment, then continued, "Pel ap'Drom." Pel hustled forward with a wheezy grunt of excitement. Standing there, not allowed to move, Victor let his attention turn inward and looked at his Core without thinking about it.

At first, he almost opened his eyes with disgust, seeing the same landscape of scattered tiny drops and shimmers of Energy, but he forced himself to really look. A lot of the Energy had that red shimmer of rage, but a lot of it was the pure, rich golden yellow hue of unattuned Energy. While he let his inner eye's gaze sweep back and forth over the scattered remnants of his Core, a brief flicker caught his eyes, and he saw that one of the tiny little pools of rage-attuned Energy was very slightly spinning. While he studied it, he caught the flicker again and realized it was a tiny pulse. Was this what was left of his Core? Victor used his will to urge the little spark to flare brighter, for the slightly spinning drop of Energy to spin faster. He almost laughed aloud when it responded; it flared brightly for a fraction of a second, and its movement seemed to flicker just a touch more rapidly. To his delight, Victor saw a tiny droplet of rage-attuned Energy nearby slowly start to drift into the pulsing little fragment of his Core and join with it.

“Victor! Victor of Tucson!” the foreman’s voice yanked Victor back into reality. He opened his eyes and stepped toward the foreman quickly, unsure if he’d already been called and missed it.

“Here, sir!” He stumbled up in front of the foreman.

“Not time for dozing yet, Victor. Alright, I have your contract here. What a mess! I’ve never seen so many scribbles and initials. There’s no witness or official notary mark for either the original signatures or any of the alterations. Lucky I have Tyn here. He’ll make sure our portion of the contract with you is up to imperial standards, don’t worry. Now, it looks like you were initially contracted for some sort of fighting sport, hmm? Let’s see; then you were sold to a private party, one ap’Horrin? Right, well, then your contract was bought by the Greatbone Mining Consortium. Now, I’m not sure you’re aware, but all the provisions added to your contract initially were stricken out at the sale to ap’Horrin. Here we have a simple agreement of four years and six months of unspecified labor. That sound right?”

“No, not really. I didn’t get any say in those contract changes, and I had some things promised to me - opportunities for earning awards and stuff like that.”

“Right, but how do I know that? Maybe you breached some terms of service, and that’s why it was stricken, hmm?” Victor felt some heat rising in his neck at the man’s words.

“That’s bullshit, man.” He couldn’t keep the frustration and bitterness from dripping some venom into the words. The neatly dressed, perfectly coiffed man narrowed his eyes and looked Victor up and down, resting his right palm on the handle of the coiled whip on his belt.

“Take a breath, Victor. Think about what you say to me, and really consider your tone. Now, I have to work with what I’ve been given, and this contract is a joke, but one thing is clear - the length of commitment. Tyn, do you agree?”

“Agreed, sir. You’re doing your best to stick to fair terms with this inhabitant of the Ridonne Empire. I think your diligence will be admired by any auditors that happen to pull this ill-conceived contract.”

“Excellent.” He flicked his hand up to his ear, pulled a quill from behind it, touched the tip to his tongue, and signed the paper attached to his clipboard. “Put your signature or X here,” he said, holding out the quill to Victor and pointing to a line on the bottom of his old contract. Victor ran his eyes over all the crossed-out lines and little signatures and initials, shook his head, and took the quill. He knew very well that this guy could kill him if he wanted to. He could kill him and make up some bullshit story about how Victor went crazy and tried to escape and kill all the guards. He doubted the “imperial auditors” were very hard to please. He wrote his name next to the spot where the foreman pointed. “Good, you’re a quick learner, Victor. I think you’ll go far in the Greatbone operation. See that tent over there with the big red axe painted on it? That’s where

you're to report. You'll learn the rules there, but let me give you a quick primer: don't try to run. We have guards with bows and mages with spells stationed all over. You'll stand out like a feyris to a redhood hawk."

"Alright." Victor didn't trust himself to say more without getting in trouble, so he just nodded and started walking toward the big tent the foreman had gestured to. It looked almost like what Victor imagined a circus tent would look like. It looked like it was made from gray canvas and had a red flag flapping at its peak in the dusty wind. On the side facing Victor, a big red axe had been painted, and Victor wondered just what that meant. He saw several other tents nearby with different symbols painted on them, a pick, a cart, something that looked like a crudely drawn lizard, and a shovel. He shrugged and scanned ahead and behind him for any sign of where Pel had gone, but he didn't see the old man, and he briefly mourned the loss of yet another friend; something made him feel like he'd not see him again.

When he got to the tent, he had to walk around the side to find the big open flaps to enter it. A small wooden ramp led up out of the dust onto a deck-like floor. Victor walked up and saw that large open trunks lined the wall on his left. Several men and women clustered around posts with different designs carved into them on the right-hand side. Each cluster seemed to have one of the mine employees wearing khaki standing nearby. Along the back wall, several mine employees sat behind a long table. Victor walked up to the table and looked at the employee sitting nearest the middle, a pale-blue-haired Ardeni woman. She cleared her throat, sat up a bit straighter, and motioned for Victor to come forward.

"I was told to come to this tent," he said by way of greeting.

"Mmmhmm," she said, pulling out a flat black slate. "Put your right hand on this slate and say your name." Victor shrugged and leaned forward to lay his hand on the slate. It was warm and seemed to buzz slightly at his touch.

"Victor Sandoval."

"Alright, you're registered with the Deep Delvers. Are you new to the mine or been here before?"

"Uh, I'm new. What's a fuckin' deep delver?" Victor tried to cut off his words, but they came out too fast. The woman didn't seem offended, though, just looked at Victor quizzically for a moment, then answered him.

"Well, you've been chosen to be in the group that enters the deeper dig sites ahead of the workers to make sure they're clear of hazards. That means you must have some fighting experience, hmm? Either that or Foreman Venz-dak decided you're going to be more trouble than you're worth and wants you in a hazardous job." She shrugged like it was a fifty-fifty chance. She glanced over at the little groups of people clustered around the different poles. "Pick a number between one and four."

“Huh?”

“Our reinforcement crews all have four people in them. Pick a number, and that’ll be your new crew.”

“Um, three, I guess.” Victor didn’t think it mattered, and he liked the number three.

“Right, that’s Captain Lam’s group. Okay, before I can get you some equipment, I’ll have to get you collared. Let’s measure your strength.”

“Uh, what?”

“For your collar - we don’t want to waste an expensive amber-ore collar on you if you don’t need it, right?” She produced a smooth, white crystal that reminded Victor of one of his Abuela’s Christmas candles. It glowed with a brilliant, warm radiance. “Hold that.” She held it out to Victor, and he took it in his hand. The glow immediately subsided to the point where Victor thought it was gone completely. When he really looked, though, he saw a very small, almost imperceptible luminescence. “Oh, great, we’ll just need a tier-one for you. I bet I could even use a tier-zero if I had one.”

“Oh, great.” Victor let the crystal roll out of his hand onto the table. The woman looked up at him sharply, eyes squinted in anger, but didn’t say anything. She scooped up the crystal, then stood and walked around to the row of chests, motioning Victor to follow. He was surprised to see a line had formed behind him, and when he turned to follow the Ardeni woman, one of the other employees at the table called the next prisoner forward. Victor didn’t recognize the people in line, and he wondered where they came from. Did they have to pull prisoners from other parts of the operation to fill this duty? The woman was rummaging through a chest, and she stood with a smooth black ring in her hands.

“It’s iron, but the artificer took the time to smooth it out. You should be grateful. I’ve seen some delvers wearing much rougher work.” She handed it to Victor and motioned toward her neck like she wanted him to put it on.

“Uh, how do I put it on?” He couldn’t feel any seams in the metal.

“Oh, just hold it to your neck; I’ll do the rest.” She’d pulled a thin, silvery rod from somewhere and held it, waiting for Victor to comply. Once again, feeling like he should see another option but unable to find it, Victor pressed the cool metal against his neck. The woman reached forward and tapped the ring of iron with her rod, and suddenly it was around his neck. “Now, you seem new to this stuff, so listen: because of your assignment, you’re allowed to carry a baton and to use Energy abilities if you have them, but only for self-defense against the creatures in the depths. That collar will suppress your Energy if you try to leave the mine. It will allow us to track you. It will allow us to kill you remotely if we must, and, finally, it will be impossible for you to remove - it’s designed to resist someone with far more Energy than you possess. Understand all that?”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Good!” She smiled brightly and moved over to the next chest. She reached in and lifted out a gray metal rod about two and a half feet long, perfectly cylindrical with a worn, sweat-stained leather handle wrapped around one end. She handed it to Victor, and it felt very heavy and sturdy. “This is your weapon for deep delving. You’re allowed to carry it around with you, but it must always be held down next to your side. If you raise it in a threatening manner outside of your duties, any of the Greatbone Consortium employees have permission to summarily execute you. We all carry one of these control rods. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I get it. Can I get a belt or something to hang it on? I don’t want to accidentally fuck up and lift it up where I shouldn’t.”

“There’s a contribution store at the camp Settlement Stone. You’ll see it when you go into the main cavern. Indentured workers are allowed to earn contribution points at a reduced rate. You should visit the store when you have your free hour each evening to pick up quests. Okay, that’s it from me; have you got any questions? Last chance!” This time, she gave him a genuine smile, and Victor wondered how pissed he should be at her. Was it her fault she had this job? Did she see the wrong they were doing to people like Victor? He decided that he couldn’t let her slide, so he didn’t return her smile, just shrugged.

“I can’t think of anything right now.”

“Alright, go stand next to the post with the pultii carved on it.” She gestured at the other side of the tent.

“What’s a pultii?” Victor glanced at the posts and just saw various strange-looking animals carved on them. She sighed heavily and walked past him, pointing at the pole that was second from the right. He nodded and walked toward it. When he got closer, he saw that the most prominently carved animal looked kind of like a turkey. Was that a pultii? The employee standing next to the group clapped his hands when he walked up.

“Right! That’s our fifth walking up. C’mon then, dogs; I’ll deliver you to Captain Lam.” He started walking out of the tent, and the three Ardeni and one Shadeni that had been clustered around the pole followed him out. Victor brought up the rear, noticing that they all held the same gray metal batons, pointed to the ground. The employee was walking straight for the gaping maw of the enormous tunnel. In the sun’s bright glare, he couldn’t see far into it, but he got a sense of depth from the shadows that hung under the high stony ceiling. It took them a good ten minutes to cross the hard-packed dirt of the open pit to the first shadows of the cavern, and when the sun finally was obscured and Victor slipped into the tunnel’s domain, he caught his breath at the scale of what he saw.

The enormous central tunnel of Greatbone Mine stretched into the distance farther than he could see, brightly lit with Energy lamps that hung from the soaring ceiling and stood

on wooden posts at regular intervals. All along the sides of the vast tunnel, ramps carved into the stone switchbacked and ran in a dizzying maze, a honeycomb of smaller tunnel openings leading away into God know's where. Ramshackle huts and tents lined the sides of the great hall, interspersed with larger, more sturdily built buildings. "C'mon, quit gawkin', you vermin. Captain Lam's barracks are deep into phase two. We gotta pick up the pace if I'm gonna make my date." He laughed like he'd just said the funniest thing in the world. They walked past people pulling carts, hauling buckets, and lounging on wooden crates. They walked by large barracks-type buildings, some with smoke coming from chimneys and dozens and dozens of little buildings. Here and there, they passed fires burning with people cooking something on sticks over the flames, and Victor looked up wondering if smoke was a problem, but wherever it went, it was lost to his eyes. After about a mile, they had to circumvent a large crowd forming into multiple queues around a tall, black stone covered in strange writing. "That's the Settlement Stone, you vagabonds," the employee called back over his shoulder. "When you get settled, you should ask Captain Lam to let you come pick up quests. I'll give ya that tip for free, you brigands!"

"He's a funny guy," the little red-haired Ardeni man in front of Victor said out of the side of his mouth.

"Yeah. Real comedian." Victor snorted, and the man laughed.

"I'm Tyge," the man said, turning slightly and offering his hand. Victor took it and nodded.

"I'm Victor." They continued for another fifteen minutes, and the number of ramshackle buildings dwindled off to only one here and there. The tunnel was still the same enormous size, though, making the structures seem all the smaller. Their leader stopped outside a building that reminded Victor of a Viking longhouse. It had large metal braziers hung from the overhanging lintel, and they burned with a blue-white, smokeless flame.

"This is Lam's longhouse," Their guide announced, then walked up to the big wooden door and pounded. He didn't wait for an answer, though, depressing the iron latch and pushing the big door inward. It swung smoothly on big metal hinges, and Victor saw the inside from where he stood, looking over the employee's shoulder. A stone hearth sat in the middle of the big hall, and Victor could see heat waves rising off it and faint smoke rising to the opening in the center of the building's ceiling. All along both walls were narrow wooden beds, each with an identical gray blanket and single white pillow. On the far side of the open hearth was a long table, and Victor could see a dozen or so people sitting at the table, apparently sharing a meal.

A tall woman stood up at the far end of the table and walked around it, toward the door and the group of new recruits. Victor struggled with his grasp on reality when he saw her; everything about her seemed unreal in one way or another. She was easily seven feet tall but thin as a rail. She had pale skin and huge almond eyes that glittered like cut

emeralds, and, sprouting from the center of her back were four enormous dragonfly wings that seemed to be dripping with glittering fairy dust. She wore a dull, copper-colored breastplate and dark leather pants, with similar armor plates on her thighs and shins. When she was just a few paces away, her strident, tenor voice cut through the cobwebs in Victor's mind, sounding like a trumpet calling him to battle, "Ahh, my new recruits. Wonderful! Thank you, Bilun. I've got it from here."

"You're quite welcome, Ma'am." Their escort turned smartly on his heel and, without a parting insult for the prisoners, marched away.

"Well, well. Come forward, recruits! Welcome to Lam's Furies, the toughest bunch of Deep Delvers in all of Greatbone!" She regarded the five of them with a warm smile, and Victor noticed, now that he was able to jerk his eyes away from her glittering wings, that she was as badass-looking as she was beautiful. She was covered in little scars and had weird, colorful tattoos all over her arms and neck, and probably elsewhere, but she had on too much armor to be sure. With her long, blond hair pulled back in a knotted braid, she regarded each of them coolly for a few moments, and when she looked at Victor, she glanced up and down his frame, a slight frown above her pointed chin.

"I haven't seen your paperwork yet. Tell me your names, please." She looked at them one by one, and everyone said their names, but Victor was still too stunned by this woman's otherworldly appearance to hear them. She seemed to exude some sort of power or energy that was unlike any of the people he'd yet met. She was simply larger than life. Finally, she rested her gaze on Victor and raised a sharp, blond eyebrow.

"Um," Victor had to swallow several times to moisten his vocal cords, "I'm Victor."

"Where are you from, Victor?"

"From Earth. Another world. Um," she kept staring at him, and he felt like he had to fill the silence, "from a town called Tucson. I, uh, I was summoned and fought in some pits in a city called Persi Gables."

"Now I'm getting the picture. Alright! Enough for now. Our day's duty is over, so come and sit at the table and get to know the rest of my crew. I'll assign you each a buddy to tell you how things work, and by tomorrow morning, I'll expect you to be ready for duty. We start early, recruits, very early."

Chapter 23: Delve Six-Fourteen

Victor followed the old, blue Ardeni man to the back of Lam's barracks, where he'd promised to hook him up with a belt. It was cool that he was allowed to have a club, considering he was basically a slave, but he didn't like carrying it all the time. When he'd mentioned it to Gris, the guy that Captain Lam had ordered to show Victor around, the man had laughed and said that Victor just needed a belt. "All right, Victor, let's see

here,” Gris said, throwing open a big wooden chest and rooting through leather scraps, burlap, tattered old clothes, and worn-down boots. He finally pulled out a length of leather with a tarnished, bent tin buckle. He tossed it to Victor, who ran it through the loops on his black pants, and buckled it with about seven inches of leather to spare.

“Yo, how about a pair of old boots? The assholes that sold me took my good ones.” Gris looked Victor up and down, then shrugged.

“Ain’t coming out of my pocket!” He laughed, digging around and throwing a bunch of boots at Victor to try on. Victor held a few that looked about right to his feet and, after trying on several pairs, settled on two boots that were mismatched but fit him passably. “Look at that! You’re ready for delving!”

“Alright, thanks, Gris. So, what’s next? We supposed to go get some ‘quests’ or some shit?”

“That’s right,” the old guy reached up to scratch his white stubble, running his fingers around inside his collar to let his skin breathe. Victor noticed that his collar was a lot more ornate than his own, made from something more like a bronze alloy than iron, and covered with a lot more weird letters. “Yeah, let’s go do that now. I need to turn one in, anyway.” He started walking back through the hall, past a bunch of the others in Lam’s unit, including some other veterans giving the other newbies their version of orientations. Lam wasn’t around, having left to handle some business shortly after Victor and the others had arrived. When they got outside and started back toward the tunnel entrance, Victor was surprised that he couldn’t see the enormous tunnel exit. It had felt like they’d walked straight in, but the slope was deceptive, and, in the distance, the only thing he could see was more tunnel and the ceiling with huge globes of glowing Energy throwing orange-yellow light down.

“Dude, this tunnel is fucking huge.”

“Hah, wait ‘til you see the deep vaults.” Gris strode ahead, moving quickly for a guy with such short legs.

“Hey, is Lam one of those, um, Ghelli? You know the people with the dragonfly wings?”

“Oh, aye. She’s a rare sight, though. Her race is up into advanced stages; she can even fly with them wings.”

“That’s pretty badass. What’s she doing in these mines?”

“Hah, you got a lot to learn, Victor. These mines run deep. When they chased the amber-ore vein with this tunnel, they started running into ruins, and the deeper they went, the bigger the ruins got. All kinds of ancient shit was buried down here. Lam works for the Greatbone Mining Consortium, but she’s also hunting for artifacts for herself.” That made sense to Victor; she’d been something from another league

compared to all the other people he'd met in this world. Even the lady at her mansion hadn't had anyone around that resonated like Captain Lam. They started running into other mineworkers as they walked up the tunnel, and after a few more minutes, they came up the curving path to the big central area where most of the shanties and buildings were concentrated and where the weird black stone rose into the air.

"What is that thing, anyway?"

"What?"

"That big fucking stone with all the weird letters all over it."

"Really? You didn't have a Village or Town Stone where you came from?"

"No, man. I'm not from this world." Gris gave Victor a good long stare with his bright red eyes, then grinned.

"I guess that makes sense. Well, it's a Settlement Stone, where this 'community' is directly connected to the System. It lets the people running the place buy things from the System, build structures, and set up stuff like a Contribution Store for us workers."

"Ahh, gotcha. So that's where we get the quests?"

"Right, because we're not free employees, our rewards are pretty small, but it all adds up." Gris led Victor down the slope to the cleared area around the Stone, and they joined one of the queues of people waiting to interact with it. Victor passed the time waiting by people watching, and he saw plenty to keep him entertained. He noticed that many of the people milling around wore belts with pouches attached and that the pouches all had a pickaxe branded on them.

"What's with those bags with the pickaxes?"

"Those are people on mining detail. They get a dimensional container to carry what they dig out each day. Those bags are enchanted specially, though; they keep track of what the miners put in them, so there's no funny business when they drop off their haul each day."

"They think of everything, huh? Hey," Victor slapped the metal baton sticking out of his belt, "what kinda shit we gonna have to fight down there?"

"I've seen all kinds of creatures deep down: giant rats, Yeksa, zombies, ghouls, the list goes on and on. Captain Lam killed a Yovashi the other day, too." Victor didn't know what the fuck some of those things were, but he was a little tired of playing the dummy, so he just grunted and acted impressed.

“So, am I going to be fucked? I mean, my Core got basically destroyed. I can’t do much beyond swinging this club around.”

“Ahh, I was going to ask you about that collar but didn’t want to be rude. So you really don’t have much Energy, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Well, Lam’s a good Captain. She’ll probably put you with some of the stronger guys and just expect you to help out as best you can. Um, I won’t lie to you; deep delvers suffer a lot of casualties. Hey, here we go! Our turn.” He laughed and walked up to the vacant facet of the octagonal Settlement Stone. “I’ll go first. You just put your palm on the Stone, and you’ll see some menus and stuff that you can go through. You want to go to the quests section; it’s the second option on the first page.” Victor nodded and watched as Gris went about his business, and when the old man stepped back and nodded to the Stone, Victor slapped his palm against the flat surface.

He immediately saw a menu screen pop up in his vision, much like when he looked at his status page. He only had two items on his menu: Contribution Store and Quests. He touched the Contribution Store first, just to see what it was, and he found a menu with a dozen subheadings from things like food to clothing to approved weaponry. Victor clicked on the weaponry list and found a menu with three different items: basic baton, artificed baton, and heavy artificed baton. Victor grunted and said, “Just batons?”

“Oh, you’re checking out the store? Yeah, they don’t like us with real weapons up here, even though some of the guys in our unit could really massacre a lot of people with a baton. It doesn’t make sense, but it keeps the administrators happy.” Victor looked at the prices, and the cheapest baton was fifty credits, and the “Heavy Artificed Baton” was 500. His balance was zero, so he shrugged and backed out of the Contribution Store and clicked on the Quests button. A menu appeared:

Quests for Victor Sandoval in Greatbone Mine:

Slay 100 denizens of the deep

Reward: 1-3 credits per kill based on creatures slain, determined by System calculation.

Recover Energy-rich materials

Reward: 1-1000 credits based on Energy level, determined by System calculation.

“One hundred? I have to kill a hundred fucking things down there? Are there that many monsters?”

“Hah! Yes, and then some. They keep coming, too, no matter how many times we kill them and beat them back. I suppose if we stopped going deeper, chasing ore, they

might stop coming. Who knows?" Victor sighed, pushed the green "accept" button next to each quest, and then turned back to Gris.

"All done, man. What's next?"

"Now we should go get some shuteye because Captain Lam doesn't hardly ever sleep, and she likes to wake our asses up early." He turned to leave, and Victor followed. They returned the way they came, meandering through the little clusters of soiled humanoids. Some of the denizens of the mine cast sidelong glances Victor's way, and a few even seemed outright hostile. He felt out of place, as usual in this world, but more vulnerable than ever. At least when he'd been in Yund's warehouse, he'd had Yrella and Vullu watching his back at first. He tried to avoid making eye contact with the larger, more dangerously crazy-looking individuals. He felt some relief when they finally passed out of the more crowded central settlement area and into the quieter, darker stretch of tunnel that led to Lam's barracks.

When they walked up to the doors of the barracks building, Gris motioned for Victor to be quiet and then opened the door slowly to avoid making any noise. A few dim lights showed members of the unit huddled over whatever sort of strange hobbies kept them busy during the bedtime hours, but most everyone was sleeping already. Gris pointed to an empty cot near the door, and Victor took his meaning, going over to it. The mattress was thin, something like burlap stretched over scratchy hay or grass, but he had two wool blankets, so he lay down on one and pulled the other over himself. He'd kicked his boots off and looped his belt with his cudgel over the little bedpost but otherwise slept with his clothes on. When he closed his eyes and stretched out, Victor realized it was the first time he'd slept in a bed since coming to this world. It might have been a shitty, uncomfortable bed, but it beat sleeping on a hard, hay-covered floor.

He was deeply asleep, dreaming of watching his grandma cook breakfast, when someone gave his cot a good shake and said, "Time to move out! Get up!" Victor yawned hugely and rolled onto his back, looking around. The barracks hall was brightly lit, and the entire unit was lining up by the door, a few people still straggling into the line. He didn't know what would happen to people slow to move, so Victor jumped up and jammed his feet into his boots. Gris walked up while he was pulling his belt tight.

"Don't forget to make your bed. Captain Lam doesn't like a sloppy barracks." He helped Victor fold his blankets and said, "just fold them neatly at the foot of the cot every morning."

"Got it, thanks." Victor hustled over to the line, following Gris, and was happy that he wasn't the last person; a thickly-built red-skinned Shadeni guy lined up behind him, looking disheveled and stressed.

"I didn't sleep at all!" he grouched quietly to the back of Victor's neck.

"That sucks, dude. You'll do better tonight."

“If I live that long! I can’t believe I was assigned to the delvers!” Victor glanced over his shoulder at the stout man and shrugged.

“Yeah, here’s hoping.” They’d only been lined up for about a minute when the far door opened and closed, and then Captain Lam was striding through the barracks toward them.

“Good! I don’t have to beat anyone this morning. Yet. The beds look alright, and you’re all lined up. This is how we do it every morning. Now move out! Sergeant Fath, lead them to forward delve six-fourteen.”

“Right, Captain Lam!” a massive, hulking Shadeni man with an eyepatch shouted, pushing open the door and marching out. The line of club-wielding prisoners followed him out, and Victor was surprised when the sergeant started booming out a march cadence, and the veterans echoed him. It reminded him of an army VR he’d watched a few years ago, some comedy about a rich guy who had to sign up for basic training.

Marching through the deep dark!

Always in the deep dark!

People know us!

Monsters fear us!

We are the delvers!

The mighty Lam’s delvers!

We drive back the darkness

and the hiding creeps!

Tough Lam’s delvers!

Rough Lam’s delvers!

Marching through the deep dark!

Victor had never marched before, but it wasn’t hard to figure out that he was supposed to step with his left foot when the guys in front of him did so. He didn’t know the words to the march, but it was easy enough to repeat after the humungous voice of the sergeant. They made good time, and he had to admit that the cadence made it more fun than just walking along in a bunch. They went through a dozen different verses before repeating, and Victor started to think the sergeant was just making them up off the top of his head and felt rather impressed by it.

After an hour or so of marching, he noticed that the lights were less frequently hung in the high tunnel ceiling and that the tunnel was growing more narrow. It was still large enough to drive a few trains through, but it was definitely tapering. Another twenty minutes brought them to a circular wooden platform surrounding a massive vertical shaft that descended into even greater depths. Captain Lam, whom Victor hadn't seen on the entire march, was standing on the platform and gestured to a long rope hung through some pulleys. Sergeant Fath screamed, "Grab hold, unit!" pulling the rope's loose end toward the column. Victor hustled to comply, grabbing the rope with a dozen other sets of hands, and then the sergeant screamed again, "Pull!" Victor pulled along with everyone else, and they started to haul the rope back down the tunnel. They hauled it for what had to be five hundred yards before the word came from down the line to stop.

"The fuck is this for?" Victor asked Gris, who had also helped haul the rope.

"Whatever delver unit that went down last night didn't return. They left the lift at the bottom, and it ran out of Energy, so we had to pull it up by hand.

"They didn't return?"

"Yeah," Gris shook his head, "probably found a nest of something nasty."

"Jesus." They walked back to the shaft, and Victor saw that a circular platform was now hovering in the open shaft. Captain Lam was standing on the platform, holding her hands against a shimmering white and yellow crystal about the size of a basketball mounted at its center.

"She's recharging it," Gris said.

"Huh," Victor grunted and moved over to the crowd of other delvers waiting for further instructions. After about five minutes, Captain Lam straightened and motioned for everyone to board. Victor followed after the others, hopping over the two-foot gap between the deck and the floating platform. He didn't look down while he jumped because he had a feeling he didn't want to see just how deep the shaft was. The platform hardly moved with each additional delver, bobbing almost imperceptibly under their combined weight. When Captain Lam and her twenty-two delvers were all standing on the platform, she touched the crystal, and Victor's stomach dropped out as they descended. It was like riding on a huge open-air elevator, and he wondered how many people fell off to their deaths every year.

Victor watched the stony sides of the shaft blur past for a few seconds, and then they were slowing, and the platform came into a huge underground space that boggled Victor's mind. Energy globes hung from massive chains shedding light over the broken, stony landscape filled with strange fungi and glistening plantlife. A river cut through one corner of the cavern, flowing quickly enough to form rapids on the tumbled stones scattered in its bed. As the platform gently came to a stop atop a small hill next to a

large rectangular building, Victor noticed movement out among the giant fungi stalks. He strained to see what it was but only caught glimpses of something pale and furtive. "What's moving around out there?"

"Probably mulsii. They're like fat, pale worms with legs, and they have the temperament of a rabid dog. They'll eat anything," Gris responded.

"Sounds great."

"Good news is, we can grill 'em up. They're pretty good." Gris smacked his lips.

"Alright, time to look sharp! Get your sticks in your hands!" the sergeant hollered. Victor, happy to comply, gripped his baton in his right hand and looked around nervously. "We need to cross to tunnel fourteen, and that means we're going through those shrooms. Be on the lookout for mulsii." He turned and started marching, and the unit followed, keeping the same line order as when they'd been up in the tunnel. This time, however, there wasn't a loud marching cadence. When they started across the massive cavern, Victor became aware that his bird's eye view from the platform hadn't given him an accurate perception of its size. They hiked for nearly fifteen minutes before coming to the first fungi stalks, and as they approached, Victor could see that they were like big, pale, creamy-gray trees.

When the column moved into the fungi forest, Victor reached out and touched one of the rubbery stalks, amazed by its size. "Careful, youngster," one of the other veterans said, "some of the shit that grows down here is poisonous to touch. That one's alright, but don't go grabbing everything you see."

"Right, thanks." Victor wiped his hand on his pants, though there wasn't anything on it. They hiked for a few minutes, but then a rumbling sound accompanied by a strange chorus of hoots brought the column to a halt as the sergeant screamed, "Mulsii pack!" Victor lifted his club and stood shoulder to shoulder with two others as the unit formed a loose circle, facing into the mushrooms. The rumbling grew louder, and then Victor saw the long, pale-white forms of the mulsii charging between the stalks. They had worm-like bodies, six long stick-like legs, and broad heads that reminded Victor of his cousin's pitbull, though without the fur and friendly mammalian eyes. If these things had eyes, they were too narrow and pale for Victor to spot, though he saw their long nostril slits flexing as they surged over the spongy ground.

He couldn't make any more observations because the things were on them then, and Victor became too busy methodically smashing his baton into hard skulls, bendy bodies, and brittle legs. The two members of Lam's unit on either side of him seemed to know what they were doing, and Victor found himself able to focus entirely on anything that approached him directly, ignoring his flanks. The baton might have been a simple weapon, but it was heavy, and Victor was strong, and he had no trouble smashing the occasional mulsii that charged him and sending it skittering off along the ground. The

furious melee was over as soon as it began, and the delvers were left heaving for breath while the surviving mulsii hooted and howled, charging away into the fungi stalks.

Victor looked around and was surprised to see that one of the delvers was down; a massive chunk of his neck above his collar was gone. Several others sported bite wounds on their arms and legs, and some of the veterans were starting to move among them, passing out bandages. Victor cracked his back and then felt a surge of Energy as the downed creatures began to emit golden motes. He looked at his Energy attribute on his status page and saw that he now had forty-four over seven. Hadn't he had a maximum of five before? Once again, he felt a little surge of hope that his Core wasn't wholly destroyed. Maybe it was healing, and maybe he could do something to help it along. He resolved to spend some time trying to cultivate or at least manipulate the little pools of Energy where his Core used to be next time they rested.

Sergeant Fath was exhorting the delvers to move faster as they buried their downed comrade when, with a gust of wind and a shower of glittering Energy, Captain Lam came out of the darkness and landed among them. "Damn! Already lost one, Sergeant?"

"Aye, Captain. It was a bigger pack than we expected."

"Well, finish the burial, then we need to get moving. We're supposed to clear six-fourteen today, and you're not halfway there yet."

"Aye, ma'am! You heard the captain, worms! Dig faster!" Victor tuned the sergeant out as he watched Captain Lam walk down the line past him and then up the path toward whatever tunnel was their goal.

"Don't let her catch you staring like that, Victor," Gris said with a chuckle.

"I can't help it; she's amazing."

"Yeah, she's something to see, that's for sure, but she's the most dangerous thing in this mine, so mind your manners."

"Right," Victor said as he knelt to pull up another handful of airy soil to toss into the pit where they'd planted the dead delver. Victor felt a little bad that he didn't even know the guy's name and that he was disappearing into an unmarked grave, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. When they resumed their march, the sergeant made them move a lot faster than previously, and it was only a few minutes later when they moved out of the fungi forest and into a big stone tunnel, but not nearly as massive as the tunnel up above. This tunnel didn't have light globes in the ceiling, so a few of the delvers were given bright, glowing lamps to hold. Victor figured one of the veterans must have a dimensional container because he never saw anyone carrying gear. Still, somehow things like these lamps and shovels seemed to appear out of nowhere when needed.

They followed the tunnel on a winding path, past several other tunnel openings, and always on a downward slope. They'd been traveling for about an hour when word made its way down the line that they were almost to delve six-fourteen and should get ready for a fight. Victor looked ahead and thought he saw Lam talking to the delvers in the front, and he wondered if the captain would be fighting with them. Thinking about Lam fighting made him smile, and it was with some surprise that he noticed his lack of stress or anxiety. He supposed part of it was that he didn't know what to expect, so he couldn't properly freak himself out, but a significant factor had to be that he'd been fighting for his life for weeks now, and this just didn't seem like anything worse than what he'd already been through many times in the pits.

Victor gripped his baton and surged forward with the rest of them, happy to see Lam's glittering wings up in the lead. Suddenly the sergeant started chanting, in his huge, bass voice, "Now we kill! We kill for Lam! Now we kill! We kill for Lam!" The other veterans picked up the chant, and Victor, feeling the mob frenzy, screamed along with them. They charged chanting, roaring, batons waving in the air, down the tunnel and into a wide, open cavern filled with half-buried stone buildings. A bright orb of energy blazed, hanging from a chain in the vaulted ceiling, shedding light on the scene, and skitters and shrieks echoed from the shadows as they burst into the open area in front of the tunnel.

Swarming, dark forms poured from the collapsed buildings and surged toward the band of baton-wielding delvers. "Form up! Shoulder to shoulder!" the sergeant boomed, and Victor found himself once again in a loose circle, facing out toward a much larger force of enemies. He still hadn't gotten a good look at them, but as he crouched, baton ready to swing, he saw a cluster of dark shadows erupt from a nearby collapsed building toward his side of the circle. They were about as big as a person and moved almost like shadows, sliding along the ground with gleaming red eyes. Still, they were definitely solid because he brought his baton down on the first one to slide toward him, and he felt it crack, and a shower of hot liquid sprayed onto his fist and forearm as he pulled his baton back for another swing. He smashed it into the creature again, and it twitched and thrashed, and that's when Victor realized they were like long stick-men with perfectly black carapaces. Their heads reminded him of something he'd see on a praying mantis or a grasshopper.

"Stickmen!" one of his neighbors grunted, swinging his baton. Victor smashed aside another one and another. He wanted to ask what the fuck a stickman was but never got a moment to catch his breath; they just kept coming, sliding over the ground in waves, and now that Victor had seen one up close, their movement freaked him out even more. It was like they were crawling along the ground the way a person would crawl up a ladder. While he was fighting, he heard a tremendous shriek, and when Victor glanced toward it, he saw a massive black-carapaced form crawling out of a dark crevice about halfway through the cavern. He didn't have time to worry about it, though, as more stickmen came at him.

As he battled on, he heard a clear, piercing shout echo through the cavern, and when he looked, he saw Lam diving through the air, streaks of glittering light trailing behind her. She smashed into the top of the giant carapaced head emerging from the crevice, and a tremendous crack resonated through the cavern. Victor had to look away to fight again, but, throughout the battle, whenever he got a moment of respite, he'd glance toward where he'd seen Lam, hoping to watch her do something cool again, but she just stood at the edge of the crevice, a colossal hammer resting on her shoulder, watching the fight. None of the smaller stickmen approached her.

Victor grew tired, and he found himself wishing he could call on his old rage, but he had to settle for his weapon skill and good old-fashioned strength and endurance. He'd just smashed aside another wave of the creatures when the guy on his left fell to his knee, a stickman crawling up onto his back, gripping with its hooked hands and biting into his shoulder with its black, razor-sharp mandibles. Victor cracked it on its hard head with his baton but then fell back to fight off another two that were coming for the gap in the line. He screamed, "get that off him!" to the girl fighting on the other side of the downed man. She kicked out at the stickman she was fighting, sending it sprawling, then she turned and helped to finish the one on the guy's back. By the time they were both back in line, another wave of the creatures was coming. "Where the fuck? How many of these fucking things are there?" he yelled to no one in particular, and no one bothered to answer.

Victor's arms were numb, and he felt like he was swinging a lead telephone pole by the time he smashed the last of the creatures, looked around for his next victim, and found nothing more coming his way. He turned and looked around the scene. Piles of black-carapaced bodies surrounded the knot of delvers. They stood with hands on knees, huffing and puffing for air or kneeling over fallen comrades, trying to staunch bleeding. Just then, a thick fog of golden motes coalesced over the mounds of defeated creatures and began to stream toward all of the survivors. While Victor stood transfixed, absorbing a thick stream of Energy, he saw a shimmering golden and sparkling purple river of Energy come out of the crevice and smash into Captain Lam's chest. She rose off the ground, her entire body glowing and sparking with golden-purple light. He'd long since finished absorbing his little stream of Energy when Lam finally floated back to the ground, and her glow subsided.

He'd been so amazed by the sight of Lam's Energy absorption that he hadn't noticed the System message that had popped up in his vision:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 12 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

"Holy shit," he said, despite himself.

"What, Victor?" Gris asked, limping over and holding a hand to a bleeding bite on his shoulder.

“Oh, nothing,” Victor didn’t know if he should mention that he’d leveled, so he deflected, “I mean, did you see Lam floating in the air?” Gris started talking about something like high-tier Energy rewards, but Victor tuned him out, looking at his status sheet. He’d somehow convinced himself that he was broken, that he couldn’t level anymore while his Core was “fractured.” He’d leveled, though, and when he turned his eye inward, he saw that more of those red droplets of rage-attuned Energy had moved toward his tiny, pulsing Core. He looked at his Energy and attributes on his status sheet:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

289/23

Strength:

28

Vitality:

34 el. com

Dexterity:

19

Agility:

19

Intelligence:

10

Will:

24

Points Available:

7

His Core was healing; there wasn’t any other explanation. He had a shit-load more Energy in his body than his broken Core could hold, but he knew he could work with it. If

he got a chance to do some cultivating, he felt like he could really start to heal, and then maybe he'd have a surprise for the fuckers that put the collar around his neck. He was thinking about where to throw his seven free points when the sergeant hollered, "Alright! Let's bury our dead, clear the corpses, and we'll rest before heading back for the day. Good fight, Lam's Furies!"

Chapter 24: Beetles

Three of Lam's Furies had died fighting the stickmen. Nobody seemed particularly broken up about it, and Victor couldn't help imagining himself in their shoes; one minute, they were marching along, joking and laughing with other prisoners, and then they were buried under some rubble, forgotten at the bottom of a deep pit in the ground. "If this is the fucking bottom," he said, spitting into the dirt.

"What?" Gris asked.

"Just thinking about how shitty this is. Those dudes we just buried—nobody's gonna remember them. Their families probably already considered them lost, right? I mean, I can't imagine people are happy to hear about their loved ones coming to the Greatbone Mine. Here one minute, alive and fighting, gone the next, forgotten so they can be replaced by the next poor suckers the foreman sends down." They were sitting on some rubble, eating hard rolls and dried meat that one of the veterans had handed out.

"Welcome to life, kid. Work as hard as you want, be as important as you want, but when you die, the world moves on." Gris handed a skin of watery wine to Victor, and he took a long drink. It wasn't strong enough to give him even a slight buzz, but at least it was something different.

"Yeah, it's just bullshit, that's all. I'm sick of being led around like a dog, told to fight one thing after another." He spoke softly so as not to draw attention to himself, but he felt like he had to say something to someone. Gris chewed his hard, crunchy bread, staring at Victor for a moment before he replied.

"Victor, you know I'm not really your friend, right? I'll have your back in a fight, as long as we're fighting what Lam tells us to, but don't get any ideas that I'm going to help you escape or some crazy thing. I've been down here three years and have five more months to go. I'm going to make it, and I won't do anything that'll stick my neck out. You understand me?"

"Yeah, I feel you." Victor sat back against the stone and stared up at the ceiling, a hundred feet above. He studied the little sparkles in the rock that had to be reflections of the glowing Energy lamp. What made the reflections? Gemstones? Eyes? Flakes of ore? He had no idea, so he stopped worrying about it. "Hey, how long we gonna get to rest?"

“Probably until Captain Lam comes back. She’s scouting ahead into the ruins around here. Could be ten minutes, could be a couple hours.” Gris stretched out and hung an arm over his eyes. Victor sat up and cleared his mind, focusing inward on his Core. If he was going to get out of this place, he’d need to be stronger, and he couldn’t get much stronger until he fixed his Core. Could he fix it? He decided he had to; he was tired of being told what to do, and there was no way he’d be spending five years in this place. What would happen if he ran through his cultivation drill with his Core the way it was?

“One way to find out,” he muttered very softly and began the process. He called up one of his rage constructs and focused on it, feeling the heat start to spread at the very center of his being. It was working! He was so pleased that he almost interrupted the process. With the build-up of rage-attuned Energy, his little Core fragment started to pulse and flare very rapidly, and Victor had to begin the process of pushing Energy out and through his pathways right away. However, this proved beneficial because as he cycled the Energy around in his pathways, it started to absorb some of the little red pools of Energy that floated around his burgeoning Core. He pushed the Energy in an ever-widening circuit of his pathways, spread out from his Core all the way to his extremities and then back again. When the wave of hot, red Energy surged back into his little Core, it felt like a fire had ignited in the center of his body, and he watched with his inner eye as his little Core swelled, started to crack, and then slowly stabilized. The cracks healed over, and it pulsed more slowly and steadily. Looking at it, Victor thought it was easily twice as big as it had been when he’d started. He paused, took a long breath, and then looked at the Energy numbers on his status sheet:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

118/49

“Oh, fuck yes,” he muttered. His Energy cap had more than doubled. Could it really be this easy? Just some cultivating, and his Core would be fixed? The asshole who’d fragmented his Core had acted like what he was doing was permanent. Thinking back to when he’d been strapped to the table while the weird-ass tentacled guy had reached into his stomach, he shuddered, but a vivid memory came to him—hadn’t the tentacled guy said something like he hadn’t broken a spirit Core before?

He looked into his Core again and saw the little pulsing, red sun still surrounded by tiny pools of Energy. The red, rage-attuned pools were significantly reduced, but the other white-yellow Energy pools seemed as numerous as ever. What was the deal with those? When his Core was fragmented, why had part of it lost its rage affinity? Not for the first time, he wished that he had some sort of expert to consult. He wondered how much Lam could teach him; she was the most powerful being he’d ever met and had to know things that could help him. He shoved the thought aside, though; there was no

way he was going to let anyone know his Core was recovering, even a little. Not to mention, he had no real reason to trust her; just because she was awe-inspiring didn't mean she would want to help him. The last thing he wanted was for her or someone else to decide he needed a stronger collar.

"You cultivating, Victor? I'm surprised it does you any good with such a weak Energy level. I suppose everyone can improve a little, eh?" Gris asked as if on cue.

"Hah, yeah, everyone always makes fun of me, but I figure it's relaxing if nothing else." Victor grinned, then stood up to stretch. It wasn't much longer until Captain Lam came out of the deep crevice, glittering sparkles streaking after her as she flew over to the group and landed.

"Good news, delvers! I found another vein and even more ruins. We'll set up a forward camp tomorrow so the diggers can come down and get started. Sergeant! Bring them back to the barracks!"

"Right, Captain!" Sergeant Fath shouted. "You heard the captain! Line up, cockroaches!" Victor snorted with laughter at being called a cockroach; part of him was pleased that the dirty little bastards were on this world too. They lined up and began the long march back to the barracks. Victor was glad for the distraction of the march cadence that Sergeant Fath began; this one had some colorful lyrics about people's mothers, and, with the positive results with his Core, he was in just enough of a good mood to laugh at the absurdity. At the start of the march, he applied his seven free points to his strength, dexterity, and agility attributes, figuring that he needed the extra physical ability while his Core was on the mend.

Their return to the barracks was uneventful; nothing attacked them, and their only stop was to ride the levitating platform back up to the main tunnel. When they got back, some of the delvers wanted to go to the Settlement Stone to turn in their quests, but Victor saw that he only had thirty-nine kills when he checked the status of his quest. He opted to sit on his bunk and do another round of cultivating. He'd gathered from Gris's reaction that people couldn't tell how much Energy he was moving around when he cultivated, so he figured it was safe to do. He was a little worried that someone as powerful as Lam would know what was going on with him, but she didn't hang around in the main barracks, so he sat down on his bunk, folded his legs like Yrella had taught him, and began the process.

He'd managed to complete two full rotations of his cultivation drill when he became aware of a lot of activity and opened his eyes. People were gathering at the table for their evening meal, so he stretched and looked at his Energy stats:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

125/125

He'd processed all the extra Energy he'd gained from his kills, and his Core now pulsed with deep, red Energy, sending warmth and a sense of potential through his body. He looked inward and saw that he'd gathered more than half of the little fragmented pools of rage-attuned Energy, though the unattuned Energy pools were still there. He was missing something when it came to those; he was sure of it. He had a small hope that they'd start to become absorbed once all of the rage-attuned Energy was gone, but he felt like there was more to it.

The unit's dinner consisted of mystery meat drenched in fatty gravy, more hard biscuits, this time with butter, and a generous slice of some sort of melon. It reminded Victor of cantaloupe, but it was red with round, green seeds. Gris told him to eat the seeds when he saw Victor collecting them on his plate, so Victor gave it a try; they were tough, chewy, and spicy. Combined with the fruit's natural sweetness, they were a surprising treat. After they ate, Captain Lam ordered everyone to sleep. She said they'd be starting extra early, and she didn't want any noise coming from the barracks. The surviving members of the unit were exhausted, and respect for the captain and her sergeants ran deep, so everyone quickly complied, clearing off the table and quickly moving to their bunks to get what little sleep they could. Everyone except Victor, that is, he waited for those near him to fall asleep, then he silently sat up and began cultivating. He didn't care how tired he would be; he was going to cultivate all night if possible.

Victor woke to someone kicking his bed. He jerked up and looked around; apparently, his exhaustion had overcome his desire to cultivate at some point. He looked at his Energy numbers:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

274/274

He almost cursed at Gris in surprise, but he bit his tongue and stood up to fold his blankets. Then he hustled over to the line of delvers. He turned his attention to his Core and saw that it was swirling around, pulsing and glowing almost like it used to before he'd been damaged. He remembered having about five hundred Energy before they fucked his Core over, though, so something still wasn't right. He studied the space around his Core and found that there were still tons of fragmented little pools of yellow-white Energy. Whatever that tentacle dude had done to him, his rage-attuned Core was not absorbing those fragments, and his cultivation drill wasn't converting them. It was a problem, but one he could take his time to figure out; right now, he was just pleased that

he wasn't helpless when it came to Energy use anymore. Still, he'd have to be careful; he didn't want any of the Greatbone employees to know what he was capable of, and Victor knew that the other prisoners were just as likely to rat him out as help him.

The march down to where they'd fought the horde of stickmen went smoothly. They ran into a couple of packs of the mulsii, but they were small groups and fled from the delvers. This time Victor was marching behind Gris, but a thin Ghelli woman, only about five feet tall, was in line behind him, and she kept trying to chat with him during the march. With the sergeant chanting a cadence, and everyone shouting it out in refrain, Victor had a hard time hearing her, but she was persistent. "I said, how'd you manage to not get any bites or anything during that last fight?" They'd just gotten to the site of their previous battle, and the sergeant had ordered them to drink and rest while they waited for Captain Lam to show up.

"What? Oh, I just watched my spot on the line and didn't let any through. Why? Did you get bitten?" He looked at her thin, pale limbs and fragile little wings and tried to wrap his head around the idea that she was the same type of person as Captain Lam.

"Yes! One of them got around and bit me right on my butt cheek. No, I'm not showing you! It hurts when I walk, though. I wish they weren't so stingy with the healing salves."

"Ouch, that sucks." Victor took a deep swig from the wineskin someone passed him and gave it to the girl. "What's your name anyway?"

"Edeya. You're Victor, right? I heard the old white-bearded man talking to you." Victor smiled at the description of Gris.

"Yeah, that's right. Anyway, nice to meet you, and remember, when you're fighting shoulder to shoulder, you gotta trust the people next to you to have your back, so you can focus on the shit in front of you. Don't let anything through, and leave it to them to do the same. I'm not trying to be a know-it-all; Gris told me this stuff."

"Oh, thanks, but I already got an earful about that. You're right, though; that was my problem." She smiled, and Victor thought she was cute in a way, her features were very fine and pointed, but she had big green eyes and a friendly smile. She kept her hair cut really short, almost as short as his. He couldn't help thinking she seemed extremely fragile, and he had the dark thought lurking in his mind that he shouldn't bother getting to know her because she'd probably be dead soon. He tried to think of something to talk about with her almost to spite that mean, bitter voice he seemed to be hearing in his head more and more.

"Hey, I'm kinda new to this world and don't know much about Energy and Cores and stuff. Is it rude for me to ask what kind of Core you have?"

"Oh, I don't think it's rude, not when you put it that way. I have a pith class Core—it's a nature-affinity Core very attuned to trees and plants."

“That’s pretty cool. Can you make plants grow or something?”

“Hmm, yes!” Her grin broadened, showing off straight, white teeth, and Victor couldn’t help smiling back. “If I can get some levels, someday I’ll be able to craft living wood and even travel the Tree Road.”

“The Tree Road?”

“Yes! Some Ghelli with a Core like mine and with a suitable class can get a skill that lets them touch one tree in a forest and travel through it, traveling along the intertwining roots, to come out through any other tree in the forest!”

“That’s actually pretty badass. Nice!”

“Well, now it’s your turn. What’s your Core like? I noticed from your collar that it’s not, um, never mind.” Victor shrugged, reaching up to run his fingers around the circular iron band on his neck. Edeya had a collar that looked more like steel, and like the one Gris wore, it had dozens of intricate figures carved into it.

“Nah, don’t worry. It’s true. I’m from a world without any Energy, and when I came here, some asshole destroyed the Core I had.” He’d already rehearsed what he’d say to people inquiring about his Core. “I mean, I have a tiny little Core fragment left, but when I cultivate, nothing much happens.”

“Oh, that’s terrible! What savages! What kind of Core did you have?”

“Um, spirit.”

“Oh, no! Spirit Cores are so rare among my people! One of our elders had a spirit Core with a courage affinity! She was sought after by generals in Ridonne to encourage their troops before big battles. She made a fortune that she brought back to invest in our town.”

“Courage? That sounds pretty cool.”

“You have a funny way of speaking, Victor. I kind of like it!” She looked down, a bright rosy tint flooding her cheeks, and Victor suddenly imagined a mulsii sinking its long teeth into her shoulder and dragging her away. He shook his head and squeezed his hand into a fist until his nails bit into his palm. Just because she was delicate and just because she was friendly didn’t mean that she had to die. “Are you alright?”

“Um, just a headache. Sorry.” Victor was rescued from any further conversation when Captain Lam came streaking out of the dark crevice in the middle of the cavern. She strode over to the group of delvers, looking perfectly clean and coiffed like she’d just come out of a salon.

“Well, I killed a tier four salamander. There’s some trash for you all to clear out, but you should manage. Set up a barricade and the forward camp when the foothold is secure. I’m going to report my findings and let the foreman know to schedule a mining crew.” Lam spoke to Sergeant Fath, but it was easy to hear her clear, ringing voice. She strode past the delver unit, nodding to anyone that made eye contact, and Victor nodded back to her, standing up straight subconsciously.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” Edeya asked in a hushed voice.

“Yeah, that’s for sure. Fucking A.” Victor looked down and smiled when Edeya giggled at his words. “Yeah, I talk funny. I get it.”

“Alright, let’s move out. Captain says we gotta climb a pretty steep slope for about two hundred feet, then we’re going to be in the shit. Heads on a swivel, batons ready!”

“Here we go!” Edeya said, gripping her little baton and rushing over to line up. Victor frowned and hurried after her.

“Great,” he muttered, “now I feel like I have to watch her back.”

“You good, Victor?” Gris asked, coming up behind him.

“Yeah, about to crawl into a deep pit full of man-sized bugs and shit. Feeling great!”

“Aw, come on! We don’t know if it’s bugs; it could be spiders or giant lizards; it could be ghouls or imps. Heck, it’s probably not bugs!” He laughed and slapped Victor’s shoulder. Victor shook his head and followed Edeya into the crevice. The delvers slid and scurried down a loose slope of scree, keeping to the near side of the shaft. Every now and then, an Energy globe was attached to a wall or a rocky outcropping, and Gris said the captain had put those there for them.

“Must nice to be able to fly,” Victor said almost wistfully.

“Oh, I hope I can advance my race that far someday!” Edeya said over her shoulder.

“Are there many Ghelli that advanced?”

“No, not many. Only two in my hometown, and we had…”

“Quiet!” one of the veterans ahead of Edeya hissed.

“Aye, let’s hush,” Gris said from behind Victor. Victor looked around at the shadowy rift, wondering what lurked up in the high, rocky gloom. The captain’s lights allowed them to see where they walked, but they didn’t shed much light on the far side of the crevice. After a few minutes more, the word was passed up the line to get ready. They came around a bend, and Victor saw another large Energy globe spilling its yellow-orange

light into a wide, low-ceilinged cavern, one wall of which gleamed and glittered in reflected light. "Damn me!" Gris whispered, "That's the biggest amber-ore vein I've seen."

The crevice opened into the cavern, and on the far side, perhaps two hundred paces away, a broad, dark tunnel continued into the depths. A howling, hissing, clacking cacophony erupted from that tunnel, and a wave of creatures rushed toward them out of the shadows. "Beetle riders!" Sergeant Fath screamed, "No holding back! Use your Energy! Captain Lam ain't here to save us! C'mon down the slope; let's get our backs to that wall!" Sergeant Fath charged down the remaining slope, and the line of delvers surged after him. Victor followed, of course, trying not to pass up the shorter-legged people in front of him but also wanting to hurry so he didn't get caught out in the middle of the cavern when the "beetle riders" fell upon them. When they got off the scree-covered slope, Victor let his legs really stretch out, and he grabbed Edeya's wrist, pulling her along with him. He'd barely gotten into position and pulled her next to him when the creatures, howling and skittering, closed the distance and attacked.

Victor raised his baton and smashed the head of a yellow and red beetle the size of a mastiff as it tried to jump onto Gris's back. Gris, panting and red-faced, lined up next to Victor and offered him a nod of thanks, then the battle took his attention away. The eighteen Delvers were lined up against a solid wall of rock, and a skittering, hissing, clicking horde of beetles spread out before them. Every fifth beetle or so was being ridden by a little man-like creature with skin so pale, it looked transparent. They bore spears and crude clubs and axes, and they hissed and howled with mouths gaping open to display snake-like fangs. Victor wasn't an expert on combat logistics, but in his amateur opinion, they were fucked.

At first, it didn't go as badly as he feared; some of the delvers had some pretty amazing Energy skills, and they turned the tide in their favor for a while. Sergeant Fath roared out some kind of battle chant that seemed to invigorate the delvers, making Victor's arms surge with buzzing energy. He felt confident and sure and laughed while he smashed his baton out in heavy overhead strikes at anything within range. He was careful to keep his place in the line and felt so good with the sergeant's chant bolstering him that he had time to spare between opponents to throw an occasional smash at the creatures in front of Edeya. She didn't complain, though she'd held her own so far.

One of the veterans a few spots down the line would roar every couple of minutes and breathe out a long, liquid belch of flames that would drench the beetles in front of him for a good ten paces, lighting them on fire and sending them hissing and squealing in a panicked, frenzied rampage through the horde. Some of the beetles they touched would also start to burn, and they'd go mad with pain and panic, lashing out at each other. Another delver was able to discharge electric shocks with his baton blows, though it seemed to drain him considerably. For his part, Gris would occasionally speed up to superhuman levels, smashing everything in front of him, sending shards of carapace flying, and driving into the horde for several seconds before rushing back, panting, to take up his position again.

Victor just plodded along, swinging and swinging, blocking, and kicking with his old worn boots whenever a beetle got too close. After seeing the fireworks some of the delvers were able to dish out, he began to have some hope that they had a chance. Still, the horde of beetles and their riders seemed to keep coming, and after several minutes of fighting, when his arm was burning from swinging his baton, one of the riders managed to slip a thin, stone-tipped spear past his guard and punch a hole about two inches deep under his left collar bone. Victor roared in pain and snatched the spear, pulling the pale, creepy little man close and bringing his baton down on his flat, hairless head. The creature's skull deformed under the blow, and it dropped at Victor's feet among the broken and smashed beetle corpses.

The corpses were starting to be a problem as they piled up; the fresh waves of enemies were crawling over them and coming at Victor and the other delvers from a greater height. On top of that, the space for maneuvering was becoming more and more cramped. Victor was starting to feel more and more exhausted, and his frustration at the situation was mounting. His shoulder and triceps were screaming with fire after swinging that heavy baton for the thousandth time, and, still, the creatures came pouring out of the tunnel.

Hissing like a snake, a beetle rider jumped off its mount toward him, swinging its axe in a two-handed overhead strike. Victor stepped forward, inside its swing, and smashed it in the side with his baton, sending it flying to his left, where it crashed into Edeya. She stumbled back, and then several beetles broke through and started swarming over her. A surge of guilt and panic hit Victor as he realized he'd caused her to fall, and he simply snapped, activating his Berserk ability for the first time since his Core had been fractured. Red washed over his vision, and his muscles sang with Energy. He howled in exuberance, smashing his way through the beetles that were snapping at Edeya's legs, and then, with a monumental effort of will, turned away from Edeya and the delvers. He waded into the horde of beetles and their riders, swinging his heavy metal baton like a thin reed.

Victor's baton whistled and shrieked as it split the air, blasting through carapaces and sending the lithe beetle rider bodies flying. He laughed maniacally, his mouth open in a leering grin as fluids and shell fragments splattered him. He had a plentitude of targets to brutalize, and at some point, in the midst of his rage, the sergeant started up his chant again, adding more fuel to his frenzied rampage. He mowed his way deep into the horde, laying waste to a wide circle of insects and their pale riders.

Victor was only aware of the need to destroy his enemies and didn't have any sense of how the tide of the battle was flowing, but his rampage had given the other delvers a much-needed respite and chance to regroup. While he pushed ever further into the horde, accumulating cuts and bruises that seemed to heal as fast as they appeared, the other delvers, lead by the sergeant's bellowed commands, pulled in tighter. They moved down the wall away from the piled corpses, readying themselves for the inevitable wave that would come when Victor finally fell.

Dimly, Victor was aware that his Berserk was fading. Though he was still in battle and tried to push more and more rage-attuned Energy into his body to keep the ability stoked, his Core was flickering and sputtering, having fed him everything it had. With a final surge, he smashed his way through a thin line of beetles so that he could mount the slippery, rubble-strewn ramp that led up out of the cavern. He'd just gotten through and gained a bit of ground when his Berserk finally faded, and he almost collapsed as the exhaustion hit him. He fell to one knee, and a beetle clambered up, snapping at his face. He managed to thrust out with his left hand, punching it under its snapping mandibles and flipping it back down the slope. Something sharp on its carapace ripped a jagged gash over his knuckles, but he'd gained enough room to struggle to his feet.

"Where the fuck?" Coming out of his rage-induced Berserk was like waking up from a dream. He had a dim memory of the fighting, but now, as he stood on the slope and looked over the chittering, clacking horde, he was utterly disoriented. He saw the delvers a hundred paces away fighting against the wall, and he saw a swath of dead beetles and riders, but there still had to be hundreds of the things. He weakly lifted his baton because some of the creatures were starting to surge up the rocky slope to him. "This is it? I'm going to be beetle food?" He was exhausted; his arms were numb and heavy, and his vision was dim, like his eyes weren't getting enough blood or something. "Come on!" He screamed, trying to pump himself up, hoping to spark some adrenaline. A beetle came within reach, and he smashed down on it with his baton, nearly stumbling on a loose rock.

He'd just lifted his baton for another blow, grunting with the effort, when a gust of wind rushed past him, trailing a line of glittering sparks. "What the fuck?" Then his brain caught up with his eyes, and he saw Captain Lam streak down to the cavern floor, directly in the middle of the horde of beetles. A burst of crackling silver-tipped flames rolled out from her impact point, completely incinerating a hundred or more beetles in a perfect circle around her. She shouted in a pure, ringing voice, swinging her two-handed hammer around in great arcs, sending broken beetles flying with each swing. She carved a swath through the remaining insects to the line of delvers, and Victor, though he had another beetle in front of him to deal with, laughed in excitement at seeing something so utterly badass. His baton suddenly felt lighter, and his muscles less exhausted, and he beat the beetle and two more after it into broken carcasses.

By then, the other delvers and the captain had moved on to mopping up stragglers, and Gris helped Victor with the last few beetles near the ramp. When Victor saw Gris and saw that no more beetles were coming, he fell to his knees in exhaustion and smiled up at the old veteran. "Hey, I thought Lam wasn't coming to save us? Somebody needs to tell the sergeant to quit being so pessimistic." Gris was helping him to his feet when the air around them suddenly filled with a mist of golden motes. "Oh shit," Victor said when he saw how much Energy was coalescing from the hundreds and hundreds of corpses. A massive stream of Energy surged toward him, and though he felt transfixed by the rush of vigor and well-being, he managed to see that his stream was broader and brighter than anyone else's, including the captain's.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 14 Spirit Champion. You have gained 14 will, 14 vitality, and have 14 attribute points to allocate.

“So much for not getting noticed,” he muttered, though Gris seemed preoccupied with his own Energy surge. He looked around the cavern and saw that nearly everyone was dealing with their own problems, and for a second, he thought he'd skate under the radar, but then he glanced at Captain Lam and felt the weight of her gaze as it bored into him.

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Chapter 25: Secrets

After sorting through the wounded delvers and seeing to their injuries the best they could, Sergeant Fath directed the able-bodied prisoners in the construction of a barrier over the tunnel that led further into the depths. One of the veterans had a rune inscribed bag from which he pulled all the boards, hammers, nails, pickaxes, and saws that they needed for the construction. Victor worked hard, all the while wondering when he'd be singled out and called over to speak to Captain Lam about his prodigious Energy gains at the end of the fight. Nothing happened, though, save for a few of the delvers looking at him with more respect and clapping him on the shoulder, saying things like, “You really took it to those bastards! Nice fighting!” Edeya, who'd suffered a badly twisted knee, didn't seem to blame him for getting knocked down and overrun, but he wondered if she even realized he'd been the one to throw that beetle rider onto her.

After they'd built a sturdy barricade over the tunnel, complete with mounted ballistae and ramparts for the defenders, Sergeant Fath handed a sack to Victor and another one to Gris and told them to get started collecting beetle corpses. “Um, how do I use this thing?” Victor asked Gris after the sergeant had walked away.

“You never used a dimensional container? The ones they let us use are enchanted so that multiple people can access them. Just concentrate on it, and send some of your Energy out to it. You'll understand what to do after that.”

“Uh, right,” Victor said, looking at the big floppy sack he'd been handed. How was he supposed to ‘send Energy into it?’ He concentrated on his Core, and just as he did with his cultivation drill, he pushed some Energy out along his pathways, feeling the hot simmering rage tickle the back of his mind. He continued to push, as thin a stream of the Energy as he could, until it moved along into his hand, then he pushed harder, trying to shove it into the bag. Suddenly he became aware of the bag and the enormous space within it. He could see that it was empty without even opening it. Holding the bag in his left hand, he reached out to touch one of the beetle corpses and willed it into the bag. Like magic, the crumpled, gooey carapace poofed out of existence, and Victor became aware of it sitting in the bag's dimensional space. “That's pretty fucking cool.”

“Glad you like it,” said a strong, clear voice that sent shivers down his spine. Victor jerked his head around and saw that Captain Lam was standing just behind and to the right of him, watching him with her glittering emerald eyes. She’d put away her massive hammer but still wore her armor, and that, combined with her height, made Victor feel insignificant in her presence.

“Um, yeah. I’ve never used one before,” Victor muttered, holding up the sack.

“Sergeant Fath tells me you might be responsible for the delvers living long enough for me to make it back in time. You think that’s true?”

“Oh, uh, no, I don’t think so. Most of the veterans had some pretty awesome abilities. I just went a little crazy at one point and charged into the horde. I bet I would have done more good if I’d stayed in the line.” Victor watched her face while he spoke, wondering if she’d see through him. Her eyes narrowed a little, but her lips quirked in a smile.

“Being modest? Or are you hoping I won’t take note of your ability? I think it’s the latter; you don’t seem the modest sort.” She stood with her arms folded, and she tapped one long finger against her opposite elbow, studying him. Victor swallowed and stood up straighter. She wasn’t all that much taller than he, six or eight inches, but she just had a certain presence that made him feel small. He supposed it had a lot to do with her level and how much Energy she had.

“Well, to be honest,” he said, deciding that it might be wise to mix some truth with his dissembling, “I have an ability that causes me to kind of go berserk, but I don’t remember a lot after I do that.”

“Oh?” She looked at him and nodded. “When I read your contract, it made note of you having a dysfunctional Core. Surely your berserking ability requires a significant amount of Energy?”

“Well, yeah, but I had a lot of Energy saved up from yesterday’s fights. It doesn’t go to my Core, just kinda sits in my pathways and stuff.”

“Mmhmm. And you just received another large influx, correct?”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t see a way to hide that fact; she’d seen it with her own eyes.

“Your affinity must be high. Well, that’s beside the point. You have enough Energy to activate your berserking skill again, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Good. I can make use of you. Carry on; clean up this mess. I’ll let you know when you’re needed.” She turned and walked over to where Sergeant Fath was berating another delver who’d done something wrong, and Victor, though he struggled not to,

watched her walk away with a very stupid expression on his face. He finally pulled his eyes back into his head and got to work cleaning up the beetle corpses. It took him the better part of an hour, even with another delver helping, so big were the piles of corpses and beetle parts in the wide cavern. When he and Gris finished, Sergeant Fath hollered at them to “eat something,” so they went over to where the wounded delvers were propped up near the amber-ore vein, and Victor sat down next to Edeya.

“How’s the knee?” He munched on the hunk of “rations” that one of the veterans had passed out. It was a chewy square of animal fat, dried meat, and dried berries and nuts. If you didn’t think about it too much and just ate it without wondering where the meat came from, it didn’t taste all that bad, and it was certainly filling.

“It’s sore, but Captain Lam told Fath to break out the good salve for it, and I can feel it getting better already. I think I’ll be able to walk pretty soon.”

“Well, that’s good!”

“It is! Victor, I thought I was going to die in that fight. I thought we all were. When I fell, and those beetles started crawling on my legs, I was sure it was over.”

“Yeah, um, I’m sorry about that.”

“What? Why? You’re the one that cleared them off!”

“Shit, you’re kidding, right? I hit the asshole rider-guy onto you. I’m the one that knocked you down.” He took another bite of his ration and stared at her, daring her to react.

“You’re too honest,” she said, “I mean, you didn’t have to tell me that. It doesn’t matter anyway; it’s not like you meant to knock me down, and you made up for it.” She shrugged, pushing herself up a bit higher against the stone wall, and then reached out and snatched the rest of Victor’s ration bar. “I’ll take this as payment.”

“Hey, what the hell?” Victor laughed and mock-snatched at the ration, and Edeya giggled, cramming it into her mouth. Her cheeks bulged out, her eyes wide, and Victor laughed even harder. “Ahh, I needed that. It’s good to laugh, you know?” Victor sighed deeply, stretching out his legs and knocking the heels of his boots against the hard ground, trying to get some of the crusty bits of carapace to fall off. He thought it was strange how he could laugh and joke around while stuck in his current mess. He was in a strange world, deep under the earth with a collar on his neck, being forced to fight monsters. “But I can laugh and joke around.”

“What?”

“Talking to myself. I’m weird, remember?” He bumped her bony shoulder with his elbow and smiled down at her.

“Well, what about?”

“Just thinking about how strange it is that people can find things to laugh about in the worst fucking situations. How long are you stuck in this place?”

“I owe two years. I took on some of my parents’ debt so they could avoid prison. My little sisters needed them home.”

“Jesus.” Once again, Victor was reminded that he wasn’t the only one with a raw deal in this place. “If I ever get out of here, I’m going to work to gain enough clout to put this fucking indentured servant bullshit out of business.”

“Hah, gonna take on the whole Ridonne Empire, hmm?”

“Alright, I know I don’t know shit, but I’m going to do something. Seriously. This system is garbage. I mean, it’s basically like allowing slavery without calling it slavery.”

“True. On the Beneset Steppes, some tribes openly enslave people they capture, but at least they’re honest about it. It’s awful, but you know what I mean.”

“I guess. After living like this, though, I couldn’t be okay with it for anyone.”

“Victor!” He turned to see Sergeant Fath staring at him and motioning for him to come over.

“Catch you later,” he said to Edeya, then got up and walked over to the big sergeant. “Yeah?”

“Go stand over by the barricade and wait; Captain Lam has a job for you.” He turned from Victor, looked up and down the line, and then shouted, “Heng! Come here!” He saw Victor still standing there and made a shooing motion toward the big wooden barrier. Victor shrugged and walked over to it, sighing with some relief when he saw the big Vodkin veteran coming over; at least he wasn’t being singled out. A moment later, they were joined by another veteran that Victor didn’t know the name of; a short but very stout, angry-faced Cadwalli with red and yellow irises in his weird goat-like face. Heng nodded to him when he walked up, but neither of them spoke.

“Uh, I’m Victor,” he said, looking at the two men.

“Heng. That’s Fenlale; he doesn’t talk.”

“Any idea what this is?”

“Nope.” Heng leaned his broad, leather-clad body against the barricade and spat off to the side. Victor noticed that both of the veterans had some decently thick-looking boots and vests, and their batons were larger and had those little System letters all over them.

“You guys buy your gear at that big stone thing with the shop in it?”

“Yeah, the Contribution Store. You pick up quests?” Heng asked.

“Uh-huh. Got one to turn in.”

“Yep.” Victor didn’t respond; he wasn’t really interested in pulling more grunts out of the recalcitrant fellow, and besides, he could see Captain Lam coming down the ramp. He watched her, wondering why she didn’t fly everywhere, but admiring the grace with which she traversed the ground. It was like watching a dancer; everything she did was smooth and perfect. He wondered just how high her dexterity and agility were. She didn’t pause by the other delvers, just walked straight up to the trio of them standing by the barrier and nodded in greeting.

“Alright, I found some ruins I want to explore, and I need you guys to watch my back while I dig around. Let’s go; I want us back here in a couple of hours.” She climbed the short stack of steps leading to the little rampart and leaped over the side, and the two veterans hurried after. Victor followed in their footsteps, once again feeling like he was caught in the wake of the events happening around him. He knew, logically, that he didn’t have a choice but still felt like he should be resisting somehow. While he dropped off the side, hanging from the rail to break his fall, he determined that his resistance would have to be mental for now. He’d continue to grow stronger, lie about his abilities, and take every opportunity to plan his escape. Surely he wasn’t the only prisoner down in the mines that felt that way, and they obviously weren’t having much success, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t make something happen. “Fuck anyone that says otherwise.”

Captain Lam and the others were standing a few feet away; she was looking at a document, tracing something with her finger, and the other two stood with batons in their hands, looking around nervously. Victor lifted his baton and looked around, walking over to them. The tunnel on this side of the barrier was about two feet higher than his head and a good ten paces wide with a reasonably steep, descending slope. They were still in a part of the tunnel illuminated by the big orb that Captain Lam had hung from the ceiling in the cavern, but it was dark just a bit further on. Victor was about to ask about the light, but Lam put the paper away and produced a glowing yellow orb, passing it to the burly Cadwalli veteran. “Alright, follow me. Victor, you bring up the rear. If you get attacked, use your berserking ability; don’t hold back.”

“Alright,” he said, squeezing his baton more tightly, glad for the leather grip that soaked up his sweat. Lam didn’t set an easy pace, striding quickly with her long legs down the tunnel. She turned down a side tunnel that Victor didn’t even see until he’d walked right up to it. The opening was a narrow crevice behind a protruding elbow of solid stone, and when the light winked out as Fenlale turned into it, Victor had a momentary panic but realized what happened and hustled after them. What the hell would he do if he got separated down here without a light? They followed the narrow, natural-seeming series of cavelike tunnels for a while, turning and descending several times until Victor was

sure he'd struggle to find his way back with or without a light. Remarkably, nothing attacked them by the time the captain stopped, and Victor caught up to the trio.

They were standing in a tunnel mouth, looking out on another vast cavern. Fenlale had covered his glowing orb with his leather shirt, and Victor could see that the cavern was dimly illuminated by hanging moss that glowed with an eerie green-white luminescence. "Glow-moss," Heng matter-of-factly said when he saw Victor staring around. An underground stream rushed through the cavern, and stone structures lined both sides of the stream, including a partially intact stone bridge. While they watched, a rumbling sound signaled some movement on the far side of the stream, and Victor saw a tail-like appendage disappear beneath a pile of rubble that might once have been another building.

"There it is," Captain Lam said, pointing to the rubble pile. "It's a greater rot fiend, tier-three or so. I'll deal with it; you three need to make sure nothing jumps me while I'm fighting. If it's something you can't handle, try to keep it busy awhile, and I'll try to hurry with the rot fiend." The tunnel opened onto the cavern a good twenty feet from the ground, so Captain Lam produced a rope and piton, which glowed red when she pressed it against the tunnel floor and sank four inches into the rock with a soft hiss. As quickly as it had begun to glow, it returned to normal, and she hooked the rope to it, throwing it down toward the floor. "After I fly down there, hurry down the rope and take up positions around that pile of rubble so you can watch my back."

Captain Lam looked at each of them, making sure they acknowledged what she said, then produced her huge hammer from some hidden container, hefting it in both hands. Victor had never seen it up close before, and he admired its craftsmanship. It had a long, black wooden handle topped with a silvery metal hammerhead pointed on one side and flat on the other. He figured it would weigh a good twenty-five pounds if the hammerhead were steel. Either she was ridiculously strong, or it was lighter than it looked because he'd seen her swinging it around like it was a broomstick. "Good luck," he said, feeling like an idiot. Captain Lam didn't make fun, though, just nodded her head and fell backward off the ledge.

Her abrupt departure caught Victor by surprise, but she rotated smoothly, and her brilliant, enormous dragonfly wings started to rapidly beat, throwing motes of sparkling light behind her as she raced toward the buried creature. "C'mon," Heng said, grabbing the rope and dropping over the edge. Fenlale followed close behind, and Victor brought up the rear. They descended quickly, then hurried over the broken stones on the cavern floor, moving between ancient buildings toward the sounds of crashing rocks and hissing shrieks that had erupted in the distance. "Matron! She could have waited for us to get closer!" The big otter-man leaped over a collapsed stone pillar, and Victor almost laughed at how funny it was to see such a wide man move so nimbly.

"I'll go left!" Victor shouted at the backs of the other two delvers, then turned left around a large stone structure blocking their path; the other two went right. He figured that they shouldn't all be in one spot if the captain wanted them to watch her back. He rounded

the building and had a short stretch of open ground ahead of him, down which he could see the stream flowing. He sprinted for it, wondering if he could make the jump or if he'd need to traverse the ancient bridge. While running, he sped past stone buildings, some intact, others nearly completely collapsed. He heard another tremendous crash and then a roar that vibrated his body; he clapped his free hand over his ear and tucked the other one against his shoulder, trying to spare them from the outburst. The sound cut off with an almost comical squeak, and Victor resumed his dash to the river.

When he passed by the last of the structures on his right and could see clearly over the bridge, he finally caught sight of Captain Lam and the creature she was battling. Lam moved in dashes and leaps that carried her a dozen feet in the air; Victor, again, wished he had wings like that. The creature was the size of a hippopotamus and built similarly, though it was shorter with six legs, a long flailing tail, and a nest of probing, spiked tentacles surrounding a slender, pointed beak. Victor watched Captain Lam leap over its back, avoiding its thrashing tail, land near its left rear haunch, and smash her hammer into its hip with a thunderous crack. Still trying to watch the fight, Victor began to trot along the river toward the partially crumbled stone arch. He was moving past a low-walled ruin when something burst up from the riverbank and slammed into him, knocking him through an ancient door, disintegrating it into a cloud of desiccated wood dust. Whatever hit him was growling and slobbering, its hot, wet mouth worrying at his shoulder as they tumbled together into the ruin.

When they smashed into the far stone wall, coming to a halt, Victor, still madly gripping his baton, began to thrash down at whatever was digging and clawing at him. It was dark in the small structure, but he caught glimpses of dark fur and gleaming yellow eyes. The creature finally secured a good hold on his shoulder and crunched down, and Victor screamed as long fangs punctured his shoulder, and the beast began to shake its head back and forth, like a terrier killing a rat. It hurt so badly that he lost track of his thoughts and simply activated Berserk. Suddenly red rage flooded his vision, and he no longer felt any discomfort from the horrible bite on his shoulder; he just felt the annoying pressure and wanted to be rid of it.

Victor stopped screaming and thrashing and got his feet beneath him, standing up and lifting the heavy beast with him. He charged forward, carrying it, still clinging to his shoulder, and bodily slammed it into the stone wall. He felt its heavy, scrabbling body compress under his weight against the wall, and its jaws sprang open, releasing his shoulder. Victor took a step back and began to methodically and mechanically smash his baton into an area where he could see the creature's eyes reflecting light. His first blow cracked something, and the next ten or twelve began to spray wet, warm fluid on each backswing. When nothing came looking for round two, Victor started to pant and look around, wondering, in his rage, what else he could kill. He paced around in the dark interior of the building, growling and grunting, his fury unrequited.

When he got to the back corner of the structure and turned, still hunting a new victim, Victor saw the dimly lit doorway and charged toward it. He took two steps, and then his foot broke through the old flooring, and he fell about eight feet to smash onto a cold

stone floor. He sat up, glaring around in the dark, and a glinting silver light caught his eye. He stared at it for a moment, and that's when the red started to bleed from his vision, and his berserking rage began to cool. The air was cool and moist, and as his mind came back to him, Victor realized he was sitting in a shallow puddle; water dribbled in from between blocks in the walls. "From the river," he said aloud, his voice hoarse.

Victor glanced around, confused at first about where he was, but then he saw the hanging, broken floorboards and dimly remembered falling. When he looked at the hole in the ceiling, he realized it was limned in a silvery light and remembered what he'd seen while under the influence of his rage. He jerked his head to the far corner, and there, stretched out as though it was reclining against the stone blocks, was a long, yellow-boned skeleton of a humanoid. Around its neck was a silvery pendant that shone with a white-silver light. Victor didn't stop to think; he just stood up and rushed over to the skeleton, briefly noting the alien shape of the skull with a small crown of black horns protruding from its brow, and lifted the necklace over its head. The chain caught on one of the horns, but he wiggled it free.

He heard the clash of combat, though it seemed distant, and remembered that he was supposed to be watching Captain Lam's back. "I am, though. Didn't I just kill something?" Using the light from the amulet, he looked around the skeleton and saw that it had a ring on its long, bony middle finger. He pulled it off the bone, marveling that both it and the amulet were shiny and untarnished. Nothing else remained of the skeleton's possessions, though some matter beneath it that he took for moss might have been badly decayed clothing. Not wanting to get caught with his loot, Victor stuffed the amulet and ring into his pants' pocket and then moved over to the hole in the ceiling. He jumped up, grabbed hold of an intact beam, and pulled himself up.

Victor saw the crumpled, shadowy form of whatever he'd been fighting and moved over to it. He could still hear Lam fighting in the distance, so he risked a quick reveal of his amulet to shine its light on the creature; it looked like a huge, black-furred rat. Victor stuffed the amulet back in his pocket, grabbed one of the rat's hind legs, and dragged it out of the smashed doorway into the cavern proper. He pulled it further away from the building, toward the bridge, and then threw it against a different building's wall. He'd acted on impulse, but when he thought about it, he realized he didn't want to leave evidence that he'd been in the building with the skeleton. There was no way he was going to tell anyone about the amulet or ring he'd found.

He was standing with his hands on his knees, gathering himself, when Heng came charging across the stone bridge. He saw Victor and ran over, "That's a big one! Jumped you on your way over, huh?"

"Yeah, got me by surprise! Had me by the shoulder and was dragging me around like it wanted to bring me home for dinner."

"You don't look hurt," Heng said, eyeing him up and down.

“Yeah, I had to use my berserking ability. It healed me up, but I lost track of myself and where I was until it wore off.”

“You missed a hell of a fight. Captain had to break almost every bone in that thing’s body before it stopped trying to fight.”

“Nothing else jumped you guys?”

“Nah, I think other rats and stuff nearby got scared from the racket. C’mon, Fenlale’s butchering that beast. The captain wants some of its organs for some reason.” Victor followed Heng over the bridge, avoiding the half where the stones had fallen into the river, and then down the far side of the bank to the scene of the captain’s battle. The huge creature looked smaller in death, deflated and limp with most of the fluid it had once held, running down the stones and into the river. Fenlale had carved a yard-long window into its abdomen and pulled out the entrails, which instantly brought Victor to his knees, retching, when he smelled them. “Haha, get it out, kid. We’ve got more carving to do.”

Heng said Captain Lam left as soon as she’d finished killing the beast without explaining where she was headed. She didn’t make an appearance until they’d finished butchering and taken turns washing the guts and blood off themselves in the cold river water. She moved quietly, and Victor didn’t notice her presence until her voice rang out from behind him, saying, “Fenlale. Where’s the bag you put the organs in?” The mute man jumped to his feet and pulled a small pouch from his vest. He ran over to the captain and handed it to her. “Good. Alright, let’s move out. I’m done here for now. Good news for you, delvers: I’m going to need to take a trip to town tomorrow, so I’ll give you a day off. You can use the time to turn in quests, rest up and train.”

“Yes!” Heng clapped Fenlale on the back, and Victor couldn’t help grinning. He had a lot to do, and a day off would serve nicely. He’d find a quiet place where he could try to inspect his secret loot, he’d turn in his quest, and he’d spend some time trying to figure out what was up with his Core. Had he had an entire day to himself since coming to this world? He decided he better not count his chickens before they hatched; just because Captain Lam was leaving didn’t mean the other veterans would leave him alone. He could hope, though.