

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 26: Soul Searching

Victor groaned and collapsed onto his narrow, scratchy mattress. He felt like he did after his first day at summer wrestling camp as a freshman. In a way, it was a good clean feeling of having worked his ass off, and, on a deeper level, he felt like he'd accomplished some things that had ignited a little flare of hope in his chest. He reached his hand into his pocket and felt the hard, cool metal of the ring and amulet, and a slow smile crept over his face as he drifted into a deep, heavy slumber.

"Victor," a gruff voice said, shaking his shoulder. Victor's eyes popped open, and he rolled onto his back, blinking rapidly in the bright light of the barracks. Heng leaned over him, his jowly, furry face just inches away. His thin, black lips spread into a broad smile, showing off lots of pointy teeth, and he said, "Hey, Captain kept her word. We're free for the day. Me and a couple others are going to turn in quests. You wanna come?"

"Mm, yeah!" Victor yawned while he spoke, then sat up. "Gimme two minutes to take a piss and get my boots on."

"Right, we'll be out front." Victor stood and slipped his boots on, then stepped through the door to the "jacks," as the veterans called the long, narrow room, where wooden toilet seats sat above holes in the ground. Two of the toilets had wooden partitions, but he was the only one there, so he just used one of the open ones. When he finished washing his hands and splashing water on his face, he walked outside to join Heng, Fenlale, Gris, and a Vodkin woman he'd seen fighting but hadn't ever spoken with. They hiked to the central cavern where the Settlement Stone rose from the ground, joking around about how lucky they were to have a day off and what they'd do with all the extra time. Heng joked about taking Sullya, the female Vodkin, to dinner, and she punched him in his belly, making his blubber quiver and jiggle. Victor laughed and dodged out of the way when Heng took a swipe at him.

They didn't have to wait long to access the stone; most of the other teams of workers were busy elsewhere in the mine, so the lines were short. When Victor put his hand on the stone and selected the "quests" menu item, he navigated to the section to turn in completed quests and was surprised to see more than just his slaying quest update:

Quests for Victor Sandoval in Greatbone Mine:

Slay 100 denizens of the deep

Complete! Reward: 240 credits. Accept reward? Y/N

Recover Energy-rich materials

Turn in sunsteel ring for 1000 credits? Y/N

Turn in artificed amulet for 1000 credits? Y/N

Victor very briefly considered selecting the yes option for the 2000 credits, but he figured that the items might very well be far more valuable to him than some Contribution Store credits. He also didn't know if the stone kept track of stuff like that, and he didn't want to answer questions about how he got so many credits. He turned in the slayer quest and picked up another one, this time requiring him to slay 200 denizens. "Do they always go up in number? The slayer quests?" He asked aloud.

"Nah, if you finish 'em fast, they do, but if you struggle with one for a long time, the next one will be lower," Gris answered.

"Ahh, thanks," Victor said, switching over to the Contribution Store menu. His worn-out, mismatched boots were starting to chafe his feet, and he wanted to see if he could get a new pair and some socks. After a bit of surfing through the menus, he found what he wanted and bought four pairs of wool socks and a pair of sturdy "mining boots" that looked like hiking boots but had steel toe guards. Standing there holding the socks and boots that had appeared in a yellow-blue mist, he also decided to buy a small "miner's pack." The pack was similar to his old school backpack but made of smooth oiled leather and with fewer pockets. He'd only spent thirty-five credits altogether, so he shopped through the menus a bit more. There were many clothing options, but nothing could match up to his black self-cleaning, self-repairing shirt and pants. He bought a few pairs of underwear and a leather breastplate that cost him a hundred credits. He figured he'd use his next quest turn-in to buy an upgraded weapon.

He stepped back from the stone and stuffed most of his purchases into his new pack, then he pulled the hard-leather breastplate over his head, fastening the three straps into their shiny brass buckles. "Not bad!" he said, rapping his knuckles against the stiff leather.

"Yeah, delvers that don't die make a lot more credits than the other crews," Heng said, stuffing some jars of pickled fish he'd purchased into his own pack. Watching him stow away his treats, Victor noticed a coil of rope which gave him some ideas. He still had over a hundred points, so he put his hand back on the stone and bought a twenty-five-foot rope, a flint and steel, and a flask of lantern oil. He figured he might as well buy a few supplies whenever he could so that he'd be ready if the right opportunity arose. His pack nice and plump with purchases, he stood off to the side, waiting for the others.

On the way back to Lam's barracks, Victor slowed to walk next to Gris, who was bringing up the rear. "Hey, man, what else you got going on today?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'll probably play some dice with the others, then just lounge about. Captain didn't give Fath any instructions for us, so he'll probably leave us be."

“Um, you know I’ve got a fucked up Core, right?”

“Yeah, you told me.”

“Well, it’s tough for me to concentrate and do the tiny bit of cultivating I’m capable of. Is there a place near the barracks I could chill and meditate without any racket?”

“Hah, yeah, there’s a cave behind the barracks. Just follow the crevice; you can’t miss it. It opens into a quiet place where some veterans go to cultivate. No one talks in there, so don’t be making any noise ‘cause some of ‘em will use it as an opportunity to practice their more violent skills.”

“Right, thanks.” Victor walked along trying to formulate a game plan for how to escape the mines but was unable to think beyond a few hours. How would he get out? He still had a collar on his neck, there were guards everywhere outside, and he didn’t even know what direction to run in. He had a lot more to learn before making a real attempt.

“Victor!” Heng shouting his name brought him out of his daydreams about bolting free of the mines, and he trotted up to the big Vodkin.

“Yeah?”

“Tell Sullya about the rat that almost ate you.”

“Oh, yeah, well, it was about as big as Gris and covered in black fur with bright red eyes...”

“Hey! Are you comparing me to a rat?” Gris interrupted, marching up to the others.

“No, Gris! You’re much better looking than that rat and at least twice as hairy,” Victor laughed.

“You believe this? Kid’s been here a couple days and is already making jokes?” Gris laughed too, though, and gave Victor a friendly shove. They continued walking, ribbing each other, and Victor found it easy to blend in. In the back of his mind, he was pissed at himself for acting like everything was alright, but he also knew that he had to fit in and make the most of whatever situation he was in. Sulking, moping, and alienating the people sharing his plight wouldn’t get him anywhere.

When they got back to the barracks, Victor didn’t go inside, saying he wanted to go try to work on cultivating. Gris nodded, and Heng shrugged, but Sullya scoffed like he was wasting time. He didn’t think she was referring to his weak Core but that she was just one of those people who didn’t see the point in pushing yourself, especially when you were being forced to work for other people.

When they'd all stepped into the barracks, Victor walked around the exterior, noting the smooth path worn into the packed dirt and rock of the cavern floor. Behind the barracks, he found that the smooth trail continued toward the jagged rocky wall of the massive tunnel and disappeared into a dark cleft in the stone. He followed the path into the darkness, and as his eyes adjusted, he saw that a faint orange light glimmered up ahead. Walking toward the light, he realized it was one of the glowing Energy orbs that Captain Lam tended to place around on paths she scouted. Victor passed three more glowing orbs following the crevice before stepping into a dome-shaped cave about a hundred feet wide.

The cave was light with more of the softly glowing orange globes, and Victor could see that it had a very smooth stone floor with rounded boulders scattered in every direction, varying in size from that of a basketball to a mini-van. Fuzzy green and blue moss covered most of the stones, and a pool the size of a large bathtub occupied the center rear of the cavern. The occasional drip of water falling from the ceiling into the pool was the only sound. Glancing around, Victor could only spot one other person—a large blue, Ardeni man meditating with his back against a mossy boulder.

Victor tiptoed over the mossy cavern floor to the far wall on the opposite side of the cavern from the other man. He moved over to one of the larger boulders and sat down behind it, facing the cavern wall. He had only been partly lying to the others; he did want to work on his Core, but first, Victor wanted to see what he could figure out about the items he'd found in the ruins. He slipped his hand into his pocket and wrapped the warm, hard shape of the ring in his fist. He'd been thinking about how he'd been told to "bond" with the storage sack that Sergeant Fath had given him to clean up the beetle bodies. Is that how you activated any sort of magical item? Gripping the ring tightly, he pushed a trickle of rage-attuned Energy out through his pathways and into the warm metal.

Victor felt the ring absorb his Energy, but nothing more happened; he didn't suddenly become aware of a dimensional space like with the sack or any other special effect. Glancing around over his shoulders, he risked a quick glance at the ring. Pulling it out of his pocket, still ensconced in his fist, he cupped his other hand over it and slowly peeled back his fingers. The ring sat in his palm, glowing with a warm orange-red radiance and pulsing with heat. Victor clasped his fingers closed and then stuffed the ring into his other pocket. He didn't know what it did exactly, but the ring seemed to absorb Energy and become a source of light and warmth. He wondered if there was more to it, but he decided to put it aside for now.

He reached into his other pocket, leaving the ring to pulse warmly over his left hip, and wrapped his hand around the medallion. It was round, about half the width of his palm, and he could feel the raised bumps of some sort of pattern on the metal. He wanted to pull it out and study it, but he knew it glowed with silvery-blue light and would be far too conspicuous for him to feel safe. It was cool in his palm, and, gripping it, he felt a slight tingle pass into his flesh. Once again, Victor pushed some Energy out through his

pathways and into the item in his fist. Suddenly a surge of ice shot up his arm and into his mind, and he felt it pressing against his mind, his spirit, his very self.

He grunted, and then Victor scowled; what was this fucker trying to do to him? He could feel the foreign presence spreading, and he bore down on it, turning his mind inward like when he studied his Core, but this time focusing on the icy presence in his mind. He began to squeeze it, pushing it back, cutting it off from the amulet, and compressing it with his will. As he drove it into a tiny corner of his mind and began to apply more and more pressure, a strange, metallic voice sounded in his mind, "I yield! Please stop!"

Victor was so startled by the voice that he did stop; he pulled back on the pressure, and the icy presence shot down his pathway and back into the amulet. Again the voice sounded in his mind, "Thank you! I am honored to serve one with such a strong will."

Victor opened his mouth to ask who the fuck was talking to him, but then he clamped it shut. He didn't know who else might hear, and the voice was definitely inside his head. He was thinking about how he was meant to reply when the voice came again, "I can feel you trying to formulate a response; worry not, I cannot read your mind, though if you think clearly of a statement directed at me, I'll understand it. As long as you maintain contact with me, that is."

"Who are you?" Victor clearly "thought" the words, actually picturing them in his mind.

"I am Gorz, a spirit bound to the amulet you hold. When bound, I was given the faculties necessary to perform the duties of a personal attendant and major-domo." Victor's mind reeled at the strange voice's revelation. For a few reasons, he was skeptical and decided to "voice" his concerns.

"What's a major-domo, and how can you be helpful if you're an amulet? Also, why the hell were you trying to take over my mind?"

"Ahh, I see you've never bonded with an intelligent item before! Sir, I must warn you: when dealing with a bound spirit, there's always a struggle of wills. No spirit is forever content to remain in its prison, and the instinctual desire to move to a more spacious and self-determining host is not easily resisted. Now that you've proven your will is sufficient to contain me, I shall not attempt another such struggle. The duties of a major-domo vary from managing a household, to managing accounts, to keeping track of important facts and dates. As for how I can aid you, my mental faculties are quite acute! My previous master used me for making maps and memorizing texts."

"Maps?" Victor's heart began to race.

"Oh yes! My previous master was quite an explorer. I've memorized thousands of miles of wilderness, cities, even dungeons!" Victor thought about where he'd found the skeleton with the amulet, and his fingers began to drum with excitement.

“Do you know where you are right now?”

“One moment,” the amulet, always a bit chilly to the touch, surged with coldness for a moment, “Oh, yes. We’re some 1,200 feet above and three point four miles east and south of where my last master perished. I’ve not been to this location before.”

“So your last master didn’t get to that location through the big mining tunnel?”

“No, sir. He accessed the Sheev-nagh ruins through the Barrowdon dungeon.” Again, Victor’s heart sped up.

“There’s more than one way out of the ruins, then?”

“If what you told me is true, I’m aware of at least two, yes!”

“How far is this ‘dungeon’ you mention from where your old master died?”

“Slightly more than thirteen miles through caverns, tunnels, and along an underground river.”

“How long ago did your old master die? And what was his name? I’m tired of calling him your old master.”

“His name was Reevus-dak, and I’m not sure how long. Something more than a hundred years; I’m afraid I slumbered for much of the time in order to maintain my sanity.”

“So, assuming the tunnels and caverns still exist, you could guide me to this ‘dungeon?’ Can you explain the dungeon to me?” Victor had an idea what the spirit meant by dungeon, but he wanted to make sure.

“Of course! If the path exists, I can direct you. As for the dungeon, sir, it was filled with undead denizens ranging in strength from high-tier-two to middle-tier-three. My master, er Reevus-dak, learned of the dungeon from a man named Polro and gained entry by solving a riddle. The entrance was near a village called Steampool Vale—a quaint place with provincial citizens that make a living gathering the minerals near naturally occurring geysers and, well, steam pools.”

“So the ‘dungeon’ is a place filled with monsters?”

“Yes, sir. Someone of your physical nature would definitely consider them to be monsters.”

“And I need to make it through at least thirteen miles of ruins filled with god-knows-what even to enter the dungeon?”

"I'm not familiar with that turn of phrase, but I think I take your meaning, sir. Yes, you'd need to brave the denizens of the deep. My master had an easy time of it at first but met his match, as you no doubt have surmised."

"Alright, enough with the 'sir' and 'master' talk. Just call me Victor."

"Very well, Victor! Thank you! Though please forgive me if I slip; I'm not used to such familiarity." Victor heard some movement behind him and realized he'd lost track of time and his surroundings while speaking with the spirit.

"Alright, listen. I'm not supposed to have you. Can you dim that light you give off?"

"Of course, Victor. I'll do my best to remain undetected!"

"Also, can you tell me anything about the ring Reeves was wearing?"

"Naturally, I cataloged all of his belongings. Let's see, at the time of his death, Reeves was wearing a sunsteel ring and an artificed silver ring of storage."

"What? I only found the sunsteel ring!"

"During my periods of wakefulness, I was aware that Reeves-dak's corpse was set upon by scavenging creatures more than once."

"Well, what does the sunsteel ring do?"

"The sunsteel ring is tremendously sensitive to Energy and can store it with minimal leakage over time. Should you desire to, you would be able to build up a large amount of Energy within it and draw upon it as needed."

"Alright, I'm going to let go of you now, and I don't feel safe wearing you, so I'll just keep you in my pocket."

"Until we speak again, then, Victor!" Victor let go of the amulet and felt the cool tingling in his hand fade away. He could tell that he'd lost connection to the spirit; there'd been a sense of it in his mind, even after he'd won their contest of wills, and now it was gone. He felt like his entire body was buzzing with the excitement of what he'd learned; there was a way out of this place, and he'd be able to get to it without anyone knowing. They'd assume he was dead if he disappeared in the depths, just like all the delvers he'd already helped bury.

He didn't think it would be wise to make a break for it right away, though; according to Gorz, the dungeon was filled with tier two and three monsters, and he was still only tier one. Sure, he'd won some pit fights with tier two fighters, but what if he ran into two, three, or fifty higher tier monsters at once? No, he needed to grow stronger, and part of

that was figuring out the problem with his Core. He still only had roughly half the Energy he'd had before its fracturing.

Victor closed his eyes and sat the way that Yrella had taught him. It felt like so long ago that she'd teased him about cultivating. Sighing, he turned his mind inward and studied the space where his Core pulsed and slowly revolved. It looked solid and vibrant, filled with the red rage-attuned Energy. Still, there were tiny droplets and pools of white-yellow Energy all around it, and they refused to budge when he tried to cultivate them. Suddenly his eyes sprang open as he had a thought. He reached his hand back into his pocket, gripping the medallion where Gorz resided, and mentally asked, "Hey, Gorz, do you know anything about Cores?"

"Naturally, Victor. I had one when I was alive, and Reevus-dak made me memorize several texts on the subject."

"What about spirit Cores?"

"Yes, one of the texts I memorized had several chapters on such Cores. What can I help you with, Victor?"

"Alright, a while back, this guy had a tentacled spider dude rip apart my Core. He said he was destroying it, but later, when I looked, the System status screen said it was fractured. I've been able to rebuild it partially, but it's only half as strong as it should be, and I have lots of little pools of Energy around my Core that I can't seem to cultivate or add to it."

"Fascinating, Victor! Give me a moment to examine my memory." The amulet grew cold again; a signal Victor was starting to realize meant it was doing something. A moment later, he heard Gorz's voice again, "Victor, according to my texts, spirit Cores are highly resilient and difficult to destroy without killing the host entity. Your description of the pools of unattuned Energy around your Core sounds almost like a partial attempt at gaining a second affinity."

"What do you mean?"

"How many affinities do you have, Victor?"

"Just one—rage."

"Oh my. Well, when someone with a spirit Core wants more than one affinity, they can split off part of their Core and gather it with the new affinity. It sounds like you had the splitting done for you, but you don't have the second affinity with which to gather the remnants."

"Am I screwed then? Can I still get an affinity?"

“Oh, odds are excellent that you have more than one spirit affinity. When you formed your Core, you probably just focused on your strongest one. You need to do some soul-searching and see if you can glean out another strong affinity with which to begin the process of gathering your Core fragments.”

“Any tips on how to do that?”

“Yes! You should meditate and focus on strong emotions and ideals. Be sure to avoid thinking of things that enrage you; you’re trying to find a new affinity, not your existing one!”

“Thanks, Gorz,” Victor thought and then let go of the medallion. He stood up abruptly, too anxious to focus, and looked around the cavern. He saw a few other veterans sitting around the quiet space. They looked to be meditating, and none of them were facing directly at him, so he took a few deep breaths to relax and then sat down again. He cleared his mind and turned his eye inward, watching his Core and the space around it. Another affinity, huh? What did Gorz say? Focus on strong emotions?

Victor concentrated and tried to think of times when he’d been very emotional. It was hard because he kept coming back to times when he’d been angry. The more he struggled to not think of a time when he was angry, the more they kept popping into his head, and the more frustrated he became in the present, which jerked him out of his meditation again and again.

Trying to meditate, Victor struggled with his mind wandering, and at one point, he thought about when he’d been fighting the beetles, thinking everyone was going to be overwhelmed, and then Captain Lam had streaked down on her glittering wings to smash into the horde of creatures. He remembered how his arms had been leaden, his lungs burning, and he’d been on the verge of collapse, but when he saw her start to swing that massive hammer, he’d had a surge of strength, of hope, and he’d begun to believe that they could win. Something made him concentrate on that feeling, that spark that had ignited in his heart and allowed him to keep fighting. What do you call that? Hope? No, it was more than just hope; he’d been inspired. Yes! That was it—inspiration!

Victor zeroed in on the way he’d felt inspired by Captain Lam’s presence, savoring that feeling, not because he was often inspired or inspiring, but because it had had a profound effect on him and his life. When he examined that emotion, he realized he’d felt it before, but not so clearly. He’d been inspired by coaches and older wrestlers when he was new to the team. He’d been inspired by Vullu and how he’d stood up to the asshole pit fighters who wanted a piece of Victor. He’d been inspired by Yrella and how she’d been kind to him regardless of their terrible environment.

The more Victor focused on that feeling, and the more he realized he wanted to be like that, the clearer it became, and then something happened—a warm, tingling spark ignited in the pit of his stomach. Victor turned his attention inward again, stopping the kaleidoscope of memories and images playing across his mind’s eye, and there, pulsing

softly next to his hot rage-attuned Core, was a smaller, second star. It shone with a steady white-gold light, and as he watched, one of the tiny Core fragments drifted into it, and it grew just a fraction larger.

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Chapter 27: Inspiration

Victor wanted to spend some more time cultivating and building up his smaller inspiration-attuned Core, but he hated feeling like he was being watched all the time and was having trouble concentrating. He took a look at his status sheet, for probably the thirtieth time in the last hour, marveling at the fact that he was finally making some real progress:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human - Base 4

Class:

Spirit Champion - Advanced

Level:

14

Core:

Spirit Class - Base 5

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

358/358

Strength:

31

Vitality:

48

Dexterity:

21

Agility:

21

Intelligence:

10

Will:

38

Points Available:

14 .com

His Core was no longer “fragmented,” and he had a new affinity—inspiration. He didn’t know exactly how that would work or what he could do with it, but he was happy, nonetheless. His Energy levels were on the rise, and he knew that as he built up his second affinity Core, he should be able to get back to his old levels, if not higher. Victor contemplated the fourteen attribute points he was still sitting on. He’d gotten them from when he’d leveled fighting the beetles, and he felt like he was being dumb, not spending them.

“Am I dumb?” he asked himself, taking a second look at his intelligence attribute. He didn’t feel stupid; in fact, he’d always done well in school when he applied himself. “Yeah, but I didn’t apply myself very often—that’s not exactly smart.”

“Shut up, kid.” The gruff voice came from the other side of the boulder, and Victor clamped his mouth shut. He furtively glanced around, then stood up and briskly walked out of the “meditation cave.” There were a lot more people in there cultivating than when he’d started. As he walked down the narrow cleft leading to the greater tunnel, he wished for a more private place. While he was wishing, he decided to wish that Yrella was still alive and that he could talk to her for some advice. “Fuck it,” he said and dumped ten points into intelligence and the other four into strength.

He didn’t know if he was making a big mistake, but he felt like he could benefit from a little bit faster brain and some better decisions, and strength had never done him wrong.

As the strange sensation of warmth flooded into his head, he almost fell to one knee, catching himself on the rough stone wall. It didn't hurt, but it was disorienting, and when it faded, Victor felt pretty damn good. He didn't notice any immediate changes in how he thought about things, but he hoped it would be a subtle difference that would pay off over time. He did see a sizeable increase in his maximum Energy, however. "Yrella wasn't lying. Intelligence definitely bumps Energy up."

As he strode from the crevice into the enormous mine tunnel, Victor almost wanted to whistle or sing or something; he was in an uncharacteristically good mood. He stopped himself, though, making sure not to make a spectacle. The last thing he wanted was for people to notice his gains. He slouched his shoulders and screwed his face up into a scowl, and kicked some rocks as he walked down the very slight incline toward the barracks.

He was coming at the barracks from an angle, and when he got to the rear-left corner of the building, he heard some soft murmuring and movement coming from the shadows near the far corner, and he directed his steps to take him closer. When he came around the part of the barracks that housed the low-ceilinged kitchen, he nearly stumbled into a couple of other delvers locked in an embrace and making out like they were outside a high school dance. When he saw Edeya's eyes pop open and stare at him over the shoulder of whatever guy she was kissing, he blurted, "Oh shit! My bad!" and turned on his heel, quickly walking back around the other corner toward the front of the barracks.

"Well, that was fucking awkward," he muttered, shaking his head. He was having a hard time finding privacy to work on his Core; he could only imagine trying to find a private place to be intimate with someone. "Poor suckers." He wondered if there were rules about that. He very much doubted the mine operators wanted people running all over the place having sex and dealing with all the things that came with it. In the end, he decided it wasn't his problem; he had enough on his plate.

Victor stood in front of the barracks, briefly vacillating between going inside or doing a bit of exploring. As far as he knew, he still had several free hours before he should hit the sack. He imagined Captain Lam would be back at it bright and early, so he didn't want to miss dinner or lights out, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to explore a bit. He knew there might be some side tunnels or caverns back toward the main settlement area, but he figured his chances of finding some privacy would be better if he snooped around toward the deeper parts of the mine.

He took a few minutes to cross over the tunnel to the far side and walked along that wall, skirting boulders and piles of rubble that had been left behind during the mining process. Victor could see and hear groups of miners and delvers moving down the center of the tunnel every now and then, but he was concentrating on trying to find side tunnels or crevices that led away—something like the one that led to the cultivation cave near Lam's barracks. After one promising shadow after another proving to be nothing more than an indentation in the tunnel wall, he was getting ready to turn back, but then he saw a jagged, dark cleft behind a large pile of boulders.

Victor poked his head into the crevice and saw that it opened up into a long, high-ceilinged tunnel with bumpy exposed-rock walls. He pushed forward in the dark for a while, but when he looked over his shoulder and could no longer see the light of the larger tunnel, he decided to risk taking out his glowing sunsteel ring. The ring was warm in his hand and gave off a friendly luminosity that only shone for a few feet in any direction. Using its light, Victor followed the tunnel for another hundred feet or so before it opened up into a small cavern with a ledge that hung over a dark abyss, the depths of which he couldn't discern. "Well, it's the end of the road for me, but at least I have some privacy here."

"Oh, aye, it's nice and quiet in here." Victor spun around, adrenaline flooding his body as he heard the gruff voice coming from the tunnel behind him. A large Vodkin stood there, a wooden cudgel in one hand, leering down at Victor.

"Hey, man. Sorry if this is your space; I'll head out."

"Naw, this ain't our space, but we figured we might see what you was doing here." The Vodkin stepped forward, and two more men stepped out of the tunnel behind him. They both were wearing leather armor and wielding delver batons. Victor wasn't dumb enough to think these guys wanted to chat; they were going to mug him or worse.

"Hey, guys. Don't fuck around, alright? Captain Lam is expecting me, and I can't be late, you feel me?"

"Oh, Captain Lam, is it?" the big Vodkin sneered. "She know you got that shiny bauble?" Victor's heart almost stopped at the words. He called himself an idiot in his head, but he snorted out loud.

"Of course, where you think I got it, dumbass?"

"I don't buy it, Chem," one of the other guys, a narrow, tall Shadeni, said.

"Nah, me neither. Let's see what this little pup's got in his backpack."

"Hey, asshole! I'm not little, and if you three come at me, I'm going to go fucking apeshit. I won't be able to keep from smashing your skulls in!" Victor stuffed his glowing ring down on his middle finger and then hefted his baton, menacing the trio. The smallest of them began to chuckle, and Victor noticed the bright gleam of his collar. He held a hand out toward Victor and made a fist. Before Victor could do anything, the stone under his feet suddenly erupted and wrapped around his ankles and knees in a vice-like grip.

Victor roared and activated Berserk, panicking at his immobility. He screamed again, his vision going red, and he thrashed and pulled with all his might, trying to yank his feet out of the stone, but while he concentrated on getting free, sharp pain erupted over his left

eye, then another spike of pain exploded in the back of his head, and suddenly he was drifting in blackness.

“Oh, Madre!” Victor woke in utter darkness with a throbbing skull and a cold, shivering body. He pulled his arms close to his chest, realizing he didn’t have his shirt on. “Where the fuck am I?” He tried to piece things together, but everything was jumbled in his head. He remembered waking up; hadn’t he gone down to the stone to turn in his quest? “Oh, man,” he reached up and rubbed at his head, gingerly feeling for what was wrong. The back of his skull was tender to the touch, but, other than that, the pain was mainly on the inside.

He felt around himself in the blackness, trying to get some idea of where he was. He was lying on hard stone, fragments of rock and dust everywhere. He patted along his body, relieved to find he still had his pants on, but his boots and socks were gone. That’s right! He’d bought socks. What else? He’d gone back to the barracks, and then he’d gone to find the cultivation cave! He started to remember snippets—his new Core, seeing Edeya kissing some guy, wanting to find a secluded spot to work on his Core and talk to Gorz. Oh, fuck! Gorz! Victor shoved his hand into his pocket, and there, like it was waiting for his grasp, was the cold disc of metal on its chain.

“Victor! Thank Baz-chemeil! I thought you perished, and I was doomed to lie in a dark hole for another millennium.” Victor pulled the chain out, hoping to shed some light on his situation, but none shone forth.

“Gorz,” he said in a dry, raspy voice. “Can you please turn your light back on?” Almost instantly, the silvery-blue light stabbed forth into his eyes, and he had to squint them shut for a moment. Slowly he peeled his eyes open to find himself on a stone ledge, not five feet from a black abyss. Was he still in the place where those assholes jumped him? “Oh yeah—now I remember. Fuck, but those guys fought dirty.” He looked around and was dismayed to see a sheer stone wall behind him. He looked up and saw, very faintly in Gorz’s light, another ledge about twenty feet up. “How the fuck did I get here, Gorz?”

“Those ruffians threw your body off after they stripped most of your belongings. Luckily, you told me that you weren’t allowed to have me, so I made myself very unnoticeable.”

“Ungh,” Victor grunted as he pushed himself into a sitting position, his back to the stone wall. “Well, that’s some good news, at least. Nice job, Gorz.”

“I was partially being selfish, Victor; I had no desire to have to spend time conversing with those brutes.”

“Alright, but why didn’t they kill me?”

“Oh, I believe they thought you dead. Victor, even in your pocket, I heard your skull crack. Then, of course, they rolled you into an abyss...” Gorz trailed off, obviously thinking his point was made.

“Yeah, I get it. Huh, I’ve never been knocked out while berserking, and I’m sure I’ve been hit in the head before.” Victor lifted the chain and slipped it over his head; he wanted both hands free. Gorz’s cool disc rested against his breastbone, and he shivered, suddenly remembering how cold he was. “At least those assholes left my pants on me. How long was I out, Gorz?”

“Just over four hours, Victor. Whatever kept you from dying wasn’t able to keep you conscious.” Victor felt his head again, unable to even find a lump.

“I think my Berserk ability was still active after I got knocked out; it mended the wound then wore off. Well, that’s my guess, anyway.”

“Plausible, Victor. Now, I detected a drop of around seventeen feet; can you see the ledge above?”

“Yeah, I saw it. Chill, man. I need to get my bearings.” Victor closed his eyes and rubbed at his neck, trying to remember the fight. Jesus, that guy’s fucking spell really screwed him over, and then he’d used Berserk too early; he’d been so enraged about his feet being stuck he hadn’t even tried to defend against their attacks. What was that big guy’s name? “Chem. Remember that, Gorz. I’m going to pay those guys a visit one of these days.”

“Noted, Victor!”

“Right, now, let me see here.” Victor stood up and stretched his arms up, pushing them against the stone, gauging how high he’d have to jump to grab the upper ledge. With his arms stretched out and him on his tip-toes, he was still a good nine or ten feet from the ledge. “Well, I’m a hell of a lot stronger than I was on Earth,” he muttered, shaking out his arms and squatting down a few times to loosen up his legs. He squatted and, with all his might, leaped up, reaching out with his arms, trying to grasp the ledge. He still fell short a couple of feet.

“Excellent effort, Victor, I felt your vertical traversal, and it was nearly six feet!”

“Yeah, if I can make it back to Earth, I’m going to have a hell of a career in sports. Well, unless I lose my new strength and stuff.”

“Is Earth the name of your homeworld?”

“That’s right; there’s no Energy there.”

“You’d keep some residual benefits, but without Energy to sustain your enhanced attributes and Core, you’d slowly return to something more typical of that world.”

“Alright, I need to jump higher; I think my Berserk ability will work, but I’m not sure I’ll have enough sanity to remember to jump up there.”

“Yes, berserking is a fraught talent. I’m afraid if I try to guide you while you’re in such a state, you’re as likely to throw me into the abyss as listen to me.”

“Yeah, good point.”

“Do you have any other abilities that might help?”

“Yeah, just a minute,” Victor replied, concentrating on his Sovereign Will skill and using it to boost his strength. Once more, he squatted, then jumped, reaching toward the ledge.

“Excellent, Victor! That was seven additional inches!”

“Not enough. I’m running out of ideas, Gorz.”

“Victor, perhaps share some information about yourself with me. What sorts of abilities do you have? Were you successful in mending your Core?” Victor realized he never spoke to Gorz again after getting his advice about his Core.

“Damn, I can be a prick sometimes. Sorry, Gorz. Let me fill you in.” He told Gorz about what he’d done with his Core and told him about his spells.

“So, you have some inspiration-attuned Energy?”

“Yeah, I do, but no spells that call for it.”

“Why not try a new spell? One way to innovate Energy abilities and spells is to cast a known spell with a different attunement. Reevus-dak used the exact same spell to cast Fiery Burst and Wind Gust; he just fed differently attuned Energy into the spell.”

“How do I give my spell different Energy? It just happens.”

“It’s an act of will. You need to clamp down on the Energy that your spell calls for and push forth the Energy you want to use.”

“Hmm, alright,” Victor said softly, turning his attention inward to his Core, where the two suns of his attunements pulsed next to each other. The white-gold orb of his inspiration-attuned Energy was about half the size of his smoldering red sphere of rage Energy. Still, both Cores looked rich and healthy. “Do I have more than one Core?”

“You have a multi-faceted Core. The shape of a Core’s manifestation is often determined by how a mind perceives it. Some people with multiple affinities might see swirling bands of color around a single sphere. Others might see multiple orbs rotating each other. There are as many Cores and shapes of Cores as there are people.”

“So these two pulsing orbs are my Core. Together?”

“Yes, that seems to be the type of Core you have, based on your descriptions, of course.”

Victor looked back at his Core and concentrated on holding the red, rage-attuned Energy locked down, and he pulled forth a strand of the warm, bright, inspiration Energy, and then he started to cast Berserk. He’d never watched one of his spells take shape before, but this time, while he stared at his Core, he saw the complex, wild spell pattern start to form in his pathways. He felt the rage Energy surge, trying to push past his mental barrier. Victor bore down with his will, holding the Energy in place and coaxing the tendril of warm, golden-white Energy toward the pattern. Suddenly the Energy was sucked into the spell pattern, and a torrent of it pulled out of the shimmering white-gold part of his Core to finish the spell.

Congratulations! You’ve learned the spell: Inspiring Presence - Basic

Inspiring Presence - Basic: Prerequisite: Affinity - Inspiration. You infuse your being with the power of inspiration, filling yourself with potential and bringing forth the potential of nearby allies. Energy Cost: Minimum 75 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.

Victor felt a surge of positivity and power pour into his limbs. His vision grew bright, the silvery-blue light of Gorz seemed to sharpen into daylight, and everything seemed clearer, closer, easier to reach.

He brushed aside the notifications, let out a whoop, and backed up two steps, so the backs of his heels were hanging into the abyss. He looked up at the ledge; it wasn’t even that far! He took one huge, jumping lunge, then leaped off his front foot, stretching out with one arm. His fingers curled over the ledge’s stone lip, and he caught on, laughing. He slapped his other hand onto the ledge and pulled himself up, bounding onto his bare feet. He laughed again, danced a quick shuffle, and then ran back toward the main mining tunnel through the crevice.

Victor made it about a dozen steps outside the dark side tunnel when the Inspiring Presence wore off, and he stumbled to his knees, suddenly feeling very heavy and dull. “Oof! That’s a hell of a comedown, Gorz.” He slapped a hand to his face, feeling drunk and sleepy.

“Describe your spell to me, Victor!” Gorz sounded a little hysterical. Had he been trying to speak to him while Victor had been high on inspiration? Victor told him about the

spell, and Gorz chortled, “Oh well done, Victor! Well done! I’m sure the effect will be incredible when you push it past advanced.”

“Alright, thanks again, Gorz. Hey, can you stay hidden if I wear you? I mean, like you hid from those assholes?”

“Most definitely if you wear me under a shirt, but I’d have a hard time hiding on your chest like this in the open.”

“Oh, alright, then I’ll put you back in my pocket. I’m about to go to the barracks, and I doubt I’ll slip in unnoticed.”

“Speak with you soon, then, Victor.”

“Right,” Victor took the amulet off his head and stuffed it down in his pocket, then he stood and stretched. He was starting to feel normal again. He broke into an easy jog, angling straight for the barracks. He knew he was late for light’s out, so he figured he’d be in trouble. He tried to open the doors quietly, but, of course, they creaked and rattled. Sergeant Fath was standing in the aisle between the bunks, arms folded and staring at Victor when he stepped inside. He raised one hand, beckoning Victor with one finger, then he turned and walked up the aisle and through the back door, where Captain Lam kept her quarters.

Victor followed behind, padding softly on his bare feet, feeling like he was walking to the principal’s office or something. Snorts, loud breathing, and farts sounded in the barracks as he walked between the bunks. When Victor got past the sleeping delvers and walked by the long, wooden table, he snatched up a half-eaten piece of bread someone had neglected to clear and stuffed it into his mouth. He was struggling to swallow the dry mouthful when he stepped through the doorway into a surprisingly well-appointed sitting room. Captain Lam lounged on a plush burgundy chair, her legs up on a matching stool. Behind her and on both sides of the room were bookcases positively stuffed with scrolls, loose papers, and books of all shapes and sizes. She was sipping from a crystal glass half-full with a thick amber liquid.

“Thanks, Sergeant. I’ll let you know if you’ll be needed again.” Sergeant Fath nodded and walked out, pulling the door closed behind him. “All right, delver. Explain to me why you’re late coming to my barracks, half-naked and caked in dried blood.”

“Uh,” Victor honestly hadn’t thought of what he’d say. He’d had a tiny sliver of hope that he could slip into his bunk unnoticed, but he supposed Fath had gone on high alert when his bunk had been empty. “Well, I was out looking around, kind of exploring nearby, when some assholes jumped me. Took all my stuff.” He gestured to his bare feet and held his arms out in a shrug. Lam sat up, setting her glass on the little table next to her chair. Victor noticed she wasn’t wearing her armor; he didn’t think he’d ever seen her without it. When she put her feet on the ground, her knees jutted up, reminding him how tall she was.

“Who jumped you?”

“Some delvers, I think. Not ours; I didn’t recognize them, but they had batons.”

“You don’t know who they were?”

“Nope.” Victor shrugged. There was no way he was going to rat out that fucker’s name—no way he’d let Lam have the satisfaction of dealing with him. Captain Lam studied him for a long moment, then she sat back, putting her feet back up.

“I hope this was a good lesson for you, Victor; life is cheap in the delve. You’re too weak to be wandering around alone, especially wearing nice clothes. I don’t like the idea some scum think they can lay hands on one of my squad, but I really don’t have time to take you around to the other delver units and try to find them out. We’re heading into the deep in just a couple hours.”

“Oh, I learned a good lesson, believe me.” Victor reached up and scratched at his forehead, sending flakes of dried blood fluttering down in front of his eyes. Captain Lam grinned at him and beckoned him closer.

“Alright. I’ll give you a new baton; I’ve had plenty of delvers die on me over the years and have a pretty good collection. She reached over to a sizeable rune-inscribed leather bag sitting next to her chair, and a dull gray baton appeared in her hand. It was larger than Victor’s old one and had a few strange letters carved into the metal. “This one has a momentum enchantment; it’ll swing faster than a normal baton, and you should be able to reverse your swings more easily.” She held it out, and Victor took it. The baton was heavy, at least twice as heavy as his old one, but it felt almost alive in his hand. He wanted to swing it around but knew that would be a dumb move in the captain’s sitting room.

“Um, thanks, Captain Lam.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you didn’t die, Victor; you’ve got some talents I find useful, and my unit is already understaffed. Don’t be so stupid again, alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now go to the supply chest and dig out some boots and a shirt.”

“Right, thanks again.” Victor turned and moved to the door, pulling it open. He wanted to steal another glance at Lam’s sitting room or at Lam and all the cool things she had around her, but he forced himself to keep his eyes forward and stepped out, feeling her gaze boring a hole in his shoulder blades. He closed her door and then walked down the short hallway to the supply chest. At least she wasn’t going to make him walk around barefoot as some sort of lesson.

Chapter 28: Guard Duty

Victor's new boots pinched his feet around the toes, and he frowned, thinking of the nice new boots and socks he'd gotten to enjoy for all of a few hours. He was tired, dirty, and sore but otherwise felt alright as Lam's delvers made their way back to the forward camp they'd set up for the miners. Edeya had given him funny looks as they'd started out marching, and Gris had gruffly asked where the hell he'd been, but Victor just shrugged it off and said, "Ran into some assholes, but Captain Lam let me off easy, don't worry."

When he'd dug around in the chest, he'd come up with a large vest-like sweater that had originally been rust-colored, so the bloodstains from the previous owner weren't very noticeable. It was kind of scratchy, but warm, and fit him well enough. After that, he'd stepped into the jacks, into one of the partitioned toilets, and slipped Gorz on under his vest. Having Gorz to mentally "talk" to helped the march go faster, and Victor had learned a thing or two about his attributes.

First of all, Gorz had been enthusiastically in favor of Victor putting points into intelligence, which made Victor feel better; he'd had some doubts after that snap decision. He'd also told Victor that his class awarding him some "unbound" points at every level was quite rare and that he'd get a chance to "refine" his class at level twenty, but it might be best to keep the one he had.

Another thing he learned was that Gorz really did remember just about everything he "observed," and he assured Victor he'd know it if he got close to the delvers who'd jumped him. Gorz explained that, to him, every Energy user had a sort of signature that made telling them apart very easy. Victor had told Gorz to stay on the lookout because he wanted to find out where those assholes had their camp.

"Victor!" Sergeant Fath called out from the barricade. Victor looked up from his daydreaming and jogged over to him.

"Yeah?"

"Lam wants to take some of the veterans to explore around the latest ruins she found. We're leaving you with a few others to guard the miners. Shouldn't be too bad."

"The miners aren't even here yet."

"That's right. Keep the place tidy while you wait, and don't let the miners get slaughtered by rats or something. We'll be gone a while, probably 'til quitting time." Victor opened his mouth to object but realized this was one of those moments when the proper response was probably to say something positive.

"Alright, I got it."

“That a lad. I knew you were up for it.” Fath held out a fist, and Victor bumped it.

“Excellent news, Victor! It seems this low-ranked authoritarian has deemed you worthy of some responsibility.” Gorz piped in with his tinny, mental voice.

“Huh, go figure.”

Lam, Sergeant Fath, and ten of the veterans left through the barricade a few minutes later. Victor was left behind, somehow in charge, with Edeya, Tyge, the rest of the new recruits, and two veterans that, apparently, weren't worthy of any responsibility. He didn't know if he should try to give directions or just kind of watch everyone to make sure no one did anything really stupid. He decided that, for now, he'd be one of those hands-off managers and just sort of watch, making sure nothing came over the barricade to surprise them.

While he stood on the low rampart, looking out into the dark tunnel, he “talked” some more with Gorz. “Is there any way to create more spells without altering one of the ones I have?”

“Yes, though it takes an adequate knowledge of spell patterns. I know some patterns, but it would be very hard to describe them to you verbally, and I'm unable to write with ordinary utensils; Reevus had a special slate that I was able to interact with.”

“Damn, what are the odds we could find the rest of his belongings near his corpse?”

“Not good, I'm afraid, though some of his belongings were consumed or carried away by giant vermin as they ate his flesh; we might find some near their nest, should we locate it.”

“Hmm, something to think about, that's for sure.”

“Just gonna stare into darkness until they come back?” Edeya had come up behind him, and Victor turned to smile at her.

“Sure. That's where the monsters come from, right?”

“I guess so, but Trilla says guarding miners rarely has any action. She said the big fights always happen when we claim new territory, like when we first came here.”

“Who's Trilla?”

“That tall Ardeni girl, one of the vets they left back with us.”

“Well, Sergeant Fath didn't leave her in charge, so she's not worried about getting her ass chewed out if something goes wrong. I'll keep an eye on the dark.”

“Wise, Victor!”

“Quiet, dude. You’ll make me say something dumb out loud.”

“Of course, my apologies.” Victor almost chuckled at the contrite tone Gorz had taken.

“Um, thanks for not saying anything when you saw Beal and me behind the barracks yesterday.” Victor looked back at Edeya; her eyes were down, and she was fidgeting nervously.

“What? Nah, none of my business. Don’t even worry about it. I’d be careful, though; I doubt Fath or Lam want people fucking all over the place.”

“Fucking?”

“Yeah, er, having sex.” Edeya’s face got very red at his words, and she stammered out a few attempts to speak, then she shoved Victor against the railing and walked away with a disgusted explosion of breath. “What did I say?” he called, but she didn’t turn.

“I’d say your friend found your choice of words rather crude and insulting.” Victor almost told Gorz he was being too sensitive, then he frowned and shook his head.

“I’m an idiot sometimes.”

“Perhaps so, but nothing some practice won’t fix. Why not apologize to the lass? It seems she is sensitive about her reputation and doesn’t consider her dalliance with young Beal to be a part of a larger pattern of behavior.”

“Well, I will, but I’m still not sure why she got so pissed; just because they were only making out doesn’t mean they weren’t horny for more.”

“Yes, but your implication was crude; be logical.” Victor thought about those words, “be logical,” and had to admit they were effective. If he looked at his words without any emotion, they really were something an asshole would say.

“Alright,” he said aloud, turning from the darkness and looking around for Edeya. He saw her standing on the stone incline that led to the upper chamber. The miners still hadn’t arrived, and the other delvers were spread all over the place doing their own things. He saw red-haired Tyge sitting with another delver playing with some carved bone dice. Tyge had been the first guy he’d met among the delvers, and Victor hadn’t gotten to know him at all. He determined to remedy that as soon as possible. “Tyge!” he called.

“Yeah?” The smallish Ardeni man called back.

“I need you and your friend to come up here and watch the tunnel. I’ll relieve you soon.”

“Um, alright.” Victor watched as Tyge and the other delver picked up their dice and climbed the ramparts.

“You guys know how to use these big bows?”

“The ballistae? Yeah, just crank the string back, put in the bolt, and pull the trigger.”

“Alright, I’ll be back soon.” Victor hopped down and walked over to the ramp where Edeya was sitting. “Hey,” he said as he walked up. She definitely had the whole sulking thing down—back to the wall, arms crossed, frowning and looking anywhere but at him. “Look, I’m sorry. I have a problem with putting my foot in my mouth. I wasn’t trying to say anything about what kind of person you are.”

“Well, it was insulting to say that! Even if I liked Beal like that, it doesn’t mean I’m going to ‘have sex all over the place!’”

“Yeah, I know. Look, I’m stupid, alright? We’ve already talked about how I talk funny, right? Can we just forget I said it; if anything, what I said speaks more about me than you, right?” She finally turned to look at him, meeting his eyes, and then a grin quirked at the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah, it does! It says a lot about you!”

“Right.” Victor wasn’t sure he was making the kind of progress he wanted with her, but it seemed good that she was at least smiling. “We okay? Cause I don’t want you pissed at me when we’re fighting, alright?”

“Alright. Thanks for the apology.”

“Yeah, you’re cool. No worries.” Victor gave her shoulder a little punch. Her smile broadened, and she gave him a return punch.

“Right on, that’s the spirit. Man, where the fuck are those miners?” He looked up the stone slope, seeing no sign of them.

“I don’t know! I was wondering that while I was standing over here feeling mad at you!”

“You think they ran into trouble in one of the upper caverns? Like where we fought the stickmen?”

“Maybe. Do you think we should check on them? Would Captain Lam get upset if we go anywhere?”

“Well, I think my instructions were to stay put...”

“Victor, your superior’s words were specifically, ‘...don’t let the miners get slaughtered by rats or something.’” Gorz piped up in Victor’s mind.

“Hmm, actually, I think our number one duty was to keep the miners alive, not to guard this shithole barricade. Hey, go get that veteran you were talking to; what was her name?”

“Trilla; I’ll get her.” Edeya ran over to where a group of three delvers sat around talking next to the amber-ore vein. A moment later, a tall, thin Ardeni woman stood up and strode over with Edeya in tow.

“You wanted me?” As she drew closer, Victor realized she wasn’t really very tall; Edeya was just short as hell. Her voice had a slight nasal quality, and she wore a perpetual sneer. Victor looked into her bright yellow eyes and nodded.

“Yeah, I’m heading up to the next cave to check on the miners. I need you to guard the barricade with Tyge and that other guy.”

“Who made you boss?”

“You heard Sergeant Fath! He’s in charge!” Edeya snapped from behind Trilla.

“Whatever. Yes, sir, boss!” She sketched a mocking bow and turned to walk over to the barricade. Victor looked at Edeya and shrugged. He brought his fingers to his lips and whistled. When the other delvers looked at him, he motioned them over. They came slowly at first, but then with more urgency as Victor clapped his hands and said, “C’mon, hustle!”

“Listen, I think something’s happened to the miners. We need to head up and check things out. I’m leaving those three,” he gestured to the barricade, “to watch the tunnel; we’re going up. Let’s move!” He tuned out their questions, allowing Edeya to field them, and started climbing the ramp. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt like he needed to hurry. He reasoned it could be that he’d built up some imaginary emergency, and he’d find nothing, but it felt strange that the miners were taking so much longer than the delvers to get down to the dig site.

He was a much faster climber than the other four delvers, and by the time he climbed the ramp far enough to see out of the chasm into the next cavern, he was a good fifty yards ahead of them. A rumbling cracking cacophony signaled something going on up above, so he gripped his new baton tightly and crouched low as he approached the opening. He could hear the others scrabbling along behind him as he peered over the lip of the cleft into the upper cavern.

There, among the tumbled ruins where the delvers had fought the stickmen, Victor saw the backside of a fighting retreat taking place. The miners were being pushed back through the tunnel leading up to the next cavern by a frenzied, clicking mob of little men

that seemed to be made of stone. They didn't speak or scream or anything else you might expect of stone monsters, but their bodies ground and rumbled as they moved and clacked against the stone of the cavern floor. Conversely, though on the far side of the frenzied battle, Victor heard the miners grunt, scream, and roar as they tried to beat the creatures back with their mining picks.

Victor was planning a charge when he felt a cool hand grip his arm, holding on to his tricep. "Those are stone imps! They'll slaughter us!" Edeya hissed in his ear. He looked down at her and raised an eyebrow.

"Bullshit. They don't look that tough."

"Well, they are!" Her eyes were wide and round with fear, and Victor looked at the other three delvers crouching behind her.

"Look, I don't give a fuck that Lam told us to protect these miners, but I'm not someone who can slink away while some folks are getting jumped by monsters. Fuck that." Without really thinking about it, Victor stood up straight and cast Inspiring Presence. Once again, he felt the surge of well-being and the brimming potential all around him. He spread his mouth into a wide grin and laughed. "Come on! You want to live like a bug in a hole? Let's fucking kill these things!" Everything was brighter, everything seemed easier, and he could tell that his delvers felt the same way; they stopped cowering and gripped their batons.

"Let's do it!" Edeya said firmly.

"Fuck yeah! Hit 'em in the back while they don't see us!" Victor turned and charged, not waiting to see who followed. He jumped over the broken landscape, hopping low crumbled walls and sliding around boulders. Before he knew it, the stone imps jostling and pushing toward the retreating miners were right in front of him, and he jumped into the fight, swinging his baton with heavy, whooshing blows that cracked into their rigid bodies, breaking off pieces of hard flesh and shattering little limbs. Victor howled and pushed more Energy into his Inspiring Presence, extending the duration and bolstering the ragged, battle-weary miners. His arms seemed to sing with power, and he started to laugh.

He was aware of his delver companions joining the fray, but his attention was on the dance of combat. Fighting under the influence of Inspiring Presence was a lot different than when he cast Berserk. While berserking, he was aware of his enemies and his need to destroy them, but he could focus on little else. Now, fighting among the stone imps with his delver friends, he was aware of everything; he could see the movements of the imps, the way their stiff joints seemed to follow a rigid movement pattern, and he was mindful of the best way to block them and slip past their slow, clumsy guard to smash their hard little heads. He concentrated on maximizing the efficiency of his movements and had enough cognizance left over to help a fellow delver with a missed parry or stumbled footing.

The miners and other delvers benefited also, and as their tempo of attack increased, and their actions went from harried and fearful to bold and precise, they began to shatter the resistance of the stone imps, who had to fight now on two fronts. Soon they'd reduced their number to just a few, and though Victor's Inspiring Presence wore off, leaving everyone feeling hungover and sluggish, they managed to pulverize the last of the little creatures with no further loss of life among the delvers or miners. As they all stood around panting over the corpses of the stone imps, a thick carpet of Energy motes started to form over the battlefield and began to stream into them. Victor savored the rush as the Energy poured into him, refreshing his exhausted limbs and wiping away his hung-over haze.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 15 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate. Congratulations! You've learned Bludgeon Mastery - Improved.

"Thank the Ancestors you all came up here!" a grizzled, old Ardeni miner with white and red peppered hair said, walking up to the panting delvers. Victor stood up and reached out to shake his hand.

"Yeah, we figured you all were taking a bit too long to get down, so we came to see what the hold up was. Did you lose any?"

"Aye, a miner and our foreman, but it would've been a lot worse. Thanks again." He turned to gather up the surviving miners, eleven of them, and then they all stood around looking at Victor. Victor looked at his delvers, making sure none were seriously hurt, and then nodded.

"Well, that was a good fight. Good job, everyone. Let's get down to the ore and get to work."

"Ahh, shit on that idea! We just had the piss beat out of us!" One of the miners said, stepping forward.

"Who's in charge of you miners?" Victor asked, frowning at the stocky, pickaxe-wielding Cadwalli.

"As I said, the foreman died," the older, friendly guy said.

"Alright, well, get this straight; Captain Lam doesn't give a shit how tired you are. You've got work to do, and I do too. Do you think Lam will let me slide if I tell her I sent the miners home because they were tired and scared? Now get the fuck down that ramp and get to work."

"What about the bodies?"

“We’ll deal with them on the way out. Right now, I need you to hustle down because I’ve got three guys holding down the fort, and they could need our help at any minute!” Victor didn’t know where his sense of authority was coming from or how he was standing up to all these older men and women, but he didn’t care. He was sick of going with the flow, and as long as he was in charge, he was damn well going to do things the way he thought was right. “C’mon, let’s go!”

“Yeah, quit arguing and get moving!” Edeya said, moving behind the miners to help shepherd them down. Victor nodded, and the whole group got moving. There was some grumbling, but the miners were generally glad to be alive, so they moved with the delvers down the ramp and to the ore vein and got to work. Victor checked in with the three delvers they’d left, and they reported no action.

“Figures you guys would get to have an easy battle while we sat around twiddling our thumbs,” Trilla grouched, but Edeya wasn’t having any of it.

“Easy? Easy? Have you ever fought stone imps! If it weren’t for Victor, the miners would be dead, and we’d be down here hiding, hoping they didn’t come this way after they killed them all.”

“Relax, girl,” Trilla said dismissively.

“Everyone relax,” Victor said, putting a hand on Edeya’s shoulder. “It’s good we fucked up those imps, but let’s stay cool in case more stuff comes our way.” A loud crack interrupted him, and he turned, flinching out of reflex, to see the miners had somehow split off a considerable section of the amber ore vein and were starting to tap off chunks with their picks. “Shit, that startled me. Are those picks enchanted?”

“Of course,” Trilla scoffed, but she turned and stared into the darkness over the ramparts, and Victor took that as a sign that she was willing to let things drop. He turned and checked in with the rest of the delvers, and then he spent some time watching the miners work.

He knew there had to be more to this operation than just slaves running around with picks. No, it was slaves running around with magical picks and with bags that could hold thousands of pounds of ore. “Magic sure makes shit easier,” he muttered.

“Indeed, Victor. Speaking of which, I had an idea you might like to try,” a slightly metallic voice said in his head.

“Oh yeah?” he thought.

“Yes, there’s a spell that all Energy-using children are taught, and it requires no prior knowledge of patterns. It’s a light spell, and, though you don’t have any unattuned Energy, I think it will still work for you, perhaps with an added effect because of your

attunement.” Victor walked over to the ramp leading out of the cavern and sat down on a square-topped boulder, keeping the miners and the barricade in his field of view.

“Alright, lay it on me.”

“Well, children who have developed a Core and pathways are often taught to channel some Energy into their palm, using their will to form and compress it into a ball. With pure Energy, this creates a yellow sphere that casts light. If one’s will is strong enough, it can be made to float around the caster.”

“And with my spirit Core? My attuned Energy?”

“I speculate that it will still cast light, though in a different shade, and it might have an emotional impact on those caught in its glare.”

“Alright, let me see here,” Victor turned his mind inward and looked at his Cores, but then he stopped himself, “Hey, I have seven points to spend. Any advice?”

“Will would help with this process, though your will is already quite good for your level. You should weigh that against your immediate survival needs. It seems you’re destined to fight a lot, so perhaps more physical attributes. I’m sorry I’m not more help.” Victor thought about Gorz’s advice, and he thought about how he’d spoken to the delvers and miners up in the other cavern. What had made him stand up so firmly? All the fights for his life? His will? His frustration? His inspiration or rage Energy? It seemed like a lot of factors were working to influence his demeanor. Demeanor? Where’d he pull that one from?

“It seems like mental stats are pretty important for survival too. My most powerful abilities require Energy to cast, and I think they’re helping me use words to influence people.”

“That’s an excellent point; sometimes, the best victory is attained by avoiding the battle.”

“Right,” Victor decided to put four points into intelligence and three more into will. The effects were subtle but, in his mind, undeniable. Then he returned to the scrutiny of his Core. He watched the pulsing, throbbing red light of his rage-attuned Energy, and then he coaxed a thread of it loose and pushed it through his pathways and out into the palm of his hand. It seemed easy to him, and he figured that his high affinity and will were responsible. As the thread of Energy started to dissipate into the air, Victor concentrated on it and pushed it back down, willing it to ball up and press together.

He kept coaxing more Energy out and adding it to the ball in his palm, and then it seemed to ignite with a bright red light, bathing him and the area around him in a pulsing, baleful glare. He felt a surge of heat in his chest, and a growl rumbled up out of his throat.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Enraging Orb - Basic.

Enraging Orb - Basic: You create an orb of rage-attuned Energy that will bring forth anger in those who behold its light. Energy cost: 50 Cooldown: minimal.

The notifications caught Victor's attention, and he let the orb of red light dissipate, breathing a sigh of relief when it was gone. Suddenly some golden motes coalesced out of the air around him and rushed into him, much like after a battle.

"Oh, nice! I got Energy for creating the spell like when I learned fighting skills."

"The System rewards innovation with Energy. I'm sure you got some when you made the Inspiring Presence spell, as well; you were just too preoccupied to notice."

"Well, that's cool," he said aloud. Victor looked around, wondering if anyone heard him, but didn't see anyone paying him any particular attention. One of the miners eating a sandwich nearby gave him an odd look, but he figured that was because of the light he'd just made, not his words. "Probably better chill out with the spell casting for a while," he thought to Gorz.

"Excellent job on creating that light spell, Victor!"

"Thanks. I want to try it with inspiration Energy later. Hey, is it possible to cast a spell with more than one Energy type?"

"Indeed! That's how elementalists create meta-elements. I don't have any information on combining spirit attunements, but I think it should be possible."

"Alright, add that to my list of things to try out."

"Noted, Victor!"

Several hours passed with no other incidents, and the miners made good progress on the ore vein. Not long after the miners took their second meal break, Captain Lam and the other delvers returned. Victor walked toward her as she came through the barricade and approached the miners. "Where's Foreman ap'Thell?"

"He died," the older, friendly miner said, sitting up from where he'd been taking a break. Captain Lam whirled around, and her eyes zeroed in on Victor.

"What happened?" Her voice was sharp, but she didn't seem particularly angry. Still, Victor tried to choose his words carefully.

"Well, you'd been gone a while, and the miners were still not here, so I started to get worried. I took some delvers up to the next cavern, and we found the miners under

attack by stone imps.” Lam stared at Victor for a moment, and then she turned to the miner.

“This is true?”

“Oh, aye. We’d of lost a lot more if your sergeant here hadn’t come up to the rescue.”

“I’m not a sergeant…” Victor started to say, but Lam cut him off.

“Huh, good initiative, Victor. And none of you died in the fight?”

“Nope, we caught ‘em from behind, and the delvers fought well. The miners made a good showing, too.” Victor shrugged, and Captain Lam studied him for another minute, narrowing her eyes. Then she smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Well, I’m going to authorize some extra contribution points for all of you that rescued the miners!” she announced. “You’ll find them added to your balance at the Contribution Store.” More quietly, she said, “Victor, I’d like a meeting with you when we get back to barracks.”

“Alright,” Victor said, though he couldn’t tell if that was good news or bad. As Lam moved to inspect the mining progress, he thought, “Gorz, you think I’m in trouble?”

“Not necessarily, Victor, though her Energy aura is quite powerful. I’d be surprised if she didn’t sense something about you.”

Updated from

Chapter 29: Revelations

With dread heavy in his heart and butterflies swimming in his stomach, Victor approached Captain Lam’s study. They’d been back for an hour and had a meal together as a unit, and then Victor and some others had decided to head to the Contribution Store. He’d barely gotten outside, waiting with Gris for Heng and Edeya, when Sergeant Fath had come out and said, “Victor, I gotta go fill in paperwork for some recruits. The captain wants you to talk to her in her study. Hurry up!”

“Good luck,” Gris had said with a wry grin, probably just glad it wasn’t him.

Victor sighed and knocked on the door. A clipped “come” sounded from within, and he opened the door, stepping into Lam’s study for the second time. She was sitting at a small round table this time, and she motioned to a stool on the other side of the table, “Take a seat.” Victor stepped into the room and squatted down on the stool, feeling kind of silly with his knees poking up under the table. He cleared his throat nervously. “Alright, Victor. I’ve looked over your mess of a contract a dozen times, and nothing makes sense. Tell me about yourself.” She gestured to the paper in front of her written

with half a dozen different inks, lines scratched through, and signatures scribbled in odd places.

“Um, what do you want to know?”

“Everything. Let’s start with where you’re from.”

“Originally? From a planet called Earth. I don’t think the names of my country or town would mean anything to you.”

“And how did you end up in my unit?”

“Um, when I got to the mine, the foreman sent me to the tent where...”

“No. I mean, how did you wind up with this contract? Why aren’t you free?”

“Well, I wish I could explain it. One minute I was in my Abuela's house; the next minute, I was standing in a barn with some fucking wackos. They took me to the city and sold me to the guy that runs the pit fights there.”

“This was in Persi Gables? Yund is the man who bought you?” She pointed to Yund's name up near the top of the contract.

“That’s right.”

“Tell me about your time with Yund and how you ended up in the mines with a broken Core.” She sat back and took a sip from her crystal glass, waiting for Victor to speak.

He started slowly, haltingly, unsure of how much detail she wanted, but with her encouragement, he began to tell her about his time at the Wagon Wheel. He told her about Yrella and Vullu, and his eyes welled up with tears for the first time in a long while. He wiped them away and kept talking, telling her about his Core and some of his fights and how Yund had made the contract with him. He told her about being the “justice” for the Lady, and then he told her about how Yund sold him out to the nobleman that had tried to destroy his Core. Finally, he told her about waking up in the wagon and finding out he’d been sold to the Greatbone Mining Consortium and how the foreman had sent him to the tent where he’d been randomly assigned to Lam’s unit.

Lam drummed her fingers on her table as she regarded Victor, then she reached behind her to her bookcase and picked up another crystal glass, setting it on the table. She produced a dark bottle from somewhere and poured an oily amber liquid into both glasses, then the bottle disappeared, and she gestured to the new glass, “Take a drink; you deserve it.”

“Um, thanks.” Victor picked up the heavy glass and took a sip; he’d tasted whiskey before, and this was similar, though it had a faintly sweet aftertaste. “It’s good,” he said, smiling.

“Alright, Victor. You’ve been given a raw deal. What’s happened to you in this world isn’t fair, and it isn’t right, but life isn’t fair. That’s one thing I know about you. Another thing I know about you is that you’re a lot stronger than people think. Your Core either isn’t broken like it seemed, or you’ve figured a way to heal it.” She held up a hand as Victor opened his mouth to object. “As far as I’m concerned, the two facts even out the scales a little.” She paused again to regard Victor, making sure her words sank in. “I don’t care how strong you get. I don’t care if you escape from this shithole someday. I just want you to know that I won’t tolerate any violence to those under my command, and I hope you’ll work with me for a while. I’d like to see what you can become.”

“Seriously?” he asked, completely dumbfounded.

“Seriously. I don’t work for Greatbone Mining Consortium. Sure, I have a contract with them, but I’m not here for them. You understand?”

“Yeah, I understand. Um…” Victor had to look down, squeezing his eyes shut. He didn’t know why he was so overcome with emotion, but he felt like someone had taken a huge weight off his back. He blew out a heavy, shuddering breath, and then he tried again, “Thank you, Captain.”

“Finish your drink, and then go spend some of those contribution points. You need a clean shirt and some boots that fit. Just don’t get jumped again, alright?”

“I won’t,” Victor said, taking another drink, savoring the way the liquid warmed his throat and belly. He smiled and shook his head, “I knew you were cool from the first time I saw you, Captain.”

“Cool?”

“Yeah, like awesome, great. I mean, aside from all this,” he put a finger under his metal collar and gave it a tug.

“Alright, alright. Flattery won’t get you another drink. As far as those collars go, yes, I feel some guilt about associating with the mine operators, but these ruins are a rare opportunity. The world’s cruel, you know? Anyway, go on, get out of here. We’re going deeper tomorrow, and I’m bringing you with this time.” She gestured to the door, smiling, and Victor stood up, almost light-headed with relief, and buzzing slightly from the drink, as he set the glass down. He waved awkwardly, moving to the door and out. When he closed it behind himself, he stood there for a moment, trying to gather his racing thoughts, but all he could do was grin stupidly.

“Congratulations, Victor! It seems you’ve gained a powerful ally!” Gorz’s voice piped into his head, and he jerked in surprise, looking around nervously.

“Thanks, Gorz. You fucking startled me.”

“My apologies, Victor!”

“It’s all good, man. It’s all good.” Victor walked briskly through the barracks, noting that most of the delvers were gone, and then out the front door. Of course, his friends were gone; he’d been talking to Lam for a long time. He turned toward the central settlement and broke into a jog, passing by groups of delvers and miners. There was a lot of traffic at that time of day as groups of workers finished their shifts, returned to their camps and visited the Settlement Stone to turn in quests. He was about halfway to the main settlement cavern when he heard Gorz’s tinny voice again.

“Victor! I can sense the Energy aura of one of the thugs that tried to kill you!” Victor stumbled as the words hit home.

“What? You’re sure? Just one of them?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure. He’s just twenty yards away, moving in the same direction as you.” Victor looked ahead and saw the figure that Gorz must have meant. A small, slouched figure was walking briskly toward the tunnel entrance. There were a lot of other people moving about, though, and Victor, no matter how badly he wanted to beat that guy’s ass, wasn’t going to throw away all the progress he’d made. He didn’t need to get flagged by some mine employee and have his collar activated to melt his head off.

He looked around, noting the wooden shanties and occasional larger building, and wondered if whatever delver unit those guys were with was stationed nearby or if he was going to visit the Settlement Stone. “Gorz, keep track of that guy; how close do I have to stay to him?”

“I can’t sense him if you’re much farther away than this, Victor.”

“Alright.” Victor kept moving, careful to stay well behind the guy, and when the crowds grew thicker and he lost track of him visually, Gorz kept him informed of his movements. As they came into sight of the vast settlement area, the guy turned to the left, and Victor followed him.

“Victor! I sense another of the thugs, just ahead of where the first thug is; they’re not thirty yards ahead and to the left.” Victor moved cautiously to a low ramshackle building and looked around the corner. Sure enough, there was Chem, talking to the guy that Victor had been following. He clapped him on the shoulder, and the two of them turned and walked into a large wooden building with a black star painted on the door.

“I think we found their barracks, Gorz. Take a note of it.”

“Done, Victor!”

“Good job,” Victor said softly, then turned and made his way back toward the cavern's center and the tall Settlement Stone. While he walked, he spoke softly to himself, “What a fucking productive day.”

When he got to the settlement stone, he didn't see his friends right away, and he wondered if he had missed them while he'd been preoccupied following Chem's friend. “Gorz, can you spot Edeya or Gris?”

“Not in the immediate vicinity. I'll keep a lookout, though.”

“Perfect. Thanks, Gorz.” Victor waited in line to access the Settlement Stone, and when his turn came, he was pleased to see that he'd gotten another five hundred contribution points. He wondered how many Captain Lam was allowed to dish out like that but figured she probably had shitloads; it wasn't like she needed any of the junk for sale on the Contribution Store. Once again, Victor bought himself a backpack, new boots, new socks, and two new, long-sleeve cottony shirts. After all that, he still had plenty of points left to buy a hardened leather breastplate and some leather bracers.

He took his goods off to the side of the stone and started sorting through them. He was too paranoid about changing his shirt out in the open where someone might see Gorz, so he stuffed most of his clothes into his backpack. He took the time to swap out his boots and put some socks on, though, and his feet thanked him. He also put the hard leather bracers on, pulling the laces tight with one hand and his teeth.

With no sightings of his friends, Victor turned back toward the barracks and got ready to leave, but just as he was getting ready to set off in a jog, he caught a whiff of something good. He followed his nose to the other side of the Settlement Stone, where a guy was selling skewers of meat from a rolling cart. His cart was made from wood but had a sizeable cast-iron insert in the middle of it where coals smoldered. Hanging above the coals were the skewers of marinated meat, and the scent made Victor's mouth water. He walked over to the cart and got in line behind a few other customers, watching as they each went up, exchanged something with the cart guy, and walked away with some meat skewers.

“What do you charge for them?” he asked when it was his turn.

“Five for a bead, and yes, I know that's robbery, good luck finding another merchant in here.”

“A bead...”

“I can teach you how to make Energy beads, Victor,” Gorz piped in.

“Alright, maybe later, thanks,” Victor said, stepping back. “What’s an Energy bead?” he thought.

“It’s a physical manifestation of Energy. Anyone with Energy affinity can make one, but the greater your affinity, the easier it is, and the faster you can do it. They’re often used as currency in System-influenced worlds because the System will take them as currency at Town Stones.”

“So, there’s nothing wrong with it? Like, I won’t get busted for making them?”

“I doubt that man could trade for them if it were illegal in the mines, Victor.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Duh. Alright, what do I do?”

“You’ll want to be somewhere you can concentrate and where you won’t be interrupted, especially for your first one.”

“Alright, I guess meat skewers aren’t on the menu tonight. Maybe next time.” Victor turned and started back to the barracks, staying toward the center of the tunnel and keeping alert; no way he was getting jumped again for his boots. He’d only been walking a couple of minutes when he caught sight of Edeya and the others, so he jogged up to them. “Yo, guys! I was wondering if I’d find you.”

“Victor! You live! The Captain too hard on you?” Gris asked.

“Nah, man. She was fucking cool. She just wanted to talk to me about my contract; all good.”

“That’s good, Victor,” Edeya said, “I was afraid we were in trouble for leaving the barricade or something.”

“No way! She was glad we did that. We’re good. Hey, did anyone else get some new kicks? Check these out.” Victor held one of his new steel-toed boots up.

“Hmm, seems to be a popular model!” Heng said, laughing; all the veterans had the exact same boots.

“Hey, we’re allowed to make Energy beads, right? I wanna try to buy some of those meat skewers next time.” The older vets looked at each other with big smiles, and Edeya made a gagging sound. “What?”

“You have any idea what kind of meat that was? You don’t see any holbyis around here, do you?” Gris asked.

“What’s a holbyis?”

“It’s a herd animal. The point I’m making, Victor, my boy, is that the meat you’re drooling over is probably some kind of monster. Probably giant rats.”

“Well, it still smelled fucking good.”

“Hah, if you’re determined, then yes, it’s perfectly fine to make Energy beads; just don’t go flaunting them around cause that’ll get you robbed. Again.” Gris laughed, and Heng joined in. Edeya looked at Victor like she felt sorry for him. Victor couldn’t feel any irritation; he was in too good a mood from his talk with Captain Lam and everything else that had happened that day. He just grinned and shrugged.

They got back just in time for Fath to return and announce lights out. For a moment, Victor wondered about Sergeant Fath—was he an employee of the mine, or was he loyal to Captain Lam? He certainly seemed to have Lam’s trust, but Victor was wary of anyone who didn’t wear a collar in this place. When the lights went out, and he laid down in his scratchy cot, Victor realized just how bone-tired he was, and he couldn’t spare any more thoughts about Sergeant Fath, collars, or anything else.

He woke as he heard some of the others stirring, and Victor scrambled out of bed to clean himself up. He managed to get a partitioned stall in the jacks, so he changed his shirt, keeping Gorz nicely hidden, and then joined the other early risers for a quick breakfast. It was the first time he’d gotten up in time to eat, and the warm cereal filled with bits of sweet, dried fruit came as a pleasant surprise. He’d just finished wolfing down his food when Sergeant Fath stood up from the table and said, “Wake up the rest of these slugs; we’re heading out in five minutes.”

Victor took particular pleasure in waking up Edeya, lifting the foot of her cot off the ground and giving it a good shake. She thrashed and sputtered and looked around with wild eyes. When she saw Victor, she bared her teeth and said, “I’ll pay you back for that!” They laughed, though, and soon the column was marching out, chanting another marching cadence about a boy who hated his mother’s cooking so much that he signed up to work someplace called the Impfire Forges.

Victor hadn’t seen Captain Lam yet that day, but he figured she would come flying from behind, or she was already deep in the ruins scouting around. While they marched, Gorz tried to explain to him about Energy beads, “You see, the System seems to crave Energy-rich materials, and you can create such materials by manifesting the Energy that you cultivate. It’s a process very similar to what you did when you made your rage-attuned light; you simply channel your Energy out through your pathways and condense it with your will. You’re aiming to create something far denser than your light orb, though, and as it takes shape, you keep adding to it until it’s the appropriate size. You start to get a feel for that the more you make. Some places trade in tiny beads, the smallest possible physical manifestation. They only take about one-tenth as long to create as a standard Energy bead.”

“And it doesn’t matter that my Energy isn’t pure?”

“No! In fact, the System pays more for attuned beads. Why, you can even create beads with multiple attunements, which increases their value more!”

They talked for a while more about the process, and by the time they arrived at the forward camp, Victor felt like he had a pretty good grasp on the concept. Just as he'd half-expected, Captain Lam was already waiting for them. She was all business when they walked up, “I'm heading out with Victor, Heng, Thayla, and Fenlale. Sergeant Fath, make sure the miners don't slack off; we'll be gone most of the day.”

“Yes, ma'am!” Sergeant Fath turned to the delvers, “Alright, you dogs! I need four on the barricade and four watching the ramp!” Victor walked over next to Captain Lam, happy that she'd kept her word about taking him with her today but also annoyed at himself for being worried that she wouldn't. The other three delvers she'd named also gathered with her, and Victor bumped knuckles with Heng when he held his fist out.

“Victor?” the tall Shadeni woman named Thayla asked.

“Yeah.”

“You're the one that got jumped the other day, right?”

“Yeah, that's me.”

“Guess you can take a beating. That's good.”

“Alright, let's get moving,” Captain Lam said, looking up from the journal she'd been studying. She strode away, and they all fell in line behind her. This time, Victor took the lead. Something about the way Lam had spoken to him and, more importantly, listened to him made him feel more enthusiastic about helping her. He felt like having her on his side made his chances in this world a hell of a lot better, and he planned to take advantage of the opportunities she was giving him.

They reached the point where Victor had fought the rat and found Gorz, and, once they'd all shimmied down the rope to the ruined structures, Lam fluttered down and said, “Alright, I have a tunnel I'm going to explore. The rest of you split up and dig around these ruins. Listen, I've already been through most of the larger structures, but there are plenty of buildings with lower levels that I haven't been through. You'll probably run into hostile creatures, so I want you working with a buddy. On that same note, I am giving you all some trust here. Don't blow it. If you find something interesting, bring it back here for me to check out. If it's too big to carry, make a note of it, and show it to me when we meet up here. Speaking of which, we'll gather back here in two hours. Victor, you're with Thayla. Heng and Fenlale, you're a team as usual.”

“Captain?” Thayla asked.

“Yeah?”

“Can we make it interesting? Any reward for the team that finds the most stuff?” Her lips curled in a grin, exposing her sharp canines, and Victor had to admit, he liked her nerve.

“Thayla, Thayla, Thayla,” the captain said, shaking her head with a rueful smile. “Alright, if it will keep you all honest, I’ll let the team with the best finds take a choice from items I don’t want.” Fenlale slapped Heng on the back with a big smile on his face. Thayla whooped, and Lam continued, “Alright, everyone take a light stone; you’ll need it in the ruins.” She produced a handful of leather cords with glowing yellow stones affixed to them, passing them out to each delver. “Now, get going!”

“Let’s go!” Thayla gave Victor a shove, and he followed her into the crumbling ruins, taking the opposite direction from Heng and Fenlale. She ducked into a narrow “street” between ruined buildings and hurried between several others, seemingly heading somewhere in particular.

“Where are you going?”

“I know what buildings they searched yesterday; I’m taking us to a big building we didn’t get to yet.”

“Oh, sweet!” Victor supposed Heng and Fenlale had similar intel, but it didn’t change the excitement he felt at the prospect of exploring old ruins looking for treasure. “How does Lam keep delvers from trying to keep stuff they find?”

“Hah. If you’re dumb enough to try to cheat Lam, then good luck to you.”

“Right. I’m not that dumb, and I don’t want to cheat her, anyway.” Victor meant his words; he respected Lam to a degree—as much as he could respect someone who used indentured servants as fodder to fight monsters while she hunted for treasures. Yes, he wanted to grow stronger and escape, but he didn’t want to make an enemy of her. Thayla paused in front of a large building and looked at him; she had long black hair tightly bound to her red scalp in a bunch of braids. Her eyes were angled in such a way that she seemed angry or ready for a fight all the time, but she regarded him calmly for a moment, then shrugged.

“Yeah, I doubt Captain Lam would’ve brought you along if she thought you were scum. I heard you did a good job protecting the pickers yesterday, too.”

“Hah, pickers.” Victor snorted and followed Thayla as she stepped through the ruined doorway. The structure must once have been at least two stories tall; some of the upper floor was still standing, though the ceiling was falling down in various places. Something stood out among the tumbled stone blocks, though—steel girders with huge bolts with X-shaped heads holding them together. “Wonder who built this place so far underground.”

“Who says it was underground when they built it?”

“Well, we’re pretty fucking deep. Not sure how all these buildings could get down here otherwise.”

“Hmm, well, the System managed to combine four worlds into one, so I don’t think it would be too hard for it to put a town into a cave.” She reached forward and lifted a thin stone slab, peering under it while speaking.

“Good point. So this world used to be four?”

“So they say. C’mon, look around!” She gestured around the ruined building, and Victor moved over to a half-fallen wall and peered over it. Nothing was there but more rubble, so he started sifting through it, looking for anything other than old building materials. He kicked through some dusty, rotted doors and dug through piles of petrified wood, all the while hearing Thayla doing the same in other parts of the building. He was climbing through another old, rotted door when he heard Thayla whoop.

“Victor! Come here!” She called, and Victor turned and hastily retraced his steps. Her excitement was palpable in her tone, and it was hard for Victor not to reciprocate it. He could see the path she’d taken over the dusty stone floor and followed it, wending through broken walls, doors, and around corners. She called twice more, urging him to hurry, and he did, bursting, finally, through another broken doorway into a large, mostly-intact room. That’s when he saw something was wrong.

Thayla sat against the far wall, her legs stretched out, and her chin hung down to her chest. When Victor saw she wasn’t moving, he scanned the rest of the room and saw a dark shadow lurking in the corner to Thayla’s right. Movement caught his eye, and he saw a gray tendril of vine-like material twitch along the floor. He traced its length to see that one end of it was hidden in the shadow cast by Thayla’s light stone, and it seemed to be wrapped around her neck. Then Thayla’s voice came out of the corner where the larger shadow lurked, “Victor! Hurry! I found something!”

Victor stepped back behind the crumbled doorway, his heart racing. What the hell was going on? He peeked around again, staring at Thayla. Was she breathing? He thought he could see her chest moving ever so slightly. “Victor! Hurry!” her voice called from the far corner again. Should he run and try to get Captain Lam or the others? What if Thayla was dying? What if that thing was slowly choking her or draining her life away? His mind began to run away, imagining all sorts of horrifying scenarios.

“Gorz, any idea what’s happening?”

“No, Victor. I’m sorry.” Victor wished he could see better, but neither his little light nor Thayla’s could reach that far corner. Then it hit him—his light spell! He didn’t want to send a rage-attuned light in there, though. He concentrated on his Enraging Orb spell, turning his mind inward so he could focus his will on holding back his red rage Energy. When he saw the spell pattern start to form, he pushed some inspiration-attuned Energy

toward it and was pleased when a white-gold orb of brilliant light began to form above his outstretched hand.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Globe of Insight - Basic.

***Globe of Insight - Basic: You create an orb of inspiration-attuned Energy that will help those within its radiance see the potential in their surroundings. Energy cost: 50
Cooldown: minimal.***

Several things happened at once when the globe of warm light finished forming above his palm: motes of Energy formed out of the air and surged into Victor, the light shone brightly into the room where Thayla lay against the wall, and something screamed with rage and indignation from the dark corner. Having never experimented with moving around his orb with just his will, Victor thrust his hand into the room as if to throw it toward the dark corner.

He watched as the orb sailed through the air, banishing the dark shadows and exposing the long, twisted, gray tendril that snaked over the ground and wrapped around Thayla's neck. Another such tendril was already groping its way over the ground toward Victor, and he lifted his baton in preparation to bat it away when the light uncovered the creature lurking in the corner. It looked like a gray, fleshy tree trunk with stubby limbs and a wide mouth at its center. The gray tendrils or fleshy roots were slithering forth from its base. Unbidden, Victor's Uncle's favorite expression slipped from his lips, "Madre de Dios!"

His orb had stopped mid-air near the center of the room, and its bright light revealed Thayla's purpling flesh and the weak twitching of her limbs. No longer considering fleeing as an option, Victor charged toward her, skirting away from the other probing tentacle-root, and slammed his baton against the one that held Thayla. He smashed it hard against the stone ground, and though he couldn't cut the thing with this blunt weapon, he felt something give inside it, and the creature screamed again. The screech came from its gaping, gnashing maw. When Victor flinched from the sound and looked toward its source, he saw the mouth was filled with little razor-like teeth and a dozen probing slimy tongues.

Victor shuddered and pounded on the vine, again and again, madly grinning, when he saw the gray flesh start to pulp and break apart. The creature continued to scream, and its other probing tentacle finally caught up to Victor, snaking around his ankle. He tried to yank his foot away, but it tightened like a vise, pressing the leather of his boot into his flesh and grinding his bones together. He hadn't expected it to be so strong! Victor hesitated for a moment, weighing his options, but then the tentacle jerked, pulling him sideways, and he panicked, activating his Berserk.

Red lust for violence filled his mind and clouded his vision, and Victor stopped resisting the pull of the tentacle-root, charging headlong at the gray, fleshy thing in the corner. He cackled as he brought his baton down onto the broad expanse of pallid, damp flesh,

smashing it into the creature as hard as possible. Frustration fuelled his rage when nothing much happened as a result of the mighty smash. The flesh jiggled, the maw screamed, and the tentacle wrapped further around his leg.

The creature's maw was large enough to snap Victor in half should he fall in, but, even in his madness, he used his left hand to brace against the trunk-like exterior of the monster and continued to pound his baton, to little effect, with his other. All the while, the gray tentacle continued to snake up his leg and around his waist, and that's when a shiver of panic broke through Victor's rage, and it began to fade. He felt the creature's enormous strength as it continued to squeeze, and then he felt a dark, invading Energy start to creep into his pathways through the flesh at his waist, where the tentacle was in direct contact with his skin.

Victor raged against the intrusion, pushing hot red Energy toward the foreign presence, and he managed to shove it back for a few seconds. Then, he began to weaken, his guts squeezed so tightly that he was having trouble taking a breath. His pummeling of the monster degenerated into pathetic slaps, and darkness began to creep around the edges of his vision, and once again, the invading Energy began to push into him. Then, something strange happened in Victor's mind; he stopped panicking and wondering what to do next. Instead, he thought about Yrella and Vullu, and then he thought about Belsa and wondered what happened to her. He'd never know, he realized.

Something wet and hot hit Victor's face, and the squeezing lessened slightly. His ears had long been overwhelmed by the creature's screaming, so he didn't notice anything different when it continued to shriek, perhaps with a slightly higher pitch. Again, wet, hot fluid splashed him, and again, the tentacles loosened, and Victor felt blood rush up to parts of his body that had been deprived. He managed a gasping breath and opened his eyes. Another splash of hot fluid accompanied by a feminine grunt greeted him as he jerked his head from left to right, trying to see what was happening.

Thayla was swinging a broad-bladed axe against the creature's trunk, showering herself and Victor with gore with each swing. Her latest chop had severed much of the tentacle, and Victor managed to stumble back, falling onto his butt. Not knowing how else to help, Victor channeled his inspiration Energy into Inspiring Presence, and suddenly Thayla stood up straighter and began to hack in earnest, more precisely placing her strikes. Victor, for his part, felt a surge of well-being and scrambled to his feet, instantly spotting his fallen baton. He scooped it up and was about to lay into the monster, regardless of the ineffective nature of his weapon, when Thayla stepped back, grinning.

"It's done," she said, panting. She reached toward her chest, slipping a finger behind her leather vest, and suddenly the axe disappeared.

"Nice job..." Victor panted, rubbing his sore leg and waist.

"If you mention my axe or my dimensional storage, I'll kill you in your sleep," Thayla said matter-of-factly. Victor genuinely felt insulted and was about to tell Thayla that he wasn't

a snitch when a massive current of Energy poured forth from the dead monster into them both, and he lost himself in the exhilaration of it.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 16 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

Updated from

Chapter 30: The Well

"I'm sorry I said that," Thayla said after the rush of Energy faded. "I know you risked yourself to get that thing off my neck, but I don't want to get killed because I showed you my secret."

"You think Lam would kill you for having that axe?"

"Hah, no, not Lam. She's the one who gave me the storage ring I have hung around my neck. This stuff makes me a big target, though, and I'm not looking to get jumped if you know what I mean." She gave Victor a funny look, and he realized she was trying to make a joke.

"Alright, alright. Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I promise I won't mention it. How'd this thing get you around the neck like that, anyway?" Victor looked at the red, blistered marks above Thayla's collar.

"I was looking through that trapdoor, and I called for you, then that damn vine or tentacle thing dropped from the ceiling and grabbed my neck." She pointed to a wooden square in the stone flooring, and Victor realized it was the trapdoor she was referring to.

"Oh shit! So you did find something? Let's check it out!"

"Alright, but use your light orb," she pointed to the Globe of Insight still hovering in the air where Victor had "thrown" it. He looked at it and tried to send out his will to make it move toward the trapdoor, but it felt like trying to grab a globe of water with his fingers; he could feel it, but it kept slipping from his grasp.

"Promise not to laugh?" he asked Thayla.

"Sure, why?"

"Well, I don't know how to move that orb."

"Hah, get closer to it. When you're learning to manipulate Energy constructs, it helps to gesture with your hand; my mother told me that people are used to moving things with their hands, so we subconsciously visualize our will as a projection of our touch."

“Really?” Victor walked over to the orb and held out his hand, “pushing” it toward the trapdoor. The orb floated effortlessly ahead of his hand and stopped when he pulled it back. “Holy shit, that was easy. Your mom’s a genius!”

“Well, she was pretty smart and a great teacher. I miss her all the time,” Thayla said, shrugging and moving to lean over the trapdoor. “Alright, get your baton ready. I’m going to open this thing.” She pushed her hands through a large gap between the rotting timbers and yanked the trapdoor up. It moved easily, probably because she’d already forced it earlier, and Victor’s light shone down onto more gray stones and the rotten remains of an ancient ladder. “Hmm, lots of cobwebs and some mold, but I don’t see anything dangerous,” Thayla said quietly, poking her head into the hole. “Push your light down there.”

“Alright,” Victor, using his hand to guide it, lowered his floating orb and pushed it down into the space beneath the floor. Thayla still had her head hanging through the opening, and when his light moved past it, she took in a deep breath.

“We’re going to win for sure!”

“What? What is it?” Victor knelt to try to poke his head through the opening.

“Crates! Lots of crates! They’re preserved, too. Whoever stored this stuff cared enough to enchant them!” She grabbed the hole’s edge, giving Victor a bit of a shove to make room, and then she dropped down. “Nothing here but some old dead spiders! Come down,” she called up. Victor took one more look around the room, focusing on the hunched corpse of the gray thing and, seeing nothing to worry about, dropped down.

The room below was a low ceilinged stone galley about ten feet wide by fifty long, and both walls along its length were stacked with wooden crates, each about two feet square. Thayla was prying open one of the crates with an iron prybar that she’d, presumably, pulled out of her storage ring. Victor went over to help. The wooden crate was made of good, solid wood, and the nails holding the top down weren’t the least bit rusty. “Someone really enchanted these so they wouldn’t decay? Would that be expensive?”

“For me or you, yeah. For some rich noble, not at all.” She grunted and gave the prybar another heave, and Victor pulled the wooden lid. With a screech, the nails pulled free, and the contents were exposed—stacks of dull red metal ingots. “Woah,” Thayla said, putting her prybar away and lifting out one of the ingots.

“What kind of metal is that?” Victor asked, also picking one up. It was heavy, maybe heavier than steel, but he wasn’t sure. The red color was interesting, though, and it had a weird, shifting sheen in the light of his orb.

“I don’t know. It’s not amber ore, steel, or any other metal I’ve seen. Maybe it’s valuable. Forget that; it’s definitely valuable. I just don’t know how valuable.”

“Alright, let’s take one back to the meeting spot, eh?”

“Yep, Captain Lam will know what it is, I’m sure.” Thayla set the lid down and then walked up and down the row of crates, counting them. “Twenty-four ingots in a crate and a hundred and twenty crates. Ancestors! If these are very valuable at all, Captain is going to love us.” Victor couldn’t help smiling; he’d almost died a few minutes ago, and now he was discovering a hidden hoard of possibly magical metal—the huge, sudden swings in his fortune couldn’t be good for his mental state, but he felt good, anyway. Was it the Energy he’d gotten from the kill? Was he still buzzing from it?

They climbed out of the storage cellar and then made their way out of the ruined building and back to the meeting point. He and Thayla were the first to arrive. Then Lam came swooping out of a dark tunnel halfway up the wall on the far side of the cavern. Her wings trailed glittering motes as she descended to land in front of them. She was clearing her throat to speak when Heng came jogging out from behind a building, Fenlale a short way behind with a rotten wooden trunk cradled in his arms. “We got something good, I think, Captain!” Heng hollered as they strode forward.

“What about you two?” Captain Lam asked while they waited for the two men to close the distance. Thayla held out the ingot, and Captain Lam took it, weighing it thoughtfully in one hand while she produced a leatherbound text with her other. Heng and Fenlale arrived while she was studying the ingot, and Fenlale let down his burden with a heavy clatter of wood and metal.

“What’s in the chest?” Thayla asked.

“Weapons, and most of ‘em not even rusted. Artificed, I’d wager.”

“Huh, nice. Might have won, too, but I think we’ve got you beat.” Thayla said, a sly smile stretching her lips.

“Hmm, this is an alloy. See how the light makes those rainbow swirls in the metal?” Victor leaned close, looking where she pointed. “And it’s hard; I can’t scrape it with my steel dagger. I’d say this is a mixture of amber ore and bronze. According to my book, amber ore, tin, and copper require less heat to combine than steel and amber ore, but they still produce a tough alloy. It’s valuable for sure, but let me take a look at these weapons before I determine who won.” Victor looked at Thayla, and she held a finger to her lips and winked.

Captain Lam lifted the lid off the old wooden box and whistled appreciatively. The box was full of knives and shortswords. The knives ranged in size from small four-inch blades to much longer dagger-like weapons. There were only four shortswords, but they all gleamed in the light of the glow stones, their matching blades dangerous-looking even to Victor’s untrained eye. “Yep, very nice blades—artificed for sure. Sorry, Thayla and Victor, but I think Heng and Fenlale win!”

“Oh, but you haven’t seen all that we found,” Thayla said, grinning at Heng, who’d just started to whoop and raise a fist in the air.

“You have something else?”

“Well, not exactly; we have something more—over a hundred crates of those ingots.” Thayla nodded to the ingot still in Lam’s fist.

“What?” Lam stood up, and her eyes widened. “Crates?”

“Yep and each crate has twenty-four ingots,” Victor added, holding out a fist for Thayla to bump. She gave him a funny look, but then she laughed and gave his knuckles a good punch.

“Show me!” Lam said, sweeping the box of daggers and swords into her dimensional container. Heng groaned, and Fenlale sighed heavily, but they all started to follow as Thayla scampered through the ruins, leading the way to the cellar full of ingots. Victor clapped Heng on the shoulder and grinned, shrugging his shoulders, and Heng groaned again, more loudly.

“Don’t rub it in, kid!” He shrugged out of Victor’s grip, and Fenlale smiled broadly, shaking a fist up and down, which was something Victor had learned he did when he wanted to laugh.

It turned out the horde of amber ore alloy was more than even Captain Lam had hoped for. She had to use three different dimensional storage devices to scoop it all up, and even then, she was in a hurry to get out of the mines and cash it in because two of her storage devices were so full that she was worried about their stability. She’d promised Victor and Thayla a reward but then marched them double-time back to the barricade and the other delvers. As they arrived, she called out, “Sergeant Fath!” The angry-looking Ardeni man hustled over, his deep baritone voice booming a reply.

“Yes, Captain?”

“I have to hurry to the surface. Make sure the miners wrap up their work, then bring the unit back to the barracks. Tomorrow will be another day off.”

“Yes, Captain!” As Fath saluted, Captain Lam launched into the air, steaking up the crevice to the next cavern. Fath turned to the four delvers and grinned, “Found something good, eh?”

“Aye, some weapons and a huge haul of amber ore alloy. I’d say Lam just made more money than the entire mine will produce in the next week,” Heng said, scratching at his chin.

“You don’t say,” Sergeant Fath said, shaking his head ruefully. “The privilege of command, eh? Which one of you found it? Or did the captain find it?”

“Me and Fenlale found the weapons, but these two found all the ore,” Heng replied.

“Alright, you all take it easy, seeing how you got everyone a day off tomorrow. We’ll head up in a couple of hours.” With that, Sergeant Fath moved over to the ore vein and began to excoriate the miners about their progress. The four delvers moved off to the side and sat with their backs to one of the cavern walls. Victor took his pack off and dug out an old roll he’d tucked away, and began to gnaw on it.

“That what you brought for lunch?” Heng laughed at him. Victor just shrugged and continued to chew the hard, dry bread. Thayla snorted and tossed him an orange fruit that looked sort of like a peach.

“Hey, thanks,” Victor said, taking a bite; it was sweet and reminded him a lot of an apple.

“You’re welcome.”

“Hey, can I ask you guys a personal question?” Victor looked around the small group.

“How personal?” Thayla asked, tilting her head and frowning. Heng just snorted and shrugged, and Fenlale, as usual, just ignored Victor, munching away on some sort of grain mix he had in a small sack.

“Well, I mean, I’m trying to figure this whole Energy thing out, and I was wondering what kinds of Cores you all have. I was told my kind of Core is unusual among ‘civilized’ people—it’s a spirit Core.”

“Yeah, I knew something was weird about your Energy because I felt your light orb affecting me,” Thayla said.

“Well, yeah, my Energy is attuned; that light orb had inspiration-attuned Energy in it.”

“Hmph,” Heng grunted, chewing on a hunk of dried meat.

“I don’t have any attunements. I have a pearl-class Core; it’s pretty simple, and I only have pure Energy.” She held out a hand, and a small ball of shimmering yellow light formed over her hand. “See? My light spell is just a light.”

“Are attunements rare?”

“Nah,” Heng said, finally having swallowed his mouthful of dry meat. “But, and I’m not trying to be insulting here, spirit Cores are more common among primitive people like Urghat or the tribes on the Beneset Steppes. Lots of Ardeni and Shadeni have different

sorts of attunements or affinities, as most people call them. Many have some elemental affinity, but they usually also have some pure Energy in their Core. Your Energy is all attuned?”

“Yeah, as far as I can tell.”

“That’s interesting. At least you have a nice attunement; it seems inspiration could be pretty useful. My aunt has a sapphire-class Core and affinities for decay and air; she’s been able to create a lot of powerful spells mixing the two,” Thayla said, taking a bite of cheese.

“Huh, that’s cool.” Victor tucked into his fruit, finishing it off in a few bites, and then he heard scuffling feet, looked up, and saw Edeya had walked over.

“Hey, everyone! I heard you found something good? We get the day off tomorrow, again!”

“Aye, Captain probably has to go into town to deal with her new riches,” Heng said, a chuckle in his voice.

“What’s up, Edeya? You guys have to fight any demons or anything?” Victor asked.

“Nah, it’s been so boring here! The miners just chip away at that vein, and we stand around picking our butts.”

“Least you didn’t have your life almost sucked out of your neck by a creepy gray tentacle tree,” Victor grinned, giving Thayla a nudge.

“Why are you talking? That thing was about to pull you into its mouth when I saved you!”

“True, true.” Victor laughed, motioning for Edeya to sit next to him.

“I can’t sit; Fath is going to scream at me any second now. Talk to you all later!” Edeya waved and meandered toward the barricade.

“You say your Energy is inspiration-attuned? It seemed like you went crazy during that fight with the beetles, and didn’t I hear Lam telling you to use your ‘berserk’ ability?” Heng asked while he dug around in his pack for something more to eat.

“Oh, yeah. I have a second affinity: rage.”

“Really?” Thayla regarded him more closely, then turned to Heng. “Isn’t that what the Corran Blood Ragers are famous for?”

“Hmm, yeah, now you mention it. I think they use blood magic, too, though. Blood and rage affinities.”

“Blood’s not a spirit affinity, though, is it? My aunt had classmates at the academy who had blood affinity.”

“I dunno,” Heng shrugged, looking at Fenlale, who also shrugged. Thayla looked at Victor.

“I don’t know either. I wish I had a teacher or something.”

“Victor, I’m happy to inform you that a blood affinity is not a spirit-based affinity.” Gorz piped up in Victor’s mind. He tried to process the info without looking strange.

“I don’t think it is. How could someone have a spirit affinity and a different kind of affinity at the same time?”

“Some kind of specialty Core, I guess. Probably tricky to form or something. It might require a certain bloodline or a secret process,” Thayla said.

“That’s correct. I don’t have the specifics, but one of the texts I read mentioned in a footnote that some spirit-casters, as the author labeled them, had traded potency for versatility by forming specialty Cores allowing for such diversity.”

“Interesting.”

“What?” Thayla asked.

“Oh, just the idea of having spirit affinities and other affinities.”

“I thought your Core was damaged, anyway,” Heng said, pointing at Victor’s iron collar.

“Oh, yeah, but I can dream, can’t I?” Victor stuffed the last of his hard roll into his mouth. Their conversation drifted to more mundane topics—what they’d get for dinner, how close everyone was to their quest completion, what they’d do with their free time the next day, and that’s when Heng said something interesting.

“I’ll probably volunteer at the well.” Fenlale shook his head at these words, and Thayla’s face got serious.

“What’s the well?” Victor looked at Heng.

“It’s a deep pit where creeps come crawling out at all hours of the day. The mine uncovered it about fifteen years ago. They sent a few expeditions in, but none of them got to the bottom without having to retreat. Now they just let volunteers kill the things that come up out of it,” Heng replied.

“Really? Is it worth it?”

“Ancestors, no!” Thayla said. “Who wants to fight imps and demons and fire hounds on their time off? I’ve had at least two friends go to ‘volunteer at the well’ and never return.”

“Bah, it’s not that bad!” Heng said. “Not to mention, you get credit toward your quests, and the Energy for killing that stuff isn’t bad. How you think I made it to tier two in here?”

“Well, I’m not going,” Thayla said with a snort.

“Who says I invited you?” Heng laughed, and Thayla threw the pit from her fruit at him.

“Do people really get free time that often? Where they can be volunteering to fight at some endless pit of monsters?” Victor didn’t think it made that much sense.

“Well, we get time off now and then when Captain Lam makes a big find; it’s the same deal for lots of the delver units. Some people in here don’t need much sleep, either, thanks to racial advancements. Those people come to the well and slaughter monsters regularly. Guess who keeps getting stronger?” Heng chuckled, obviously thinking of some particular people he knew.

“Can I come along, Heng?” Victor asked, his impulsive thought blurting out of his mouth.

“Sure, Victor.” Heng bit off another chunk of his dried meat and then threw the rest of it to Victor. “Better eat something besides fruit and old bread.”

When they got back to the barracks that evening, Heng told Victor they’d head out after breakfast. Victor decided to spend some time that evening working on his Core, so he made his way to the cultivation cave. He was a lot more relaxed this time, not worrying about hiding what he was doing; Lam had told him she didn’t care what was going on with his Core, and he figured anyone who took too much interest in him was just going to report what they saw to Lam or Fath. That said, he still found a somewhat secluded spot in a far corner of the cave behind a boulder.

“Gorz, what would happen if my strength was a lot higher than my agility or dexterity? Do I even need dexterity as a fighter? Isn’t that, like, fine motor skills?” Victor was asking because he still had seven points to spend, and he was thinking about putting them into strength; he might not have an axe, but if he were a lot stronger, his bludgeon might have hurt that gray tree thing all the same.

“With regard to fighting, having a strength that far outweighs your other physical attributes can cause you to have trouble controlling your weapon. Strength provides power and speed to your swing, but agility allows for movement and hand-eye coordination. Dexterity also plays a role in finer adjustments for targeting, blocking, and weapon manipulation. You wouldn’t see a real problem unless your strength was two or three times your other attributes, though.”

Victor looked at his attributes:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

578/578

Strength:

35

Vitality:

62

Dexterity:

21

Agility:

21

Intelligence:

24

Will:

55

Points Available:

7

In his opinion, he was getting dangerously close to having an overbalanced strength. He decided that, as long as he was surviving based on his ability to fight, he'd have to add his free points to those physical stats, being careful not to pump one too much higher than the others. That said, he put three of his free points into strength and two each into dexterity and agility.

Looking at his status screen again, Victor was reminded that he still had a lot of work to do with his second affinity; his pool of Energy had recovered a lot since having his Core fractured, but most of that was due to his increased intelligence and will. There were still lots of little Energy pools and fragments floating in the space around his Core. "Time to

get to work,” he said, beginning his cultivation drill, focusing on gathering up the little remnant fractures of his old Core and pulling them into the white-gold heart of his inspiration Energy.

Victor lost himself so thoroughly in the process, running through his drill again and again, that when he’d gathered up the last of the little fragments and opened his eyes to study his status screen, he realized he’d been at it most of the night. Still, the results spoke for themselves:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

904/904

He stood up, stretched massively, and hurried back to the barracks. He knew he’d missed lights out, but he also knew that lots of people had seen him in the cultivation cave. If Sergeant Fath were looking for him, he’d have figured it out pretty quickly. When he crept through the big double doors and slinked into his cot, no one challenged him, and no angry Sergeant Fath stood in the aisle waiting for him.

Victor closed his eyes, knowing he’d only get a couple of hours of sleep but still feeling good about things. Since he’d eaten that fruit from the noblewoman and advanced his race, he had trouble sleeping more than four or five hours, and, in his mind, a little sleep deprivation to fix his Core wasn’t a big deal. So, it was with a wry smile and a yawn that he greeted Heng the next morning as the older man shook him awake.

“Ready?”

“Sure, can I grab some food?” Victor sat up on the side of his cot, stretching.

“Yeah, but make it quick; it’ll take us an hour to walk there, and I don’t want to spend the whole day fighting. I’d like to have time to do some shopping at the Stone.”

“Right,” Victor said, standing up and going over to the big table where he jostled for a seat and grabbed a plate of scrambled eggs, a hunk of bread smeared with butter, and a big mug full of watery wine—it was the only drink they ever served in the barracks. After wolfing down his food and doing his business in the jacks, he followed Heng outside and toward the big central settlement.

They’d only made it a few dozen steps when rapid footfalls came from behind them, and Victor turned to see Edeya running up. “Wait up!” she called, and Heng stopped to regard her.

“What’s up?” Victor asked.

“You guys are going to the well?” Heng nodded in response to her question.

“Can I come?”

“I don’t own the well,” Heng shrugged, “you can come or not—up to you.”

“Yeah, I don’t care,” Victor added. “Is it crowded there, Heng?”

“Nah, and if it is, we’ll fight down to one of the platforms, so we don’t have to compete for kills.”

“There’re platforms?” Edeya asked as they started walking again.

“Yeah, the mining company tried quite a few times to make headway down the well, and they set up forward camps—carved ‘em right outta the stone.”

“Huh,” Victor grunted, matching Heng’s quick pace. Edeya walked a little behind them, and she was unusually quiet during their walk. Victor thought about trying to draw her out, but, as usual, he was struggling with what to say without putting his foot in his mouth. Finally, he blurted, “Hey, why so quiet today, Edeya?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing, just thinking about home. I’ve kind of lost track of the days, but I think it’s my sisters’ birthday. They’re twins.”

“Ahh, jeez, that sucks. I bet you wish you were there.”

“Hah, you think so?” she asked, and Heng snorted.

“Right.” Victor stopped talking; that’s what he got for trying to be understanding. He could tell Edeya wanted to talk some more, but he carefully avoided looking at her as they made their way through the big central settlement, this time taking a right through a narrow tunnel in the massive cavern wall. This new tunnel opened up into another huge tunnel, about half as big as the main central one, and they followed that for a while, past more shanties and ramshackle structures. They turned again and again, and soon Victor was wondering if he’d find his way back.

Heng hadn’t been lying; after about an hour of travel, they finally came to a stone wall with a massive metal door mounted to it. The door was designed to slide open on two steel beams about as wide as Victor’s thigh bolted to the stone. It was open about two feet when they arrived, and a sizeable Ardeni man in a mining consortium uniform was standing by it. “He’s there to close the door if the fighters get overwhelmed,” Heng explained. The Ardeni nodded to the three of them as they stepped through, and then Victor got his first look at the well.

The first thing he noticed was the high stone ceiling with two giant yellow Energy globes hanging from chains, making the room as bright as noonday. Then he saw the well—a pit in the stone about a hundred yards across with a stone ramp winding around its rim, leading into the depths. The ramp started about twenty paces from where they'd entered, and sitting around the top of the ramp were a dozen or so weary-looking delvers. The men and women held their batons in their fists and had eyes only for the pit, completely ignoring the newcomers.

“Pretty good crowd,” Heng said, “We might be heading down a bit.” He strode forward, and Victor and Edeya followed, their earlier bickering forgotten.