

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 31: Grinding

When they got to the carved stone ramp that led down around the pit in a spiral, Victor had a sudden surge of vertigo. The ramp was about as wide as a one-lane road back on Earth, but there was no railing, and it had a fairly steep slope. What was worse, he could see out across the pit to see the ramp winding down around the ledge, growing smaller and fainter the further he looked. Hanging in the air, at the center of the “well” about a hundred, or a thousand for all Victor could tell, feet down, mist clouded the air, reflecting the bright yellow lights from above.

Some of the gathered delvers snickered when they saw Victor stumble and hold out his hands for balance when he walked up. He looked around, scowling, but the assembled characters weren’t intimidated by his glare. All sorts were there, lounging or standing idly, tapping their batons in their fists. He saw a huge, bulky Ardeni that made even Ponda seem small. He saw a pair of Ghelli women, their wings glittering—not as large or as brilliant as Lam’s wings, but they looked a lot more functional than Edeya’s. A cluster of four Vodkin brought his mind back to Ponda, yet again, as they laughed at some joke, their big, furry bellies jiggling with the motion. Then there were the usual red-skinned Shadeni and normal-sized Ardeni—some were kitted out in armor and looking ready for action, and some looked more like Victor or Edeya, their gear cheap and patchy and their eyes hungry.

“When was the last wave?” Heng asked, glaring around. As far as Vodkin go, Heng wasn’t a very big guy, but he had a look that gave people second thoughts about being rude. A tall Shadeni woman that was all legs and long arms walked up and clasped his hand.

“Heng!” she said, “been too long!”

“Aye, Captain’s kept us busy. Anyway, when was the last wave?”

“Not gonna introduce me to your friends?” she asked, ignoring his question again. She turned to Victor and Edeya and said, “I’m Shar. Heng used to be my lover.” Heng groaned and slapped a hand to his furry head. Victor snorted out a laugh before he could catch himself, but Edeya stepped forward and held out her hand. f

“I’m Edeya! So nice to meet you! This tall guy is Victor.” Edeya clapped a hand on Victor’s shoulder, and he smiled at Shar.

“Good to meet you.”

“Come on, Shar, how long since the last wave?” Heng tried for the third time.

“Oh, you’re no fun, Heng! It’s been about fifteen minutes; we’d just thrown the bodies over when you all walked up.”

“What was it?”

“Stone imps—only about twenty of them.”

“Think we’re going to head down a bit. This crowd’s a little much.” Heng started walking toward the ramp, and Victor looked at Edeya before following. Her eyes were wide, and he caught her licking her lips nervously as she began to follow after Heng.

“Heng, don’t do that! Some of us don’t want to go deeper; you know what happened to Trennet!” Shar called after Heng.

“Who’s Trennet?” Victor asked Shar.

“A friend of ours that went to the second platform. Never heard from him again. Heng’s stubborn, though, and he won’t want to share with this many. Ahh, well, guess we can loaf about until he gets bored.” Victor looked at the other delvers and saw that a handful were standing up and starting to follow after Heng. Still, the vast majority were grumbling and looking toward the door, apparently unwilling to go deeper for action but not wanting to hang around waiting for Heng and his group to come back up.

“So people that don’t want to go deeper will just sit here and twiddle their thumbs?” he asked.

“Hah, funny guy, aren’t you? ‘Twiddle our thumbs?’ I like it!” She reached forward and gave Victor’s shoulder a squeeze. “You are a big one, aren’t you?”

“Um, yeah. I better go catch up to Heng.” Victor awkwardly pulled away and hurried after the smaller group of delvers moving down the ramp. He could hear Shar’s laughter following after him, and his ears started to burn. Why was he running away? What was wrong with a friendly woman? He shook his head, cursing his awkwardness.

“She a little too forward for you?” Edeya asked, and Victor realized she’d been watching the exchange.

“Aw, c’mon. I know when to steer clear of drama, and she seemed like more than I could handle,” Victor shrugged.

“Mmhmm.” Edeya was walking backward, talking to him, and she looked like she would steer herself right off the curving ramp.

“Watch where you’re going, chica!” Victor snapped, wincing at the image of her tumbling into the bottomless well. She turned and scooted further from the ledge.

“Glad to know you care,” she laughed. “I’m not an idiot, though; I wasn’t going to walk off!”

“Ugh, this fucking well is giving me the creeps. No one has ever been to the bottom?”

“Yeah, from what I hear. If anyone’s seen the bottom, they never made it back out again.”

“What about Lam? She ever try?” Victor couldn’t imagine Captain Lam struggling to kill anything that might be down there.

“No idea! I’ve been in her unit as long as you have!”

“Right.” They’d caught up with Heng and the other five delvers who’d followed him, but they were still walking along the ramp. Victor couldn’t see any sort of platform yet. “How far is the first platform?”

“Few more turns,” Heng said, spitting a gob of black saliva out toward the well.

“What you chewing, man?” Victor asked. Heng dug around in his belt and produced a square, brass tin. He held it out to Victor.

“Yiii weed. Want some?” Victor took the tin and lifted off the top, taking a sniff of the black, moist powder within. It smelled bitter and pungent, but it made Victor’s mouth salivate, so he took a pinch of it and stuffed it into his lip like he’d seen ballplayers do with chew. It burned a little, but it was kind of spicy with a sweet aftertaste, and it gave him a little buzz almost immediately.

“Disgusting,” Edeya said, and Victor laughed, trying to pass her the tin. She huffed and increased her pace, walking quickly past Heng. Victor spat some brown-black saliva toward the edge and then passed Heng his tin.

“Thanks,” he said. Heng nodded and tucked it into his belt. They’d made a couple of steep rotations of the well, and the air was cooler, and the light from the enormous globes up above was less bright.

“What’s the deepest you’ve been, Heng?”

“When I was newer here, I followed some real heavy hitters down to the third platform. We held that position for a long time, and I got a lot of Energy by just throwing a few shots here and there. Haven’t been past the first platform since, though.”

“Incoming!” A stout, black-haired, hooved Cadwalli guy shouted, pointing to the far side of the well with his baton. Coming up around the steep, spiraling ramp was a throng of large, lumbering creatures that looked like a cross between a two-legged bear and a beetle.

“What the fuck?” Victor exclaimed, tightening his grip on his baton.

“Oh, this ain’t lucky,” Heng said softly, then he yelled, “Form up a line—backs to the wall, they’ll throw you off. Don’t try to run! They’re twice as fast as you!”

“What the fuck are they?” Victor asked, finally voicing his question coherently.

“Deep hulks,” Heng grunted, following his own advice and putting his back to the wall. Edeya squeezed in next to him as the others jostled for a spot. The hulks were in view on the ramp now, coming up around the bend; there had to be ten or more, and they were huge, maybe seven or eight feet tall, with broad, heaving bodies and long arms that dragged on the floor as they lurched along.

“If you get thrown over, try to slide down the wall! You’ll land on the ramp below,” a big, bald-headed Ardeni yelled. Victor looked down at Edeya; her entire, thin little frame was about the size of one of those things’ legs.

“You got this, chica. Come on, get ready! Get fucking pumped!” Victor yelled, digging deep to make his voice loud and hoarse and slapping his baton into his hand. The hulks heaved closer, their grunting, coughing breaths audible now, and the red gleam of their beady eyes apparent. Victor struggled to categorize them; they had hairy legs and arms, but their chests were gray-spotted brown carapaces. Their long arms ended in three digits, each sporting a black claw wedged like a carpenter’s chisel.

When they were just a few paces away, Victor shouted, “Come on! Kill these fuckers!” and activated his Inspiring Presence. Shouts of enthusiasm echoed his words to his left and right, and suddenly everything seemed possible. Sure they were big, but they were slow, and look how predictably they swung those hooked claws. Victor stepped under a swipe and brought his baton down in an overhead smash, directly into the face of one of the hulks. His baton, far heavier than it felt, thanks to its enchantments, cracked something vital in the hulk’s face, and it fell away, scrabbling at its head and roaring in pain.

“Yeah!” Victor howled and laid into the hulk that was pressing toward Edeya. She was gamely holding out her baton, ready to try to deflect the hulk’s swipes, but Victor had its flank and, fully inspired, used Channel Spirit to drive rage-attuned Energy into his arms and his baton and laid into the hulk with a combination of three deadly, red-tinged blows. His bludgeon shattered carapace and bone with each hit, and the hulk stumbled back into Heng’s devastating overhead smash, which opened a two-inch split in the creature’s skull. It fell like a four hundred pound sack of dog food.

Victor whirled around, high on victory, only to see that five hulks had wholly overwhelmed the three delvers that had been to his left and, chisel-claws dripping with gore, swarmed toward him. “Stay back from me!” Victor took a moment to shout at Edeya, then he activated Berserk and dove into the pack of monsters. Somewhere in the tiniest part of the back of his mind, Victor worried that he was biting off a lot more

than he could chew, but he was still inspired, still high from the exhilaration of combat, and he couldn't spare any room for doubt. He squashed down that little voice and roared as his vision darkened with blood-red rage, and his body cried out for violence.

One of the hulks immediately smashed a massive claw into his left shoulder, sending him flying five feet through the air to crash into the wall of the well. Victor maniacally laughed as he stood up, the flesh where the claw had gouged knitting together. He'd smashed his forehead into the wall, but the contusion was mending before he could even register the pain. Victor didn't wait to take stock of his body's state, launching himself at the nearest hulk, sliding under its hacking swipe and coming up on its flank. He drummed his baton into it with mad abandon, trying to crack every hard surface he could see, sending flakes of chitin flying and causing the bulky brute to stumble into the hulk next to it.

He was vaguely aware that other things were happening around him—he saw sparks and heard concussions. Wails of pain and roars echoed off the walls of the well, but Victor had eyes only for the hulk in front of him. His rage had fully supplanted his inspiration, and his moves became reckless but horribly violent. When a hulk fell before him, he didn't stop pounding it until another hulk charged him and bore him to the ground, both of them sprawling away from the wall and near the edge of the well.

Victor had absolutely no concern for his precarious position; his mind had one thought—kill the thing that had interrupted his smashing. The hulk had tackled him, its long arms around his waist and its bullet-like head pressing into his stomach. The monster was heavy, but Victor didn't care; if this fucking thing wanted to wrestle, he was game! He jammed his right forearm under the hulk's scabbling left limb, pushing his hand through to grasp the thing's smooth, hard head, then he leveraged himself up to wrap his legs around the monster's torso. He bent and twisted with all his might, fighting with rage-fueled strength against the bulky creature's natural muscles.

They rolled and tumbled, and Victor roared in triumph as he finally got the creature's back and hooked his arm around its throat, pulling with an arched back. The monster flailed its long arms in panic, and Victor's mad laughter accompanied its frenzied thrashing, and then Victor was weightless, and he and his wrestling partner were falling through the air, skipping against the stony face of the well. They fell for three or four heartbeats, and then they smashed into the hard stone of the ramp, much further down in the well.

Luck was with Victor; in their tumbling descent, he'd wound up on top before the crash, and the hulk broke his fall. Still, the concussion of the sudden stop sent him sprawling away from the monster, and he blacked out for a moment. When the veil of darkness lifted from his vision, and he saw the hulk grunting and limply flailing with one working limb, he stood up, annoyed to find that his enraged self had let go of his baton when he'd decided to get into a wrestling match.

He stalked over to the thrashing hulk and delivered several brutal stomps to its round, half-chitin, half-flesh skull. He stomped until the chitin was broken, and fluid began to ooze from the monster's orifices. When it stopped twitching, Victor looked around, out of breath and sore all over. He couldn't see anything moving nearby, but he could hear sounds of struggle up above when he listened carefully.

Victor turned to the upward slope of the ramp and started running. It took him a minute or two of hard climbing to round the curve of the well and start up the slope to the original scene of the battle. He saw slumped, twitching forms, both hulk, and delver, on the ground, and he saw one hulk, still standing and swinging its hooked claws at Heng's big, furry form. Heng looked exhausted, laboriously swinging his baton to block the hulk's clumsy swipes. The monster was clearly injured, as well, with dark spots of oozing fluid all over its carapace and head.

Victor pumped his legs harder, using Sovereign Will to improve his strength and Channel Spirit to flood the pathways in his legs and torso with rage-attuned Energy. Then he smashed into the side of the hulk like a linebacker catching a quarterback by surprise. Something in the monster's torso cracked, and it flew several yards through the air to land on its stiff back and slide over the edge into the well. In the silence that followed the end of combat, Victor heard the monster smash into the stone below with a resounding crack that echoed off the sides of the well.

"Thanks," Heng said, panting and resting his hands on his knees. Victor didn't hear him, though; his heartbeat was in his ears as he surveyed the battlefield. His eyes slipped over the forms of dead hulks, over the writhing and still bodies of the delvers he didn't know, looking for Edeya. Finally, he saw her slight frame half-buried by the bulk of a fallen hulk, and he hurried over to her.

Adrenaline and panic fueled his muscles, and he didn't need any spells to help him grab the hulk and yank it off of her. He was leaning to feel if her heart was beating when a surge of Energy poleaxed him and knocked him to his knees.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 17 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

When he regained control of himself, he was relieved to see that Edeya was flushed from her own influx of Energy, and her eyes were blinking rapidly as she came back to herself. "Damn! You had me worried, missy!"

"Oh, Ancestors! Imagine waking up to this sight!" she giggled, and Victor stood up, tsking.

"That's the thanks I get? I shoulda left you buried under that thing!" He snorted but held his hand down for her. "Can you move?"

"I think so," she said, wincing and reaching to take his hand. Victor pulled her to her feet, her small hand warm in his.

"I'm glad you didn't die," he said.

"Same; I saw you fall off the edge."

"Yeah, but I had a big squishy cushion."

"Hey, you two, help me get these others up; we need to cut our trip short. Bad luck running into hulks first off," Heng said gruffly, trying to help the big Ardeni to his feet. The man's left leg was twisted in the wrong direction, and he groaned in misery.

"What about the dead guys?" Victor asked, looking at a couple of mangled delver corpses. He stepped past them to the stout Cadwalli; he was leaning against the wall, nursing a stump where his left hand used to be.

"Leave 'em; we gotta get out before another wave comes," Heng replied.

"You good? Can you walk?" Victor reached down to pull the guy up under his arms.

"Ugh, yeah, but I'm screwed for delver duty; they'll put me in the mining crews now that I'm missing my main hand."

"Sorry, bro." Victor patted his hairy shoulders. Edeya was helping the only other survivor, another Vodkin who'd been clubbed unconscious by one of the rampaging hulks. He was dazed but able to walk, and the little group started struggling up the ramp. Before he started after them, Victor looked around for his baton. He saw it over by the edge of the drop where he'd been wrestling with the hulk.

When he scooped it up, he looked around the fallen corpses again and had a brief macabre thought of checking the dead delvers for anything valuable. He wrestled with the idea for a moment but ended up leaving. He had to admit that part of his reluctance was that he worried about what the others would think if they saw him doing it. He was also strangely reluctant to touch their corpses. "Pretty weird considering all the corpses I've made," he muttered.

Despite his resolve, he did look very closely at the one body between him and the others while he walked by. The smaller Ardeni male had died due to having his skull caved in. He wore thin leather armor and had a plain, standard-issue baton lying next to his corpse. Victor didn't see anything of note on the body, so he felt better about his decision as he hurried to catch up to the others.

Victor, for all his bumps and bruises, was feeling pretty good. Whenever he got a big influx of Energy like that, he seemed to heal up quite a lot more than some of the other delvers. He was tempted to ask about it, but then he decided such a question might

raise more questions from them about him, so he asked Gorz instead, “Gorz, why do I heal more than some of these guys from the Energy I absorb after a fight?”

“Victor! I tried to talk to you while you were fighting, but I don’t think you heard me!”

“Sorry, yeah, my mind was occupied.”

“You most likely have a higher Energy affinity than those others you speak of. Energy affinity has many secondary effects, the main ones being how much your body can use Energy to improve and heal. Someone with high affinity will gain levels faster than someone with low affinity, and, as you noted, a body with high affinity will apply that Energy toward repairing tissue more readily.”

“Thanks, Gorz.” Victor thought about that and realized he probably had a pretty huge advantage over people with lower affinity. He gained a level almost every time he fought, though he doubted that would continue forever. Right now, though, he knew he was as strong as just about anyone in Lam’s unit, and he’d only been in this world a month or so. Sure, he’d been fighting almost nonstop, but the fact remained—his upper limit had to be a lot higher than someone with a low Energy affinity. “Gorz, what’s the highest level person you’ve known of?”

“Reevus-dak was level forty-seven. He spoke of his master, alluding to him being of the sixth tier and the strongest mage on his continent.”

“Was that on this world?”

“No, Reevus came here through a portal.”

Victor was about to ask another question when he realized they were on the last stretch to the top of the ramp, and some of the loafing delvers were running down to help the wounded out. Shar was among them, and she stopped by Heng and scooped an arm under the Ardeni’s other arm to help him walk. “That was a quick trip, Heng!”

“Aye, hulks first off.”

“Ouch, bad luck. At least you survived.” Heng just grunted in reply, and Victor wondered at their strange relationship. She seemed to genuinely like him, but Heng was as reticent with her as he was with anyone. Maybe she liked it?

Once they’d gotten through the massive metal door and dropped off the survivors, Heng turned to Victor and Edeya and said, “I’m going to visit some old friends since we’ve finished early. Sorry, I’m not in the mood to head back into the well.”

“I’ve had enough for today,” Edeya said. “I think next time I’m going to stay up near the top; I’m not meant to be fighting things like hulks.”

“Smart,” Heng nodded and turned to walk away.

“Later, then,” Victor called after him. He looked at Edeya and shrugged, “What now?”

“You aren’t even tired, are you?”

“Nah, not really.”

“You should go fight at the top of the well for a while; the stronger you get, the safer the rest of us will be down in the deep delves.”

“You sure you don’t want to hang out? I’ll do most of the work, and if hulks come, you can run for the door.” Victor chuckled at the image.

“No, thanks, Victor. I don’t have your stamina or Energy affinity, I think. I’m feeling really weak, and my head hurts from when I got knocked out.”

“You okay to walk back?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing. I’ll stop for some food at the Settlement Stone.”

“Alright, then.” Victor held out his fist, and Edeya gently knocked his knuckles. “That’s the spirit. Chin up, chica; you fought like a boss!” That got a smile out of her, and she briefly waved as she turned to walk away. Victor turned back to the big metal door and walked back into the well.

As he walked over to the dozen or so other delvers waiting for action, he called up his attributes:

Strength:

38

Vitality:

69

Dexterity:

23

Agility:

23

Intelligence:

24

Will:

62

Points Available:

7

He hadn't gained any new insights since his last level, so he decided to do the same thing as before, three into strength, two into dexterity, and two into agility.

"Back for more, handsome?" Shar strolled over from a trio of Ghelli she'd been talking to.

"Uh, yeah, figured I'd try to get some more fighting in. Grind out another level or two."

"Ambitious! Not going down again, are you?"

"Nah, I'm cool hanging up here."

"Cool? What a strange dialect you have. Might I ask about your heritage? Let me see, part Ghelli, part Shadeni?"

"Huh? No, I'm a human. I'm not from this world."

"Ahh, that explains the lack of wings. Most part-Ghelli have at least some wings."

"Yeah..."

"Incoming!" a short, very stout Cadwalli hollered from the top of the ramp. "More Herd-damned stone imps!" Victor's face spread into a grin; he enjoyed cracking stone imps with his baton.

"Come on, Shar! I bet I can get more kills than you!" Victor charged toward the top of the ramp, his baton at the ready and his Inspiring Presence primed.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 32: Justice Redux

Victor shattered yet another stone imp skull, sending the rest of the creature's crumbling gray body tumbling down the ramp with a kick of his heavy boot. "Seventeen!" he howled, looking to the side to see if Shar or any of the other delvers defending the ramp had heard him, though he didn't know if they even cared; maybe he was the only one

keeping track, but he didn't mind. His spirits were high, and he was having real, genuine fun for the first time in a long while.

The imps were just alien enough that he felt no qualms whatsoever bashing them apart. Their emotionless faces and grasping stony claws did nothing but creep him out; no empathy for these things could be mustered in Victor's heart, and so he was free to revel in their destruction.

The pack of imps had been dense, stretching down the ramp and around the curve; there had to have been over a hundred of them, and they pressed into the abattoir that Victor and the other delvers had set up for them. They walked and scabbled over the corpses of their kin, and Victor, surging with inspiration Energy, led the delvers in their systematic dismantling.

Now, the last stragglers climbed, stumbling on the stony remnants of the dead imps, to the waiting clubs of the delvers, who mopped them up with little difficulty. In the end, Victor counted twenty-two kills, and he shook his baton in the air whooping his triumph. Shar laughed at him, and many of the other delvers smiled, finding it hard to be grumpy with someone purposefully acting the fool just to lift their spirits. Victor knew he was being crazy, and part of him wanted to stop and get serious; why would he want people laughing at him? On the other hand, he didn't give a shit; he was having fun and confident in his capabilities—what did it matter what all these other delvers thought? Let them laugh.

"Nice one, Shar! I saw you shatter that last guy!"

"Oh, handsome and sweet! I'm going to talk to my captain about getting you transferred," she purred, matching Victor's exuberance with her own brand of craziness, and he couldn't help but laugh.

"Better quit flirting with me, Shar! Trying to get Heng to beat me up? How many kills? Come on! Was I the only one keeping track?" Victor looked around, and Shar laughed.

"Oh, fine! I think I had seven or eight," she relented. "Are you happy? Not like you're going to win something!" As she spoke, though, golden motes began to coalesce over the crumbled remains of the stone imps and then stream toward the delvers. Victor's column of Energy was much wider than anyone else's, and as it flooded into him, he grinned, nodding to Shar.

"Yeah, I'd say I won something."

Congratulations! You've achieved level 18 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

“Hey, Victor, is it?” Another delver asked, stepping closer. He was a thickly built Vodkin with sleek black fur and a funny snaggle tooth that hung down over the left side of his mouth under his moist-looking black nose.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, nice job beating the hell out of those imps. I gotta ask, though, you seem strong; why’d they give you that joke of a collar?”

“Um.” Victor reached up to touch his cold iron collar self-consciously. “I’m good at fighting, but my Energy skills are lacking. Way to rub it in, dude.” Would that work? Could he play it off?

“Har, no offense. My Energy skills are worm dung too. At least you have that ability that gave us all some combat zeal. That was great!” He reached out with a big meaty paw to clap Victor on the shoulder, and Victor smiled in relief.

“Hell yeah, bro. Anyone know how long it usually takes between waves?” He looked around at the delvers going through the broken bodies of the imps, tossing pieces out into the well.

“It seems rather random,” a thin Ghelli man with terribly notched wings said, “sometimes a few minutes, sometimes an hour or more.”

“Alright, thanks.” Victor nodded to the Ghelli, then looked at the scavenging delvers. “What you guys looking for?”

“Sometimes they have gems in their bodies,” one of them said, kicking through a pile of imp rubble.

“Like this!” another one exclaimed, holding up a glittering red gem half encased in rough gray rock.

“Lucky find!” Shar said in a breathy whisper, impulsively reaching toward the gem. The little Ardeni pulled it back with a grin.

“Ah-ah, you know the rule—finding’s binding.” He deftly tucked the gem into his vest and moved back into the rubble. Victor shrugged and also started sifting through the imp remains, throwing pieces of rock into the open air of the well as he went. He never found any gems, but it kept him occupied until the next wave of monsters came, this one a heaving, hissing swarm of centipede-like monsters, ranging from the size of his arm to a dozen paces in length.

The bugs were bright yellow with black patterns on their carapaces, and when Victor and the others smashed them with their cudgels, they bled in glowing orange goo that left stinging welts if you got it on your skin. At the end of the battle, Victor was covered

in sore, raised red spots, and his clothes and armor were sticky and filthy with the stuff. All save his pants; his wonderful enchanted pants slowly cleaned themselves, and Victor lamented the loss of his matching shirt.

The bug fight wasn't enough to give him another level, but just as they were mopping up the last of the twitching, hissing creatures, a horde of beetle riders came clicking and howling up the ramp. "Damn, that was fast!" Victor yelled, getting ready for the fight. He hadn't used his Inspiring Presence in the last battle, but looking around, he saw that his fellow delvers were tired, sore, and not quite ready for another round. He stepped ahead of the line to face the other delvers and activated his spell, shouting, "Come on! Are you tired? Who cares? Those scrawny beetle riders aren't any match for a delver, tired or not! Let's beat these little shits back and throw them into the darkness!"

His words might not have been eloquent, but the effect of his aura made up for it. The delvers howled with renewed vigor and determination, and when the beetle riders met their line, they were smashed and pummeled into broken submission. The horde was a lot smaller than the one that Lam's unit had encountered at the amber ore vein, but the battle still lasted quite a while, and Victor once again started to rack up scratches and bruises and even a few minor stab wounds from beetle rider spears. He wanted to activate his Berserk ability, but he held himself back, afraid that he'd kill a fellow delver or get himself thrown over the edge in his mania.

Still, he used his Channel Spirit ability liberally, especially after the Inspiring Presence wore off, filling his arms and weapon with rage-attuned Energy. So effective was the spell that he was almost guaranteed a kill when he smote a beetle or its rider. His baton tore through carapaces and shattered bones alike, and by the time the horde dwindled to a few stragglers, he was sure he'd killed dozens of the creatures. This time, when the Energy rose from the battlefield and streamed into him, he saw the notification he'd been hoping for:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 19 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 14 attribute points to allocate.

On top of the level, he could feel his wounds closing up and his aching bruises fading away. "Fuck yeah!" he said, not as quietly as he intended.

"Another good victory," Shar said, her demeanor a lot more serious than Victor was used to. He looked at her and saw that she was covered in gore and sporting quite a few shallow cuts. Her face was drawn, and her eyes looked tired.

"You alright?"

"Oh yes, just tired. I used a lot of Energy in the last two battles—more than I recovered from the victory. I'll be fine after some rest."

“Ahh, yeah,” Victor looked around, seeing that many of the delvers were in a similar boat, and quite a few were leaving. He also saw some fresh faces and realized a new group had arrived during the beetle fight. “I need a watch,” he said suddenly, realizing he’d lost track of time quite a while ago.

“A watch?”

“Um, a timepiece? Something to keep track of the hour?”

“Of course, I know what a watch is; your statement just caught me off guard. You can buy one at the Contribution Store.”

“Good call! I think I’m going to call it a day. Nice meeting you, Shar.” He turned and waved at the remaining delvers. “See you guys around. Maybe next time my captain gives us a break.”

“Bye, handsome,” Shar said with a weary smile. “Tell Heng to come see me, will you?”

“Sure, I’ll pass it on.” Victor walked to the door, waving as some of the other delvers said goodbye, waved, or thumped him on the back. It felt good hanging out with all these guys and not having any sort of boss around—just fighting for the glory of it against enemies he didn’t feel guilty killing.

“Victor, am I correct in assessing your current level at nineteen?”

“Dammit! Gorz, you startled me again!”

“I’m sorry, Victor.”

“Anyway, yeah, I’m nineteen now.”

“Are you aware that most races receive a class refinement option at level twenty?”

“Yeah, my friend Yrella told me about it, back when I was just figuring shit out. I don’t quite get it, though.”

“You’ll be offered a choice to modify or change your class based on your actions and growth since your last selection.”

“Right, but if I don’t like the options, will I get to keep my current class?”

“Yes, usually.”

“Alright, well, is there anything I can do to prepare?”

“If you were wealthy and had means and access, you could eat natural treasures to improve your attributes, race, and even gain enhancements to your refinement choices. I don’t believe those are options for you, Victor.”

“No shit. Alright, Gorz, I’m lost. Can you please guide me back to the Settlement Stone?”

“Of course, Victor.”

Victor followed Gorz’s instructions and returned to the Settlement Stone cavern without incident. He was disappointed to see he still needed to kill another forty-three “denizens” of the deeps to complete his quest. Still, he had enough credits to purchase a watch. When it coalesced in his hand out of a cloud of yellow and blue smoke, he was pleased to see that it was an old-fashioned, metal-cased pocket watch. When he opened it, though, the little watch hands were floating freely over a shiny brass backplate, seemingly suspended and moved by magic. “Energy,” he corrected himself.

He saw the street vendor selling meat skewers again, and he groaned in frustration. “Gorz! I still need to learn how to make those Energy bead things.”

“Yes, Victor. Perhaps this evening, unless you get yourself busy again.”

“Yeah.”

When Victor returned to the barracks, it was nearly time for the evening meal, and he saw Heng sitting at the table next to Fenlale. He was gesturing widely with his hands and laughing, and Victor wondered if he was recounting the tale of their battle with the hulks. He looked around for Edeya but didn’t see her. He started to walk over to the table, but he felt a hand grip his elbow. He turned around to see Thayla standing behind him, her face even more severe than usual. “Where’s the little one? Edeya?”

“I don’t know. I stayed at the well fighting for a few hours; she came back a long time ago.”

“I had promised her some training, but she never sought me out,” Thayla said, her frown deepening.

“Did you check around back? Talk to her boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?”

“Yeah, um, a guy she hangs out with. What was his name? B something.”

“Beal, Victor,” Gorz supplied.

“Um, Beal.”

“Beal...” Thayla’s expression clouded more, and she stalked toward the table, and Victor saw her target—a thin, young Ardeni man with curly, bright-green hair. Victor hadn’t ever spoken to the guy, but he’d seen him around. He hadn’t gotten a good look at him when he’d run into them making out behind the building, so he’d never put the name to the face. He watched as Thayla leaned over him, her long black braids falling down the sides of her head and obscuring Victor’s view.

A moment later, Thayla stood and stalked back toward Victor. “He hasn’t seen her all day. What did she tell you when she left?”

“She said she was tired, her head ached, and she wanted to come back to the barracks.” Victor’s mind started to race—first with worry and then with guilt; he’d let her walk back, feeling sick, through dark tunnels, past tons of unsavory assholes, while he fucking had a good time hanging around bashing on monsters all day. “Fuck!” He smashed his fist into his hand.

“You should know by now about walking around the mine alone!” Thayla growled.

“Yeah, buddy system,” Victor said lamely.

“Ugh! I blame Heng, too. Ancestors! Lam isn’t going to let us go looking for her this late.”

“Is Lam back?”

“Yes, she returned an hour or so ago.”

“Let me talk to her. She owes us a reward.”

“True...” Thayla turned and stalked toward Lam’s private door, and Victor hurried after her. Heng laughed and waved when Victor walked by, but Victor hardly registered it. Victor couldn’t stop thinking about Edeya and imagining her lying in some dark tunnel, broken. He felt heat rising in his face, and, for the first time in a while, he felt his grip on his emotions starting to slip. He only managed to get himself under control enough to keep from yanking Lam’s door open when he realized he wasn’t picturing Edeya—he was picturing Yrella’s broken, twitching form. The image burned into his mind when he’d seen her die kept coming to the surface, and he realized he was losing it.

Victor gripped his hands into white-knuckled fists and forced himself to stop walking and breathe. When he had calmed a little, he strode purposefully to Lam’s door, where Thayla was already waiting for a response to her knock. After a few heartbeats, Lam’s voice called, “Come.” Thayla opened the door and walked through, Victor close behind.

“Hello, you two. Here for your reward?” Captain Lam’s smile faltered when she saw Victor’s face. “What is it?” She was sitting at her little table, a thick ledger book open before her, which she closed with a solid *thwap*.

“Something’s happened to Edeya,” Victor blurted. Thayla looked over her shoulder at him with a frown, but she turned back to Lam and elaborated.

“You know, the little Ghelli girl? She went to the well with Victor and Heng and left hours ago, but she never made it back.”

“And? She has an hour or so before lights out. Maybe she went somewhere else?”

“No, something’s wrong,” Victor said through clenched teeth. “She was sore, had a headache. She told me she was coming back to the barracks hours ago. I fucking let her walk back alone.” Lam’s face clouded a bit as her white-blond eyebrows narrowed.

“I don’t like the idea that some unsavory sort has taken or harmed one of my delvers, but there’s little chance we can find her. I wish you hadn’t let her go alone, Victor.” Victor groaned as his guilt surged again.

“I know! I’m an idiot! Captain, let me go look for her, please! I have a way to track her.”

“Oh?” Both Thayla and the captain looked at him with renewed interest. Captain Lam raised an eyebrow, waiting for further explanation, and Victor stammered for a second, trying to explain without getting himself in trouble.

“I, well, it’s my Core. I can sense certain types of Energy, and I think I can tell if I get near Edeya. I’ll hunt around for a sign of her.”

“An interesting talent,” Captain Lam said. “Wouldn’t that make it possible for you to find those that nearly killed you?”

“Maybe,” Victor decided to keep his lying to a minimum. “I know Edeya a lot better, though.”

“I’ll allow it. Thayla go with him. If it’s another delver group and their captain is present, I want you to channel some Energy into this stone.” Lam produced a small black stone and handed it to Thayla. “I’ll deal with their captain. If not, if some filthy drek have taken her, taken one of my delvers, I want you two to make an example of them.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Victor turned to leave, pulling the door open.

“Victor, don’t let the mine personnel see you if it comes to a fight. I’d hate for them to activate your collars.” Victor paused at her words, but Thayla pressed a hand against his shoulder blade, pushing him forward, and he resumed walking, his heart full of urgency and determination and his mind full of guilt and worry.

Thayla didn’t say anything as they hurried down the main tunnel, jogging toward the central settlement stone. Victor’s mind was running away from him, images of terrible things happening to Edeya flashing through it, followed by darker, vengeful, violent

fantasies. He shook his head and tried to get focused, “Gorz, please keep an eye out for Edeya’s Energy signature.”

“Of course, Victor. I’m already doing it.”

“Thanks.”

“Victor, I might suggest spending your remaining attribute points.”

“Right.” Victor was too preoccupied to vacillate about his choices, so he simply followed his latest pattern: six into strength, four into dexterity and agility.

“You can really find her?” Thayla asked as they started to pass by some of the outlying shanties and closed on the main settlement cavern.

“Yes, I’m going to be running around, seemingly at random, but I’m just trying to get a feel for her. Stay with me.” With that, Victor picked up the pace and started running. He passed by a lot of people, but most ignored him—people were often late for one thing or another in the mine, and supervisors were rarely forgiving of tardiness. Seeing a couple of delvers running pell-mell through the mine wasn’t all that unusual. Soon, they were in the Settlement Stone section of the massive tunnel, cutting through alleys, jumping over piled scrapwood, and skirting around crowds of miners and delvers.

Victor realized he was heading to the building where he’d located his assailants. He had no reason to believe they were the ones that had done something to Edeya, but he knew they were creeps, so why not check? “I’m sorry, Victor, I see the signature of one of your enemies within the building, but no sign of Edeya.”

“Dammit,” Victor spat, running past the building and continuing his meandering circuit of the cavern. He was working his way around the outer perimeter of structures toward the tunnel that led to the well. He cut in and out of alleys, got cussed at by quite a few filthy miners that he pushed through to get past their smokey, stinking cookfires, and finally finished his first circuit around the settlement space.

“Nothing?” Thayla asked as he paused to get his bearings.

“No, fuck!”

“Relax. You can’t do any good if you lose it. Get it together; plenty of time for guilt later.”

“Alright.” Victor took a deep breath, trying to calm down. She was right; there had to be a smarter way to handle this. “Where do creeps go in this place? I mean, unless Edeya is dead, they took her for a reason, right? Where do fucking assholes go to, you know, take advantage of people?”

“I don’t know! I don’t spend time with that type.”

“I have an idea.” Victor turned back toward the building with the black star painted on the door, the building where the assholes who’d jumped him hung out. He ran full out, and he knew Thayla was struggling to keep up, but he didn’t care. “Gorz,” he said aloud. “Tell me if that fucker is still there alone.”

“I will, Victor.”

Victor charged between buildings, ran past several crowds of miners drinking from big, well-used tankards, and finally came around the corner in front of the building. “Yes, Victor, I sense several Energy signatures within, but only one of the fellows who jumped you.”

“Get ready,” he said to Thayla, then he stalked up to the door with the star painted on it, grabbed the handle, and yanked it open. Sweet smoke billowed out, and he had to wave it away to see the interior of the building. He stepped over the threshold, and finally, things resolved in his vision—several wobbly tables with chairs, a group of four men sitting at one of them, smoke wafting into the air from their pipes, piles of glittering marble-like gems on the table, and some dice. Everything was illuminated by low, red-tinged Energy orbs.

“Sorry, game’s full,” said a one-eyed Cadwalli. Victor scanned the other faces, but he didn’t really recognize them. Something caught his eye, though: the thin Ardeni man with the smug smile on his face wore a collar that glinted brightly in the red light. It was made of shiny silvery metal and studded with several clear crystals. Here was a serious Energy user, a man that might conjure the very earth against his enemies.

“No worries. I just need to talk to one of you.” Victor said, a fake, rather insane-looking smile on his face as he strode toward the table. Thayla stepped along behind him, her hand gripping the baton still in her belt.

“We’re rather busy, friend. Wait outside ‘til after the game, will ya?”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, sorry to bug you,” Victor said, now only three feet from the table. Suddenly he used Channel Spirit to absolutely flood his pathways with rage-attuned Energy. His body veritably lit up with a red halo, and he exploded over the remaining distance with one stride and had his hand around the throat of the thin Ardeni, lifting him like he was made of straw out of his chair and squeezing him to the point where he could feel the tendons straining not to pop under his grip. “Make one fucking move to cast a spell, and I’ll take your head off!”

Chairs screeched on the wooden floor as the other room occupants moved back or stood up, reaching for weapons. “Ah-ah!” Thayla said, waving her baton at the three of them. “We’ve got no problem with you guys. Let my friend deal with his problem, and we’ll be gone in a moment. You don’t owe him, do you?”

“Don’t kill him! He’s losing this hand,” the Cadwalli said.

“Depends on him. You ready to talk, asshole?” Victor growled, struggling to contain his fury with all the rage-attuned Energy in his pathways. The Ardeni moved his lips like a fish out of water, and Victor realized he couldn’t speak. He reached forward and grabbed the man’s wrist with his other hand, squeezing until the bones ground together, then he loosened his grip on his throat. The man sputtered and coughed.

“You’ve made a mistake,” he wheezed.

“Spare me. Now, answer this simple question: Where would someone who kidnapped a pretty, young girl take them in this fucking mine?”

“What? I didn’t kidnap any girl?”

“Stop! Think about the question I asked you and fucking answer it, or I am going to pull this arm out of the socket. No more warnings.” Literal steam was coming out of Victor’s mouth with his growled, guttural words, and his vision was growing more and more red by the second.

“Maybe the northwest tunnels, toward the well. Some groups sell sex there.”

“Good. I’m in a hurry, but you and I aren’t done. I owe you,” Victor growled, and, as he turned to leave, he yanked the man’s arm with such force that his body flopped forward, and his head smacked onto the wooden table with a resounding crack. “If he owes you for the game, take what you want,” he growled to the Cadwalli as he turned and ripped the door off its hinges in his haste to get out of there. He was already running toward the well when he finally managed to push his rage-attuned Energy back into his Core, and he heard Thayla yelling.

“A little warning would have been nice!”

“I told you to get ready!” Victor snapped.

“Don’t take it out on me, Victor,” Thayla replied. Her voice was grave and heavy, and Victor knew what she was thinking—they were too late. Edeya had been missing all day; what horrors had she already endured? Victor screamed in rage up at the cavern ceiling, and several nearby miners scabbled to get back from him as he ran past. He ducked into the tunnel leading to the well, and when he came out to the large, open passage, he scanned the wall on the left, looking for further tunnels. It didn’t take long to find, especially running as he was, and soon he was blindly charging through a warren of twisting tunnels, passing through small caverns filled with little shanties and tents.

“Here, Victor!” Gorz’s tinny, metallic voice suddenly shrieked in his mind.

“Where?” Victor scanned the cavern as Thayla ran up behind him. He saw a dozen small wooden buildings and half as many large canvas tents. Grubby, disheveled

miners lingered around little cook pots, drinking whatever homemade swill they used to blind them to their misery.

“Twenty-seven meters ahead of you and slightly to your right.”

“Get ready; she’s here,” Victor said, striding toward the big brown canvas tent in the direction Gorz had indicated. Thayla hefted her baton, looking around to ensure no mine employees were present. Victor couldn’t remember seeing even one the entire time they’d been searching, so he wasn’t particularly worried. There weren’t any guards or anything watching the flaps of the big tent, so Victor walked right up, yanked the flap aside, and walked into the tent.

The cavern outside had been very dim, so he had to squint his eyes at first against the bright yellow light in the tent. He’d just started to look around when a haughty voice said, “What are you doing here, delvers? Get back to your units.” Victor saw the speaker was wearing a mining consortium uniform, which gave him pause, but when he saw the cage behind him, filled with chained, bruised, bleeding people, his rage pulsed hotly in his Core. He took another step forward, studying the faces of the prisoners. When he saw Edeya crumpled in the back of the cage, blood dripping from her nose and one of her wings bent and broken, he turned to glare at the thin, mustached Ardeni with bright yellow hair.

“The fuck is going on here?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. I told you to go back to your units.” He pulled a thin metal rod out of his belt. “On second thought, drop your batons.” Victor heard a thud as Thayla dropped her baton to the dirty yellow rug. “You too, big man.” He waved the thin rod at Victor, raising an eyebrow. When Victor didn’t move fast enough, he shrugged and said, “You’ve seen too much anyway.”

Suddenly Victor’s collar began to grow warm, then hot, and his mind registered what was happening. This asshole was going to kill him. Without thinking about it, he unleashed his hold on his Core, flooding his body with rage and inspiration-attuned Energy, using Channel Spirit to power his arms and hands. He dropped his baton, his whole body suddenly limned with red and white flickering, pulsing Energy.

“Too late for that,” the man snickered, watching as Victor’s baton rolled to clatter against Thayla’s. Then Victor reached up and grabbed his hot, burning collar, and he pulled with both hands. Metal screeched as he stretched and tore it apart like it was made of taffy. He threw the broken, deformed pieces at the feet of the mine employee, and then he let his fists do what they’d been aching for.

Chapter 33: Into the Depths

“Victor! Victor, stop!” Thayla’s voice finally cut through his fury, and Victor looked up from the pulverized face of the mine employee he’d been battering. His hands were

painted red to his wrists, and spatters of red decorated him, the canvas of the tent, and the faded yellow rug. "We have to get out of here!" Thayla urged, pulling at his shirt.

"Not yet," Victor said, his voice thick with emotion. His neck was raw and burning, and only now that he was coming out of his fury did he notice it. "Let me search this asshole," he finished. He moved to the side, unsure when he'd straddled the man to better beat his face, and as he did so, thick motes of Energy rose from the body, confirming that he was dead, and surged into him. He didn't level, but the influx did wonders for his scorched neck and calmed his mind even more.

"Keep watch," he grunted, glancing to see Thayla regard him askance for a moment, then turn to the tent flap, pulling it aside slightly to peer out. Victor ripped the man's yellow and green uniform shirt open, sending polished wooden buttons scattering over the blood-spattered rug. "No necklace." He wasn't sure why, but he'd imagined the key to the cage hanging on a chain around the kidnapper's neck.

"Get us out of here, please!" One of the cage's occupants had gathered enough wits and confidence to speak up.

"Quiet! I'll help you in a minute," Victor snapped, afraid that more of the prisoners would start to clamor for release, and he didn't know who might be listening from the neighboring tents. The man didn't have a pack or pouches on his belt, so Victor looked at his hands, spotting a silvery band with carved black stone inset along its center. Victor pulled and twisted at the ring, finally getting it over a knobby knuckle, and then he trickled some Energy into it, just as he had with the storage bag they'd had him use in the delves to collect insect parts.

Suddenly Victor was aware of an enormous space inside the ring, along with quite a few objects therein. He scanned through the items quickly, figuring he could spend more time with them later. He saw a baton, some knives, some clothes, a cloak, quite a lot of different kinds of food, a sheaf of folded papers, a notebook, some writing utensils, a belt, some boots, several pouches full of Energy beads, a ring with an onyx blackbird inset on a silver face, and several sets of manacles, collars, and a ring of keys.

Victor grabbed the keyring out of the space and slipped the storage ring onto his finger. He walked over to the cage and unlocked it, but before he opened it, he looked around at the prisoners, at least the conscious ones, and he said, "Ladies, I'm going to let you all go, but please wait until we're all ready to move out. Let's get everyone on their feet."

"You heard him," the woman who'd spoken before said. "Come on, let's help get everyone up. Sir, you should know he had some soldiers with him earlier. He sent them to get someone."

"Let's fucking hurry, then." Victor strode through the crowd of women and knelt before Edeya, her eyelids were half-open, but she didn't seem to recognize him. "Edeya, you there? Come on, chica, snap out of it."

“Don’t call me girl,” she said, limply lifting a fist to prod at his chin. Victor smiled.

“That’s the spirit, c’mon. Up you go; everyone’s waiting for you.” Victor stood and pulled her to her feet. She was shaky, but when she grabbed onto his arm, her grip was tight, and she followed him when he walked out of the cage.

“Nobody coming yet,” Thayla said. She’d collected both of their batons, probably while Victor was pounding on the mine employee, and she held Victor’s out to him now. “You gotta do something about your collar; it’ll raise questions if someone sees you like that.” Victor felt up to his bare neck and nodded. He looked down at his stretched and broken collar and picked up one of the elongated halves. He lifted it to his neck and bent it around so the two ends met in the back, then he gave Thayla a questioning look. “It’ll pass at a glance. Let’s go.”

“Alright, everyone, be safe; please don’t mention me to anyone,” Victor said, glancing back at the crowd of women, some propped up by others, and then he hooked an arm around Edeya’s shoulders and ushered her out of the tent, Thayla hot on his heels. “Gorz, please guide me on the shortest route back to the barracks.” He felt a little bad taking off and leaving those other women to their own devices, but he also felt like he’d just robbed a bank and needed to get the hell out of sight.

“Of course! Take your next right,” the amulet’s slightly metallic voice replied. Victor walked quickly, trying to keep to the shadows and avoiding the crowds of miners they passed here and there, but no one challenged them or came running behind them. Edeya shuffled along under his arm the whole while, her eyes downcast. Victor had to lift her while they walked to keep her moving fast enough to keep up, but it wasn’t hard; she felt smaller than ever.

They were back to the main settlement area and passing through a narrow alley of shanties when Edeya jerked against his arm and looked around with wild eyes. “Get off me!” she cried, pushing against him. Victor let go and held his hands out.

“Easy, Edeya. It’s Victor; you okay?” She looked around, her eyes wide and her hands out, like she was ready to fight, but then something clicked, and she looked back at Victor.

“You got me out?”

“Me and Thayla,” Victor said, nodding to the tall Shadeni woman. Edeya looked at Thayla, and then a sob escaped her lips, and she crumpled against Thayla, who grabbed her in a hug.

“You’re alright, Edeya. You’re alright,” she said softly, stroking her hair, careful not to squeeze her broken wing. “Come on, little bird. We need to get back to the barracks; there’ll be people looking for Victor and probably me, too.” Edeya took a long

shuddering breath, sniffed, and nodded. Then, they all started walking again, Edeya holding an arm tightly around Thayla's waist this time.

"You think they'll know it was us?"

"Yeah, I'd say. How many women did we spring from that cage? Nine? Ten? They won't all keep their mouths shut, and then the mining company will send an investigator. They'll do some scrying, and we'll be deep in the roladii shit."

"Of course—magical world means magical investigators." Victor smacked a fist into his palm. "Well, maybe you'll be fine. I'm sure whatever they see with their scrying will be something like me beating the shit outta that guy, not you."

"Depends on how thorough the investigator is, and the mine can afford good ones."

"Alright, well, let's just talk to the captain and see what she thinks."

"You sure we should? The captain works for the mine..." Thayla let her voice trail off.

"You know the captain; she has her own rules. I don't think she'll fuck us over." Thayla didn't reply, so Victor looked at her, and when their eyes met, she nodded over the top of Edeya's head.

Listening to Gorz's directions, Victor led them through the alleys and out into the main tunnel. After ten minutes of quick walking, avoiding the eyes of the strangers they passed, they were in sight of Lam's Barracks. Walking up, they were greeted by the presence of Sergeant Fath, pacing back and forth in front of the building. When he saw them, he strode forward quickly and, in his baritone voice, rumbled, "You found her! Captain wants you to bring her in through her private entrance. Come on." He turned and strode around the side of the barracks, and Victor, glancing at Thayla, who nodded, followed after.

Victor didn't remember any side doors to the barracks, so he was only slightly surprised when, rather than a door, Fath led them to a ladder. He gestured for them all to climb it to the barracks' roof, and Victor did so first, reaching down to help Edeya up after him. Thayla came next, and then Fath came up, pulling the ladder after him. He pointed to a square of light near the rear of the barracks, and Victor walked to it, realizing it was an open trapdoor. "Drop in; she's expecting you." Something about the whole situation was making Victor nervous, but he couldn't see another move; he supposed he could make a run for it, but if Lam wanted him, she could catch him, he had no doubt. He moved to the trapdoor and peered through. **freewebnovel.com**

It wasn't Lam's study, the floor was carpeted, and he thought he could see the foot of a fancy four-post bed. "Her bedroom?" he muttered.

“Hurry, drop down,” Fath said. Victor glanced at Thayla and Edeya. Edeya’s face was pale in the cavern light, and she wouldn’t make eye contact with him. Thayla gave him another quick nod, so he stepped forward and dropped onto the carpet. Sure enough, it was a nicely appointed bedroom. The bed was large with a fluffy, white quilt, and the carpet was rich and clean. The walls were plastered a creamy white and lined with backlit display cases. Victor had just started to examine the contents of one of the display cases, some sort of manuscript pressed between glass, when Lam cleared her throat behind him.

“Victor, move so the others can come down.” He whirled to see Lam sitting on a low, padded sofa, watching him from behind a glass of liquor. He stepped toward her, but she held up a hand.

“Your collar.”

“Yeah, we ran into some trouble.” A thud signaled the arrival of Thayla behind him, then the soft sounds of Edeya being helped down, and then the trapdoor was closed from above, and Victor heard footsteps moving away over the roof.

“Best explain to me, and quickly,” Lam said, taking another drink, her face not betraying her mood.

“We...” Victor started, but then Thayla stepped forward and cut him off.

“It was a mine employee. He had a cage full of abused women, and when Victor and I saw it, he activated his control rod to kill Victor and probably would have killed me too. Victor ripped his collar off and beat him to death.” That got a reaction from Captain Lam; one of her wispy pale eyebrows lifted, and she actually smiled.

“I knew they messed up with that collar!” She stood up and brushed past Victor to grab Edeya by her shoulders, leaned over, bent nearly in half to make eye contact with the girl. “Are you okay? I’ll tell you what I told Victor when he got attacked off by himself: I hope you learned something.”

“I’m okay,” she said softly. “They only had me a little while.”

“Tut, look at your wing. Come here.” She glanced at Victor and Thayla and said, “Wait here.” Then, she led the diminutive Ghelli to the far side of her bed and helped her to lay down. She produced a small vial of glowing amber fluid, and Victor could just barely hear her say, “Drink this down; you’ll wake up feeling like a twirler on Starleaf Night.” A few moments later, Captain Lam came back from around the bed and sat down in front of Thayla and Victor. “You’re likely in a bit of trouble.”

“Can you do anything?” Thayla asked bluntly.

“Oh, I imagine I could figure something out. Let’s think on it a moment. Back up and tell me the whole story. How you found Edeya, who witnessed your actions, everything.”

“Alright,” Victor said, taking the lead. He didn’t want Thayla trying to cover for him or worrying about revealing too much, so he started from the beginning. He told Lam about questioning the guy at the gaming hall, searching the tunnels, and what he did when he found the man in the tent. He didn’t leave much out, mostly just his secret conversations with Gorz.

“How’d you know the gambler would be able to lead you to Edeya?”

“Just a hunch; I knew he was a scumbag, and so I figured he might know where to find other scumbags.”

“Victor, do you want my help?” Lam asked suddenly. He nodded, and she continued, “Stop being evasive. You’re holding something back, and I’m not going to stick my neck out for someone that’s not honest with me.”

“Alright. The guy in the gambling hall was one of the assholes that jumped me. I tracked them down a while ago, figuring I’d give them a taste of their own medicine one of these days.” He glanced sideways at Thayla and saw that her eyes had widened, but she didn’t say anything. Captain Lam’s lips spread into a wide smile, though.

“You keep surprising me. Alright, next question; what did you do with the body?”

“Um,” Victor started, then shrugged.

“We left it,” Thayla finished.

“Oh, Great Forest!” Lam sighed. “Was he alone? Are you sure?”

“Actually, one of the women said he had sent his guards or soldiers to get someone.”

“Soldiers? He had soldiers? Did you catch his name by chance?”

“No, but he was a smug one; he seemed full of himself,” Thayla added. Lam studied Thayla and then Victor for a moment while she thought. Her eyes fell to his twisted, broken collar, then down, over his body to his hands.

“You took that ring from him?”

“Uh, yeah,” Victor said, shrugging.

“What’s in it? Anything to identify him?” Understanding dawned on Victor like fireworks going off, and he turned his mind toward the space in the ring, producing the sheaf of papers and the blackbird signet ring. He put them onto the low table in front of Lam’s

couch. "Alright, let's see here." She bent to pick up the ring and turned it over in her hand, a frown deepening the curves of her mouth. She set it down without a word, though, and picked up the papers, removing the cord binding them all together and opening the top one.

Victor began to grow nervous the longer Lam read through the papers without saying anything. He wanted to ask her what they were about, but he knew she'd say something when she finished, so he just stood there, fidgeting and wishing he could stand stoically and still like Thayla; she stood with her face impassive, eyes as severe as always. Finally, after reading through more than half of the papers, Lam looked up and said, "My options for helping you are slimmer than I thought."

"What does that mean?" Thayla asked plainly.

"The Greatbone Mining Consortium is run by a group of families—Merchant families grown so wealthy over the decades that they might as well be nobility. In fact, they own many of the nobles in the Ridonne Empire. Well, the man you killed was a member of the ap'Yensha clan, one of those families. He wasn't skimming; he was here to collect prospects for service in a new venture they were starting in Gelica."

The dots started to connect in Victor's mind, and he said, "So if he'd been some random employee stealing girls to make money on the side, you could have gotten us out of this mess, but seeing as he was a member of some powerful family and he was here on business they condoned, we're fucked?"

"I can help you slip free of the mine, but I can't protect you beyond that. I'm strong and wealthy, but nothing compared to those families. They can afford to hunt you to the ends of the world."

"Would they? Just to avenge that one asshole?" Victor asked.

"I don't know. Maybe? If he was well-liked, then yes, they will hunt you. If you'd made him disappear with no witnesses, it would take them a lot longer to figure out what happened to him. As it is, there's a good chance his soldiers are already combing the area for witnesses, and a scryer is en route. Also, there's one more nuance: according to these papers, another of the families, the ap'Bale clan, wasn't on board, and this fellow was taking these women under their noses. I'm not sure if that would help you or cause more problems, but I can assure you the ap'Yensha don't want others finding out about this, so they're motivated by more than just revenge."

"What if we disappeared into the depths?" Victor asked suddenly.

"You mean killed ourselves?" Thayla scoffed.

“No,” Victor licked his lips, nervous all of a sudden, but continued, “I’ve heard there’s a dungeon that leads out of the mine. If we can find the entrance, we could escape that way. They’d probably assume we’re dead if they scry us down there, right?”

This time it was Captain Lam that scoffed, “You think you can find a dungeon down there? You know how long I’ve been digging around for treasure and hidden things in those depths? If you have something more to tell me, I’m listening.”

“I saw a map. I saw a map in the home of the asshole that tried to destroy my Core. He caught me studying it, and that’s why he did it—fractured my Core and sold me to the mine. I didn’t even really know what I was looking at at the time, but when I went into the depths with you, I started to recognize the layout of some of the caverns. I think I could find the dungeon, or at least get heading in the right direction. It has to be better than what’s in store for us if those families get ahold of us, right?”

“Clever ploy, Victor. I like this captain of yours, but she may well want to take me from you,” Gorz piped in, startling Victor enough to make his heart hammer in his chest.

“I won’t lie, Victor,” she looked at Thayla and continued, “and Thayla. I’m not excited about going up against those families, and if you were to disappear into the depths, that would be one less headache for me to deal with. I hate to see you both throw your lives away, though. How good is your memory, Victor? You’ve continued to surprise me, so I’d love you to prove me wrong about this.”

Victor glanced at Thayla, and his heart hammered even harder—he saw hope in her eyes. God, what if he was wrong? “I think it’s pretty good, Captain.”

“Alright,” she produced a large sheet of thick, hexed paper and a set of charcoal pencils. “If you can draw the route, and if I recognize any of it as being accurate, I’ll help you get started. Start with lift fourteen-A.” She took one of the pencils out of the wooden case and held it out to him.

“Gorz, time to work your magic. You need to describe what I need to draw in very fucking fine detail, please.”

“Understood, Victor, though it would be much easier if you had my old slate.”

“But I don’t, so please help me here.”

“Alright, Victor. We’ll treat each hex as ten feet. For the lift room, draw a box near the top of the page that is eight hexes by eleven. Then draw an arrow down from that room that is exactly twenty-seven point five hexes long.” Gorz continued with his instructions until Victor had covered most of the sheet with winding tunnels and chambers, and when his drawing took him to the edge, Captain Lam handed him another sheet to continue on. By the time he was finished, the map covered three large sheets of her hex paper.

“Victor, do you have some sort of genius for maps? Do you remember everything you see?” Lam quietly asked as he set the pencil down.

“I’m good with maps, but no, I don’t remember everything I’ve seen.”

“If you’re right, you’ve got more than ten miles of ground to cover down there; it’s going to be dangerous and take you days. What about this long wide tunnel with the little squiggles in it?”

“That’s an underground river. I think there’s room along its bank to walk, though. If I remember the map correctly,” Victor finished lamely. Lam gave him another squinting examination but shook her head slightly.

“I don’t think you’re suicidal, so I’m going to go ahead and hope for the best. Are you going to try this crazy plan with him, Thayla?”

“Do I have a choice? I’m sure I’ll show up in the scries at the scene, and witnesses saw us running around together. Looks like I’m going to have to trust Victor.”

“Victor, I’ll make a deal with you. I already owe you and Thayla a reward for your ore find, so I’ll give you each something before I send you on your way. But, if you manage to escape through that dungeon, I’ll reward you again for any information you can give me about what you find in the dungeon. Thayla, if you get to safety, just use that stone I gave you; I’ll be able to find you.”

“Alright, it’s a deal,” Victor said.

“Let me get you some supplies; I don’t want the other delvers to know you came back here, so sit tight.” Captain Lam stood up and slipped through the door, closing it behind her.

“We’re going to die down there,” Thayla said, stretching and cracking her neck.

“Maybe, but it’s a chance.” Victor shrugged.

“Can we trust the captain?” Thayla asked softly, a whisper that Victor could barely hear. He looked at her and saw the doubt in her narrowed eyes and how she pressed her lips together.

“If she wanted to betray us, she’d just beat us into submission. She’s higher than tier four, right?” That simple statement seemed to send a wave of relief through Thayla, and she suddenly grinned, shaking her head.

“Good point.”

The door opened again a moment later, and Captain Lam came through, quickly closing it behind herself. Her hands were empty, but Victor knew that didn't mean anything when you considered magical storage devices. Lam sat down again, oblivious or uncaring that Victor and Thayla had been standing for their entire meeting. She began to stack items on the table—wrapped sausages, loaves of bread, sacks of fruit, several long lengths of thin, sturdy rope, a package of those self-sinking pitons that Victor had seen her use before, four glow lamps, and two bedrolls. She motioned to the pile of supplies and said, "Split it up in case one of you dies or gets lost."

"Thanks, Captain," Thayla said, starting to deposit some of the items into her hidden ring. Victor followed suit, taking half of the supplies into his new ring.

"I'm not done; you two don't know the fortune I'm going to make off those ingots. I wasn't joking when I said I'll reward you for more information. Here," she was suddenly holding a long, silvery-red, metal spear. She handed it to Thayla. "This is artificed to pierce armor. It's self-sharpening and nearly weightless in the hands of its bonded owner." Then she turned to Victor, "You don't strike me as a finesse-type fighter, so I'll give you one of my first truly good weapons. I haven't used her in decades, so I figure I'll give her a chance to see some action. Treat her well, Victor." Suddenly she was holding a black-bladed axe with a polished cherry-colored haft. The blade was bearded and gleamed along the edge like liquid silver.

"Wow," Victor said, eyeing the heavy, wicked axe head.

"This is Lifedrinker, and she has a heartsilver core. Those she strikes suffer as she takes their Energy. Her thirst is great; I've never been able to sate her, but some say that given enough Energy, heartsilver will start to grow conscious." She held out the axe to Victor, and he gingerly took hold of the haft. It was long enough to wield with two hands, but he could easily swing it with one.

"Thank you, Captain. I, I hope I don't lose her down below."

"You passed the first test; never call her an 'it.' Can you promise me that?"

"Yes," Victor said with a gulp, realizing he'd already thought of the axe as a thing in his mind.

"Very well; she wasn't mine when I was given her to use, and now she's mine no longer. Are you ready? Fath tells me the mines are abuzz with the search taking place. I think you should be gone soon."

"What about Edeya?" Victor glanced over at the slumbering form.

"You don't have to worry about her. She reminds me of a friend I had," she glanced around and down at herself, then continued, "before all of this. I think I'll buy her

contract and get her some training. I'm not saying I'm going to coddle her, but she won't have to worry about someone nabbing her if that's a concern for you."

"That's pretty great," Victor said, but his face fell slightly, and he frowned down at the carpet, avoiding Lam's eyes.

"I'm ready," Thayla said, still holding her new spear.

"Not quite," Lam said, looking at the tall woman. She held out her hand, and Victor saw that she held a control rod like the mine employees all carried. She held it out toward Thayla, and a moment later, a click sounded, and Thayla removed her collar, now spread open at an invisible seam.

"Ancestors! It feels good to have this thing off."

"I imagine," Lam said, a slight smile twisting her lips.

"Don't you see how wrong it is?" Victor blurted.

"Hmm?" Lam scowled slightly, looking at him.

"Captain Lam, you've been very good to me, but don't you see how wrong this all is? People being forced to fight and die while you dig around in the ruins? Look at Edeya! You seem to care about her, but she could die tomorrow protecting some miners while you dig around for treasures." Victor wanted to kick himself or slap himself or something, but the words just came flooding out.

"Strange way of thanking someone," she said, standing up, clouds behind her eyes.

"I am grateful, truly, but I feel like you're better than this!"

"Victor, you don't know me. You know a few things about me, but you don't know me. I didn't get where I am because I was coddled. I know what I do seems selfish, but that's simply because it is: I work to improve my own power. Some power comes with Energy and levels, some power comes with connections and politics, and some power comes with wealth. I do care about Edeya and others, but I also know they have their own struggles to get through. I might tip the scales in their favor from time to time, but I'm nobody's savior. Not Edeya's, not yours. I'm helping you because it won't cost me much, and it might pay off someday. Don't mistake my aid for something it isn't—I'm fond of you both, but I won't risk what I've gained to carry you out of your challenge. You've got to do that on your own. Now, it's time you both got going. I hope I hear from you someday."

Lam had been pacing the whole time she spoke, and now she stopped under the trapdoor leading to her roof, and she motioned for Thayla and Victor to come over. Thayla got there first, and Lam, having opened the trapdoor, placed her hands on

Thayla's hips and boosted her up so that the Shadeni could scramble up onto the roof. Victor stepped up next, still holding Lifedrinker, and he said, "I didn't want to insult you, Captain. Thanks for your help." She nodded, grabbed his hips, and when he hopped up, she boosted him like he was a child, and he found himself on the roof.

"Close the trapdoor, please," Lam called softly from below. Thayla gently lowered the wooden trapdoor, careful not to slam it, and then the two of them padded to the edge of the barracks' roof and dropped down.

"You have a death wish?" Thayla asked as they hurried off into the darkness of the tunnel.

"What?"

"That woman could kill us with a thought, and you decided that, after she gave us her help, you were going to lecture her about her morality?"

"My mouth gets away from me. I had to say something, though—I might never see her again, and I want to like her, but I can't get past all the evil in this place that she turns a blind eye to."

"As she said, we don't know her whole story. Let's be grateful for what we got, agreed?"

"Yeah, agreed." Victor hefted Lifedrinker and almost put it into his ring, but then he decided not to. If he was going to think of the axe as alive, then he shouldn't put it into a storage container. "Her," he corrected himself aloud.

"What?"

"Just thinking about this axe. Can you believe these weapons? I feel better about our chances already."

"Yeah, they're nice, alright," Victor saw that she'd already stowed her spear in her ring, which glinted with a golden luster on her hand.

"You moved your ring to your hand," he said.

"Quicker to access things like weapons." She shrugged. "I'm not trying to hide anymore."

"Good point," Victor said, stopping suddenly. He reached up and grabbed the ends of the twisted collar on his neck and pulled them apart, flinging the strip of metal to clatter among the stones of the tunnel. "Let's go. It's all downhill from here!" He laughed at his own wit, and Thayla, though she didn't seem to get his humor, smiled along with him. Sometimes, Victor figured, you just had to laugh in the face of the shit coming your way.

Chapter 34: Refinement

Thayla held a finger to her lips as she peered around the corner. They were almost to the chamber where Victor had first gone with Lam on her little exploration and where he'd found Gorz. Thayla, crouching ahead of him with her spear leveled, had hissed at him to be quiet and then slunk into the shadows to peer around. Victor wasn't sure what she'd heard, but he'd grown to respect her senses in the short time they'd been sneaking through the dark together.

Twice, she'd warned him ahead of an encounter with giant insects crossing their path, saving them from having to fight an unknown number of the creatures. She'd even spotted a group of stickmen lying in the shallows of an underground pool they'd skirted. To Victor, they'd just looked like deeper shadows, but Thayla had spotted their creepy, shiny eyes blinking in the lights Lam had left behind.

Victor gripped Lifedrinker tightly in his fists; his hands choked up near the bearded blade in the tight tunnel. Thayla looked back at him, her long braids flicking lightly on her shoulders and her dark eyes glittering in the light of his glow stone. She slowly motioned with her left hand to come up beside her. As he started to move, she gestured at her chest, her hand over her glow stone. Victor copied her, plunging the tunnel into darkness, the only light coming from Lam's hanging orb up ahead.

When he got close to her, he saw the old piton and rope Lam had placed for everyone to climb down. Out past that, he saw the little stream crossing the cavern, the pile of ruins where Lam had killed the rot fiend and rummaging around the battle site, several large, hunched humanoids. "Are those deep hulks?" he whispered.

"I think so. Five that I can count." Thayla's voice barely made a sound.

"Alright, do we try to sneak past? Do we kill them?"

"Hmm. It would be a tough fight."

"Yeah, maybe." Victor couldn't help looking at Lifedrinker; he wanted to fight with her so badly, he could feel it in his bones. Thayla gave him a searching look, then shook her head.

"We should try to sneak around."

"Just a sec; let me think," Victor said. "Gorz, what exit from this next cavern do we take? Is it feasible to sneak past those hulks?"

"Victor, the tunnel you want is halfway up the far wall, slightly to your left. You'll be quite exposed climbing up if my memory serves."

“Our exit is that tunnel halfway up the far wall. We’re going to need climbing equipment. How can we do that while sneaking? We gotta kill those pendejos,” Victor said softly in Thayla’s ear.

“Ugh, this is going to hurt,” she said, but she started creeping forward to the rope and piton. Victor crouched in the shadow, watching the hulks shuffling around, scooping their claws under rocks and hunks of fungi, and depositing whatever they came up with into their maws. Thayla stowed her spear, grabbed the rope, and silently shimmied down it.

When the hulks didn’t react or look their way, and Victor was sure she was down, he crouch-walked up to the edge, hooked his axe through his belt, lifted the rope, and dropped over the edge. He was halfway down, using his feet to spring away from the cliff face while he let the rope slip slowly through his hands, when a loud grunt, followed by roars and splashing water, told him the hulks had spotted him.

“Hurry!” Thayla hissed, and Victor looked down to see he was only twelve or so feet from the ground, so he let go and landed in a crouch.

“Get ready!” Victor said, yanking Lifedrinker from his belt.

“You tell me to get ready a lot! You get ready!” Thayla said, brandishing her red spear, its silvery streaks winking in the bright light of the overhead orb. Victor just laughed, lengthening his grip on his axe, ready to make use of the wide space in the cavern. “Put your back to me if they surround us,” Thayla said, and Victor didn’t see a reason to argue. The two of them stood, side by side, waiting for the hulks as they crashed through the ruins. “You’re ready to try that axe out, huh?”

“Damn right, sis,” Victor grinned, preparing to cast Inspiring Presence. He took two long, controlled breaths, and then the first of the hulks was on them. Victor unleashed his spell, and before he could even fully realize the surge of Energy and possibility that flooded him, he was stepping forward and bringing Lifedrinker down in an overhead chop. He’d aimed for the hulk’s round, smooth head but missed, splitting its shoulder and tearing a long terrible groove down through its carapace. Lifedrinker carved through its flesh and shell like it was papier-mache, and Victor crowed at the difference a good weapon made.

Shards of shell and gouts of yellow-green fluid burst from the wound, and Victor felt Lifedrinker buck in his hand as she seemed to pulse with Energy. The hulk squealed through its mandibles and fell back, causing the two on its heels to stumble. Victor lifted his axe for another hack, but Thayla’s spear was suddenly sprouting from the eye of the hulk he was aiming at, and it fell away, scrabbling at its face. With a minor adjustment, Victor brought Lifedrinker down in a sideways angled cleave into the next hulk, catching its neck and nearly removing its head. It fell, twitching, to the rubble-strewn floor.

The light was so bright, the angles so clear, and the axe so smooth as he sliced through the air that Victor felt like he was performing some kind of dance rather than fighting with huge, monstrous creatures. When a long hooked limb came his way, he backed up a step and brought Lifedrinker down through the jointed wrist, relieving the monster of its appendage.

Thayla was like a machine with her spear, using its length to keep the monsters at bay as she filled them with deep, weeping wounds. It and Lifedrinker had no trouble with their carapaced torsos, slicing and punching through them easily, exposing the hulks' weakness to sharp weapons. When the massive monsters tried to use their bulk to overwhelm them, Victor met their charges with heavy chops, and Thayla let them drive themselves onto her spear.

It helped that the hulks had come at them in a staggered line, never having the chance to surround them fully. The first kills came quickly, and then the two of them slowly hacked and stabbed the others into broken submission. Victor never had to use any rage Energy, so he kept his wits the entire time. He noticed Thayla's spear glowing brightly and moving more quickly from time to time, and he made a note to ask her what sort of spell she was using—maybe he could copy it.

After just a few minutes of violence, the hulks were reduced to broken, bleeding mounds, and Victor and Thayla stood over them as the Energy surged out of the gathered motes and into their Cores.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 20 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

Level 20 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Human Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 30. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.

"Oh shit! I hit twenty! Time to upgrade my class!"

"It's not always an upgrade—sometimes it's smart to keep what you've got," Thayla said, trying to wipe the gore off her spear with a scrap of leather.

"Are you tier-two?"

"Just barely. Been level twenty-one for a while now."

"Did your class change?"

"Yeah, I went from a brawler to a skirmisher—it's advanced, so I get better stats than my old class, and I can improve weapon skills more."

“Nice,” Victor said, wondering how lucky he’d been to get an advanced class at level ten. “You have some Energy attacks?” he asked as they started walking to the half-collapsed bridge; their exit tunnel was on the far side of the stream.

“Yeah, Flash Strike. It lets me channel my Energy into an attack, so it moves faster than normal. It makes it hard as hell to dodge or parry.” Thayla hopped over a gap in the bridge, nimbly scampering to the far side. “It uses a lot of my Energy,” she added with a shrug as Victor followed her over. “That inspiration thing you do is amazing, though. I swear I’m twice as good when it’s active.”

“Yeah, I think it helps you get insight into your skills, too. Let me know if your spear skill advances faster than you think it should while we’re together.”

“Maybe if we find a secure place to camp, we can do some sparring.” She moved toward the cavern wall, passing between some crumbled ruins not far from where Lam had killed the rot fiend.

“You think they’ll chase us down here?” Victor asked, gesturing vaguely toward the upper mine.

“Maybe. I’d be surprised, but they might. I figure they’ll keep scrying to see if we’re down here and maybe send some hunters, but if we can get into the dungeon, they might lose track of us—figure we’re dead.”

“That’d be good,” Victor said. They’d reached the rocky wall leading up to the exit tunnel, and he thought he could see enough handholds to make his way up. “Looks like we might not need ropes or those spikes.”

“You first, then,” Thayla said, gesturing to the wall.

“I kinda want to look at my refinement options, but we’re like sitting ducks in this cavern. I’ll do it later,” Victor said, jumping up to grab a low ledge and pulling himself up. A few more hops followed by pullups, and he was in the tunnel mouth. Thayla was watching from below, and when he turned to wave at her, she grinned.

“Now toss me a rope!”

“Oh, I see how it is,” he laughed, calling one of the ropes out of his ring and unraveling it down the rocky cavern wall. He held it tightly while Thayla pulled herself up, walking her feet up the wall. He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her up beside him when she came close.

“This tunnel meanders for about half a kilometer, Victor. Just stay with it and don’t take either of the side passages you’ll see,” Gorz said as Victor turned to regard the low-ceilinged, narrow tunnel they were in.

“Looks like we follow this one for a while. My neck and back are going to be killing me.” He stood up and thumped a fist on the ceiling, his back partially stooped.

“Yeah, tight quarters. You want me to go first?”

“I don’t care. Nah, I’ll go first.” Victor had pulled the rope up and stowed it. Already getting used to the convenience of the storage ring, he’d stored his backpack and its contents within. It was just too easy to think about what he wanted and have it appear in his hand; he knew, if he weren’t so busy, he’d probably have been messing around with it like a kid with a new game. Taking a deep breath and steeling himself, he walked into the tunnel, his light stone illuminating the darkness for about ten strides. He held his axe, grip choked up close, out in front of him as he stalked, stooped over down the dusty, rubble-strewn passage.

They ran into a trio of giant rats about halfway down the tunnel near a branching side passage, and Victor, using Channel Spirit, hacked the head off one of them as it charged, Thayla, from just behind him, drove her spear in the throat of the second one, and the third turned and ran. “Smart little stinker,” Victor said, watching it scurry away, dust clouding its passage.

“Let’s get out of this tunnel! Keep moving,” Thayla said, giving him a nudge. Victor grunted acknowledgment and kept moving through the low-ceilinged, narrow, windy passage. According to Gorz, he was almost to the exit when they came to a very tight portion, and Victor stopped, looking at Thayla.

“I’m going to have to slither through on my belly to get through that.” The idea of sliding through a narrow passage with a million tons of rock and earth above him was causing his heart to race and his palms to sweat.

“Yeah, I hope you can fit,” Thayla deadpanned.

“Are you trying to freak me out?”

“Claustrophobic?”

“I didn’t think so, but that looks too fucking tight for me!”

“Ancestors! I’ll go first, and that way, I can pull your arms if you get stuck.”

“Not helping!” He saw the grin on Thayla’s face, and getting that reaction from her usual reticent demeanor was almost worth his genuine discomfort. He watched as she crawled forward into the narrow portion of the tunnel, and then she was on her belly, slithering through. A few moments later, her light shone back toward him.

“Your turn,” she softly called.

Groaning, Victor crawled forward as far as he could, then he stretched his arms into the tight passage, holding his axe out in front of himself, and began to worm his way forward. At one point, his hips caught, and he almost panicked, but he felt Thayla's fingers wend their way around his wrists, and then she tugged with surprising strength. His shoulders strained, and he pulled and wriggled, and then he broke free and slid through the last portion of the cramped shute. "That sucked!" he said, sitting up and brushing the dirt off himself.

Thayla didn't respond to him right away, and he saw why when he looked around. They were in a small cave, about ten by ten paces, but rounded with a high ceiling. The only other passage from the cave was a similarly small tunnel leading from the far side, but that's not what had Thayla's attention—the walls were littered with little crystals that reflected their glow lamps, creating a bright, almost cheery space. "We should take a break here," Thayla said.

"I guess so; it's not like we've had any sleep in the last two days, and we can watch these two tunnels pretty easily."

"You should check your class refinements anyway, especially before we run into something a lot tougher than a deep hulk."

"That's a good call. Can you keep an eye out while I'm distracted?"

"Yep, I'm gonna have a snack, too." Thayla sat down on a rounded stone, with both tunnel openings in clear view, then she started taking things out of her ring: some sausage, some bread, and a tall, narrow wine bottle.

"Damn, save some for me!" Victor laughed, finding a comfortable stone to sit on. Before opening his status screen, he glanced around the sparkling cave and said, "Do you think these crystals are valuable?"

"I think they're just quartz, but I'm no expert. Maybe?"

"Huh." Victor shrugged the thought aside; they didn't have time to be chipping cheap crystals out of stone. He called up his status sheet and then selected the option for class refinement, reading through his five options:

Class refinement option 1: Spirit Weaver - Advanced. Pre-requisite: Two or more spirit affinities. You have begun to unlock the secrets of the spirit. This refinement will allow you to continue that progress, searching out the depths of your inner-self and melding your aspects into powerful Energy workings. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence.

Class refinement option 2: Battle Caller- Epic. Prerequisites: Inspiration affinity. You exemplify excellence on the battlefield, inspiring your comrades and turning the tide with powerful tactical boons. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence, Agility, Unbound.

Class refinement option 3: Herald of Carnage - Epic. Prerequisites: Spirit Core, two or more affinities, one of which being rage or terror. Walk the path of carnage, driving your foes ahead of you, breaking their spirits, and reaping their Energy. Class attributes: Will, Strength, Unbound.

Class refinement option 4: Battle Zealot - Epic. Prerequisites: Spirit Core, two or more affinities, one of which being inspiration, and one related to fear, anger, or shame. Continue to develop your battle-calling abilities. Whip your comrades into a frenzy and drive your foes mad with your exhortations. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Strength.

Class refinement option 5: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.

“Jesus,” Victor said softly, frowning and shaking his head at his blasphemy.

“What?” Thayla asked around her mouthful of sausage. She took a swig out of her wine bottle and cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Uh, I have a lot of options, and they seem loco as hell.”

“Crazy?”

“Yeah, like fucking ‘Battle Zealot,’ um, ‘...whip your comrades into a frenzy and drive your foes mad...”

“Hah, that does sound a little crazy! Spirit Cores are something different, I guess.”

“That’s an interesting option, Victor. Do you mind sharing more details?” Gorz asked, once again startling Victor; he jerked his head to the side before he registered that it was Gorz. Thayla kept watching him while she slowly chewed her food.

“Let me know if you want any advice,” she said. “I’m not an expert, but I might have an idea or two.”

“Alright, let me study these some more; just a minute,” Victor responded aloud while he began to read the refinement options to Gorz silently.

“Those are all excellent options, Victor. Your choices with unbound attributes are far more numerous than is typical.”

“Really? Why do you think that is?”

“Most likely a result of you having a spirit Core and having a base class with unbound attribute points. It’s uncommon to have refinement options that don’t build upon your base class.”

“So when you say it’s not typical, you mean in your experience?”

“Ahem, yes.”

“Any advice?”

“If you’re torn between options, remember that greater rarity, or, in this case, the epic options, will give you more attributes per level but take a bit longer to level. Also, look at the attribute distribution: the first attribute listed is usually the one with the greatest increase per level.”

Victor looked at his options again, deciding to discount options that didn’t have unbound attribute points. He liked the idea of the Spirit Weaver class, thinking it might lead to more control over his Core and perhaps open the door to more affinities. Still, he didn’t like that his only attribute improvements would be in will and intelligence for at least the next ten levels. Battle Zealot, while sounding strong, also didn’t allow for any unbound attributes, and it also seemed just a little too fanatical for Victor’s taste. “Well, not any crazier than going berserk, I guess.”

“What?”

“Oh, just thinking out loud. The Battle Zealot sounds kind of nuts, and I was just debating with myself about it.”

“Mmhmm, alright.”

“Well, what do you think? Herald of Carnage, Battle Caller, or keep my current class?”

“Tell me more than their names,” she said, taking another long pull of her wine bottle.

“Take it easy. You’re supposed to be keeping watch, not getting drunk,” Victor said.

“This weak stuff? I’m not going to do more than get a little buzzed if I drink this whole bottle. My vitality is too high.”

“Oh, right.” Victor cleared his throat and then described his class options to Thayla.

“I don’t know. Battle Caller sounds more support-oriented, and the other one sounds like you’re going to be leading the way into fights. Which one sounds more like you? Based on that fight with the beetles the other day, I’d say you should pick the, um, carnage one.”

“What about my current class?”

“Well, if I had the option for an epic class, I’d take it. My levels have slowed a lot since I got to tier two, but I’m still holding out hope for an epic class at level thirty.”

“Alright, fuck it. Herald of Carnage it is.”

“I think you and your friend have demonstrated excellent logic, Victor,” Gorz said.

“Heh, thanks, Gorz.” Victor scrolled to the option and touched the “select” button.

Congratulations! You’ve refined your class: Herald of Carnage. Class skill gained: Project Spirit - Improved.

Project Spirit - Improved: Send forth a wave of your attuned Energy to negatively influence the minds of those in front of you. Energy cost: 200 Cooldown: Medium.

“Hmm, that’s wild. I got a new spell that will use my attuned Energy to negatively impact those in front of me. How could my inspiration Energy affect others negatively?”

“I’m not sure; remember, I have no affinities.” Thayla shrugged.

“Victor, spiritual affinities, like other affinities, can be altered in your pathways to reflect different aspects of the same affinity. Imagine you had a water affinity; you could cast spells using liquid, ice, or vapor. With the right pattern, your inspiration-attuned Energy can be twisted into discouragement.”

“What about my rage?”

“Just as your rage can give you great strength and fortitude, it can be twisted to deliver madness without those benefits.”

“Damn! Good to know. We need to spend more time talking, Gorz.”

“Indeed, perhaps you’ll have more free time now that you’re sneaking through the deep delves and preparing to enter a dangerous dungeon.”

“Was that sarcasm, you little pinche?” Victor laughed, and Thayla gave him another strange look.

“Care to share the joke?”

“Did you enjoy my humor?” Gorz asked at the same time.

“Oh, just thinking about driving my enemies nuts while I hack at them with Lifedrinker.”

“Yeah, you definitely picked the right refinement. I’m glad you’re on my side.” She shook her head, then passed her wine bottle to Victor. Victor took the bottle with a grin and chugged a good third of it down. It wasn’t watery like the wine at the barracks, and Victor was no wine expert, but, to him, it was damn good.

“Doesn’t taste bad to me,” he said, passing it back to Thayla.

“I found a couple of crates of this stuff about a year ago—no idea how old it is.”

“Seriously?” Victor knew wine lasted a long time in the bottle, but the ruins down in the depths seemed ancient.

“Yes, the bottles are enchanted to preserve the contents. Lam didn’t know I found them, and I didn’t think she’d reward me enough to give them up.” She shrugged and took another drink.

“What are you gonna do? If we live through this shit and make it through that dungeon?” While he asked, Victor stood up and hefted a boulder about the size of a basketball, setting it in the center of the little tunnel they’d come through.

“I’m not thinking that far ahead. I doubt we’ll even get to the dungeon entrance—there’s stuff down here that even Lam won’t fight.”

“Come on,” Victor grunted, hefting another boulder and stacking it next to the first. “Be positive. Say we make it; where would you go?”

“Well, probably to Gelica first. If we live, there’s a good chance we’ll have some treasure from the dungeon and gain some levels. Gelica’s a big enough city where no one would notice a Shadeni woman coming into town to sell some things and resupply.” She watched, kicking her feet out while Victor piled yet another stone into the tunnel entrance. “Hope we don’t have to make a hasty exit that way.”

“Hah, you serious? Nothing hasty about me trying to worm through that tiny tunnel. I’d rather die on my feet than have something eat me from the ass up while I’m stuck in there.”

“Lovely image,” Thayla laughed.

“What about after Gelica? You got family? Got a home?”

“What’s with the interrogation? Let’s just take it one day at a time, alright? I don’t think you should know all my plans, anyway. Suppose they catch up to us and I get away, but you don’t? Think I want them going to my hometown looking for me?”

“Huh,” Victor stacked a fifth boulder into the little tunnel, completely blocking it off. “Alright, suit yourself.”

When he felt satisfied that anyone crawling through that tunnel would find progress nigh impossible, Victor sat down and ate some of his food. The sausage was fatty and salty, but it tasted delicious after all the hard work he’d been doing. While he sat and ate, he decided to spend his seven attribute points the same way he had the last few levels. He

figured when he gained his first level as a Herald of Carnage, he could revisit the pattern. Besides, his current distribution gave him an even fifty strength—it felt good. “You want to sleep for a couple of hours?” he asked, closing his status display.

“Not really. I’m too wound up. Let’s put another few tunnels between us and whoever might be coming after us. I’m hoping that passage you filled up with rocks will discourage them enough, but you never know.” She stood and brushed herself off, then peered into the exit shaft. “This one widens up after just a few feet.”

“Alright, I’m right behind you,” Victor said, once again hefting Lifedrinker.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 35: Monsters and Rivers

“I don’t know,” Victor took a slow, steadying breath, scanning the wide, low-ceilinged cavern again. “I don’t see anything.”

“I heard something, though; I’m sure of it,” Thayla hissed. Once again, Victor scanned the cavern, running his eyes over the substantial fungus sprouts and the mossy rocks. Moisture hung in a vaporous cloud along the low ceiling, and the air was hot and fetid. Ever so slowly, he moved his gaze over the ground, past the stinky, bubbling pool at the center, and then to the far wall where their next tunnel opened.

“I’ll go first,” he said, at last, unable to see anything but not wanting her to have to rely on his judgment—she’d wanted to stop and watch until whatever it was showed itself, but he was tired of the wait.

“And if you get eaten by some tier-five monstrosity? I’m just on my own, then?” Thayla’s voice was petulant and irritable, and Victor knew she was tired. They’d had to practically dig their way through the last half mile of narrow, muddy tunnels, and if she were half as dirty and exhausted as he was, he didn’t blame her.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said and started prowling forward, Lifedrinker gripped in both hands. The ground was mushy, and it squelched with his steps, so he tried to move slowly, letting each foot sink silently before taking the next step. He was about twenty paces into the cavern, skirting the edge of the steaming, stinky pool when the ground rippled, and he fell to one knee, the wet, spongy fungus soaking into his pants. He froze there, looking around. When he glanced back at Thayla, he saw her narrowed brows and angry eyes and knew she was cussing him out.

The ground didn’t shudder again, and nothing moved, so Victor carefully got back to his feet and started moving again. He’d just passed the pool when the ground surged again, and he was on his butt. Then, one of the slender, slimy fungus sprouts started to move, stretching upward and peeling back like some kind of nightmarish sex organ to reveal a three-foot-long, bone-colored spear. The long tentacle of fungus turned in the

air, pointing its talon-like tip at Victor, and shot forward. He rolled to his right, narrowly dodging the stabbing thing.

Suddenly the cavern began to shake in earnest, and more and more of the fungus sprouts rose into the air, peeling back their gray, moist skin to reveal those bone-white spears. Victor heard Thayla's voice from behind him, "Run!" Then she was tearing past him, running for the far tunnel. Victor cast Inspiring Presence and started to run after her. Suddenly the waving tentacles with bone-spear tips didn't seem so numerous, and he thought he could spot a route through them. Thayla leaped to her right, avoiding a stabbing tentacle, and then Victor lost track of her as he began to dance with the seven or eight tentacles in stabbing range.

He couldn't help the bubbling laugh that started to roll out of his throat as he dodged the stabbing, weaving spears. They sank into the ground over and over, and, inspiration guiding his arm, Victor started to cleave the tentacles off as they stabbed into the mossy floor. Before long, he was standing amid a cluster of writhing, waving, gore-spraying tentacles sans spears. He turned to the far tunnel, ready to make his way out of the creepy fungus trap, when he saw Thayla's spear sticking out of the spongy ground.

Icy panic gripped his heart, and he whirled around, looking for a sign of the tall red-skinned woman. When his eyes fell on the pool at the center of the room, he saw the surface bubbling and something thrashing within. "Thayla!" he roared and charged to the bubbling water. As he got close, his inspired mind ran through a dozen plans to get her out, but then his eyes fell on the edge of the pool, and he noticed the way the ground seemed to surge up and down, and it reminded him of a mouth sucking on a straw. "Oh, hell no!"

Victor brought Lifedrinker down on the gray flesh surrounding the pool, hacking a terrible wound in the quivering surface, and gouts of red-black blood began to seep out. Lifedrinker throbbed and pulled and seemed to sink deeper of her own accord, and Victor knew she'd found a deep well of Energy to draw from. The ground of the cavern quivered and bucked, and if he hadn't been holding tight to Lifedrinker with his legs wide, Victor knew he'd have fallen into the pool. "Spit her out, you fucker!" he screamed, and then an idea occurred to him. He used Project Spirit, and a surge of rage-attuned Energy pulsed out of him in a cone-shaped, palpable red haze.

He hadn't consciously decided to use rage Energy with the spell, but it seemed to do the trick; the gray, oozing flesh surrounding the little pool puckered and then began to convulse, stretching up out of the ground like an unhoused section of intestine. As it stretched, heaving and spewing gouts of the fetid liquid within, Victor swung Lifedrinker in a wide horizontal cleave, opening a terrible, yard-long gash in the side of the protuberance. Gouts of thick black blood sprayed forth, along with more of the liquid that had been bubbling in the "pool."

The cavern floor shook, and the swaying, bleeding, stabbing tentacles went wild in their attempts to reach Victor. None of the nearby ones had their spears anymore, and most

had been shortened by his axe to the point where they couldn't even slap at him. Victor turned to hack one that was still long enough to flail at him, liberally soaking him with black-red ooze. He cleaved it in half, leaving a stump that could only thrash and splash him with more blood.

Victor cast Sovereign Will, pumping up his strength, and also Channel Spirit, filling his arms and Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy. Then he went to work, hacking at the now two-meter-tall, writhing, pulsing, bleeding protuberance. Lifedrinker ripped considerable gashes in the thing with each swing, and soon the top half was just a deflated flap of loose flesh, and the bottom was pouring gouts of liquid and blood with each convulsion. Victor was about to deliver another terrible chop to an existing cut when he saw a glimpse of shiny, wet red flesh.

He let go of Lifedrinker with one hand and plunged it into the gaping wound, feeling around. Immediately, Victor's fingers began to burn, but he shoved his arm in further until he felt something solid, then he grabbed on and yanked with all his rage-fuelled strength. As his arm and hand emerged from the gash, he saw that he had a grip on Thayla's ankle, and he pulled, backing up a step, delivering her through the slash like a nightmarish birth. She slid free in a splash of foamy liquid and red gore, and Victor stood stunned for a moment when he saw her condition.

Thayla had an oozing, puckered puncture wound through her chest under her right collarbone. Her clothing was frayed and gore-covered, and, worse, her flesh was raw, and beneath her red skin, he could see exposed muscle tissue in many spots, including her cheeks—the thing had been dissolving her.

Victor's heart began to hammer in panic and anger, and his hand tightened on the haft of Lifedrinker until his knuckles were white. He stood over Thayla, wondering if she were dead, wishing he could heal her somehow, but struggling to contain the urge to turn and keep hacking at the monstrosity living under the cavern floor. "Pinche, mother fucker!" He growled, turning back to the bucking, quivering, fleshy tube.

As he struggled to contain his rage and turned back, trying to force himself to pick up Thayla and run from the cavern, a thought occurred to him: she might not have as much Energy affinity as he did, but she still would heal some if he got her a big Energy influx. A wicked grin spread on his face as he turned back to the gray intestine thing. "You must be worth a lot of Energy, asshole!" Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard Gorz's tinny laugh.

Hefting Lifedrinker into a two-handed grip, Victor stopped holding back his rage and let it flood his pathways, pushing himself to Berserk. The dim light in the cavern grew darker as a shade of blood-red filtered over his vision, and the only thing he could see was the heaving, pulsing, gore-spewing monstrosity. He screamed, spittle frothing his lips, and launched himself at it, whipping Lifedrinker in heavy side-to-side arcs, tearing through the thick, springy flesh of the tube effortlessly. The cavern floor continued to roll

and tremble, and the spear tentacles waved about madly, the ones shortened by Victor spraying gore all over the place, painting the room with more red. Victor laughed.

The huge, gray tube continued to thrash its way higher out of the springy cavern floor, and then the ground cracked around it, and a ropy tentacle with a claw-like hook on the end pushed out, sinking into the ground and pulling. Victor hacked it in half, and it sprayed forth a much brighter shade of blood. The sight of it fed Victor's fury, and he continued his rampage. As he worked his way around the tube, hacking it to shreds, he came within range of one of the tentacles with a spear still intact. It stabbed him through the back of his thigh, and he screamed in pain and fury, whipping Lifedrinker around and cutting it in half.

The tentacles' waving and thrashing caught the attention of his enraged mind, and, after he yanked the spear from his leg, he went on a rampage around the cavern, running from one spear tentacle to the next, cleaving them off as close to the ground as he could. He felt his rage cooling at one point and pushed more of his prodigious rage-attuned Energy pool into his pathways, extending its duration. Whether he could have chosen not to do so wasn't apparent or of interest to him; killing and the madness of combat were all he craved. The stab wounds he accumulated in his rampage mostly healed over, and the pain served only to drive his fury to new heights.

He was standing over one of the truncated spear tentacles when the cavern bucked again, almost knocking him over. He caught himself against the cavern wall and spun to see the source of the cracking, screaming, hissing sound that had disturbed him. At the center of the cavern, not far from where Thayla lay, the huge, massacred, intestine-like protuberance was now horizontal, and the creature from which it sprang was worming its way out of the ground. It heaved itself with a dozen of those hooked tentacles, pulling its enormous, slug-like body out of the ground, inch by inch.

Victor charged through the inch-deep layer of red-black blood, splashing with each step, and launched himself through the air, Lifedrinker over his head, bringing her down with a tremendous chop along the side of the quivering, gray-white horror. Pus-like ooze sprayed in the wake of Lifedrinker's blade, and he felt the axe pull at his hands as she seemed to surge through the flesh, and Victor saw currents of purple-black Energy rushing toward the axehead through the puckered flesh of the creature.

A handful of the hooked tentacles released the ground and swung toward Victor, and he danced back, waving Lifedrinker in front of himself to ward them off. He nimbly sprang toward the rear of the exposed slug body, out of their reach, and began to hack into the top of it where it was just coming out of the hole. Again, Lifedrinker cleaved through the pulpy flesh, pulling runnels of that purple-black Energy into herself. Victor watched the process, cleave after cleave, and realized his rage had faded and that the monstrosity was only weakly thrashing, its hooked tentacles mostly lying limp.

"Die! Just fucking die!" he screamed, moving around it, hacking great gashes into its side and severing tentacles whenever they came within reach. Finally, the thing

shuddered, and a massive gout of bile-like fluid poured out of the mangled intestinal protuberance, and then it collapsed, slipping slowly down its hole.

Large, baseball-sized motes of purple-gold Energy started to wink into existence in the air above the gaping hole. Then they began to coalesce into streams—a broad, river-like ribbon flowed toward Victor, and a much narrower but still significant one, toward Thayla.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 21 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

Congratulations! You've learned the skill Axe Mastery - Improved.

Congratulations! You've learned the skill Berserk - Improved.

As the notifications filled his vision, Victor realized he was floating off the ground slightly. He stretched, arching his back and letting the rush fill him, and then he dropped to the ground lightly. He looked toward Thayla and saw that she was stirring, groaning softly. “You gonna live?” He asked, walking toward her.

“Ugh, am I dead?” She pushed herself up to a sitting position, and Victor was relieved to see the flesh had mended on her cheeks and arms. “I leveled? How? Last thing I remember was a spear hooking me and dragging me toward...” she paused and looked at the hole where the monster had slid into the darkness. “Wasn't there a pool there?”

“Yeah, it was the mouth or throat of some kind of giant, underground, tentacled slug. It was gross as hell. You were almost dead, that's for sure. Good thing that big, stinky, slithering, butthole was worth a lot of Energy.” Victor reached out, taking Thayla's hand and helping her to her feet.

“You have a way with words,” she said, examining her frayed leather vest and the nearly-dissolved shirt she wore underneath.

“Well, I'm not trying to be rude, but your braids are soaked with that thing's spit or whatever, and you kind of stink.”

“My hair!” Thayla was suddenly holding a half-full bottle of wine and pulling the cork out with her teeth, then she started pouring it over her hair and braids, trying to rinse the acidic fluid away.

“You don't have water?”

“No!”

“Shit, me either. I have the watery wine the captain gave us, though.” He, too, produced a flask of wine and started helping Thayla.

“You realize you’re covered in gore, too, right?” she snapped, though there was relief in her voice as she began to realize her hair was holding up to the acidic fluid.

“Doesn’t seem likely we’ll find a shower down here, though we will pass by a river soon, I think.”

“That’s right, Victor.”

“Thanks, Gorz.”

“This cavern is fucking disgusting; let’s get out of here.” Victor started walking toward the exit tunnel but stopped when he saw something shiny winking in his glow stone. “What’s this?” He was walking through the shallow puddle where the creature had vomited up its guts as it died, and, as he advanced, he began to make out glittering objects. He saw rings, bracelets, a necklace, and quite a few gemstones. Larger lumps of metal looked like they were once pieces of armor or weapons, though they hadn’t fared as well in the creature’s belly as the objects made of denser gold and silver.

“Treasure!” Thayla said, scooping up a gold chain.

“Let’s gather this stuff up on that flat rock, and then we can go through it.” Victor had already started, fishing out a couple of rings and a large red gemstone. Thayla and he, their urgency to leave forgotten, spent the next several minutes sifting through the disgusting effluence. In the end, they had a little pile of gold and silver rings, some of them with gemstones, some plain, and several necklaces and bracelets. They’d gathered a pile of metal armor, mostly worn down to uselessness, but one piece seemed perfectly fine.

Thayla held up the silvery bracer and said, “This thing’s artificed for sure; see the runes? Mind if I try it on?”

“Go for it. What about those blades?” Victor gestured to the pile of sword, dagger, and spear blades they’d found. “Any of them magical?”

“I think one of the spear blades is. It’s perfectly sharp and doesn’t seem decayed.” She pointed, and Victor picked it up. The blade was eight or ten inches long with two razor-sharp edges. He could see the part where the old spear haft would have been mounted, but there was no trace of the wood. Still, the blade was covered in bright silvery runes, and it veritably hummed with Energy.

“Alright, I’ll take this spearhead, and you take the bracer. Then we can split the rest up?”

“Hold on, let’s see if any of this jewelry’s enchanted,” she said, smiling at how the shiny bracer hugged her wrist. Victor nodded and began sorting through the pile of rings. He found two with runes inscribed on them and set them aside. Thayla shook her head after going through the necklaces and bracelets.

“How do we tell what these rings do?”

“Bond with them—I’ll do one; you do the other.”

Victor picked up the larger ring, a thick silvery band with a yellow gem mounted on a square facet. He trickled some of his Energy into it, and suddenly a description in System text appeared before him:

Ring of the Guest: Once per day, the wearer of this ring can knock upon a mundane lock, and it will open.

“Weird! I got a notification describing the item.”

“That happens if an artificer takes the time and effort to give the item a description,” Thayla said. “This ring had one also. It’s a ring of whispers, or so the artificer labeled it. It says it can allow the wearer to overhear distant conversations.”

“That’s pretty cool. This one allows the wearer to open locks once per day.”

“Want to trade? Or do you want to keep that one?”

“Let’s just keep what we got for now,” Victor said, then pointed to the other piled valuables. “Let’s take turns picking these others. You go first.” Thayla nodded, then she scooped up a large red gem. Victor followed her lead and picked a glittering blue gem. They continued like that until all the objects were gone, and Victor ended up with eleven rings and necklaces and seven precious-looking jewels.

When they left the putrid cavern and walked a short way down the narrow, much cleaner tunnel, Thayla sighed loudly and leaned against the wall, taking several deep, exaggerated breaths. “Ancestors, it feels good to breathe some clean air again.”

“Yeah, that creature was nasty.” Victor, too, took a deep breath, groaning at how sticky with gore his body still was. He rubbed his hands vigorously, trying to rub away some of the dried blood. Even his neck was tacky, and he rubbed at that too. “I’m dirtier than ever, even worse than when I was fighting in the pits.”

“You were a pit fighter?”

“Yeah, when I first got summoned to this world...” Victor’s heart started to race, and he said, “Wait! What if those rich assholes try to summon us?”

“What?” Thayla scoffed loudly, “Good luck! My will is plenty high to resist an unwanted summon. Is your will that low?”

“No, it’s my highest stat!”

“You’ll be fine, then! When you were summoned before, was your will lower?”

“Hah, yeah—I was level zero.”

“There you go. Don’t worry about getting summoned.”

“Really? Just like that? What would happen if they tried?”

“You’d feel them pulling at you, and you could pull back. It’s a thousand times harder to pull someone through space than for that person to simply hold their ground. Summons work differently than portals or teleportation skills. I don’t know why—it’s way past my level of expertise.”

“How do you know that? Did someone try to summon you?”

“No. It’s common knowledge; even little kids know it. My favorite nursery story involved a witch that gave people poisoned pies so they’d fall asleep and be unable to resist her summon spell. Then she cooked them into more pies which she fed to their families.”

“Goddamn! That’s a twisted story! That was your favorite?” Victor raised his eyebrow, giving her a searching look.

“Well, there’s more to it! One little girl she summons escapes and makes friends with the witch’s pet forest troll. The troll saves her in the end.”

“Troll? There’re trolls in stories from my world, too.”

“Really?” Thayla straightened up, and the two of them continued down the tunnel, talking quietly about fairy tales, which brought to light that fairies were also a thing in this world. Victor was telling Thayla about wendigos when she held a finger to her lips and touched her ear. By now, Victor knew that meant she heard something, so he slowed his breathing and tried to hear it also.

At first, he couldn’t separate the sound from the normal echoes and scrapes that seemed ubiquitous in the deep, but after listening for a few moments, he heard it—a constant rushing, rumbling sound. “The river,” he hissed softly.

“Right!” Thayla started moving forward again, Victor close behind. The temperature began to drop, and the stones in the tunnel wall grew cool, and soon, the rush of the river was unmistakable. They came to the mouth of the passage and saw that it opened onto an enormous tunnel with a quickly flowing river at its center. The tunnel floor was stony with patches of actual sand here and there in depressions. Victor wondered if the river swelled during certain seasons, and that’s why the tunnel was so much wider than the current flow.

“Look,” Thayla said, pointing along the river, and Victor could just see, in the light of their glow lamps, that, though the tunnel narrowed, there was a clear, open path along the river in both directions.

“That’s the way we need to go to get to the dungeon,” he said, gesturing to the left.

“You think there’s anything terrible lurking in that water?” Thayla was slowly moving closer to the rushing river.

“It seems to be moving too fast for something to be lurking,” Victor replied, moving closer. He knew what she was thinking: it would be very nice to get cleaned up.

“I’ll fill up some empty wine bottles, and we can rinse off back on the shore, so the blood doesn’t get in the water,” Thayla said.

“Good thinking! I saw a documentary about sharks once—they can smell blood in the water for like a mile or something.”

“Sharks?”

“Yeah, um, monsters that live in the ocean.”

“Right, well, here.” She handed him an empty bottle. “Faster if we both fill them.” She held out another, and he took it. The two of them moved up to the flowing river and quickly filled their bottles, then scurried back toward the tunnel wall. They poured the water over themselves, scrubbing away dried blood and grime. Victor saw Thayla fish out a clean shirt from her ring, so he turned away and kept scrubbing at his gore-matted hair.

It took him another two trips to the river to fill his wine bottles before he felt clean, and by then, he was shivering from the cold, his clothes, all but his pants, soaking wet. Once again, Victor silently praised the person who crafted his miraculous black, self-cleaning, self-patching pants.

“Ready?” Thayla asked, her teeth also chattering.

“Yeah, we need to get moving and build up some heat!”

“We’ll be fine! Do you feel that breeze blowing along the river? We’ll be dry in no time.”

“Hmm, yeah, good point.” Victor nodded and started walking. According to the map Gorz had helped him draw, they were more than halfway to the dungeon. He was beginning to feel a lot better about their odds of making it.

“Victor, do you see that?”

“What?” Victor peered ahead into the darkness and saw a bunch of little yellow lights or maybe reflections of their glow lamps. He stared at them for a moment and noticed they kept winking on and off, and then it hit him—they were blinking eyes.

Chapter 36: Tunnels and Stairs

Thayla stepped up beside Victor, her spear leveled and pointing toward the creatures lurking in the darkness. “What are they?” she hissed.

“How would I know?” Victor held Lifedrinker sideways in front of himself, waiting and watching.

“Yellow eyes, short, or crouching. Yeksa? How could Yeksa survive this deep?” Thayla’s words were hurried, rambling, and Victor realized she was speaking in a stream of consciousness, panic tinging her voice. Thayla panicked? That didn’t make sense.

“Chill, deep breaths. Hang on,” Victor said, then he cast Globe of Insight, and the dark, stony riverbank was suddenly bathed in white-gold light as the ball of Energy formed in his palm. He concentrated on moving the globe and then lifted and “threw” it with a motion of his hand. It sailed forth and shed light on the scurrying owners of the eyes—dozens of huge, black-furred rats.

Thayla took a deep breath and said, “Thanks, the not knowing was freaking me out. I think I’m still shaky from almost getting digested earlier.”

“No worries,” Victor said, watching the rats scramble back toward the shadows, avoiding the pool of light cast by his orb. “They don’t like the light.”

“Let’s keep pushing forward; you can drive them ahead with your light.”

“Sure, if they stay scared—they’re as big as mastiffs, so I’m hoping they don’t all suddenly get a backbone.” Victor started walking, and when he got up to where his orb hovered, he put his hand up behind it and shoved it forward again. The rats continued to scurry ahead of the light. Victor noticed a reflection off to his right and realized some of the rats were in the water, rushing past them with the current. “Watch our backs!” he hissed, pointing to the rats in the water.

Thayla spun with her spear, shining her light back behind them, and then she said a word that didn’t translate and screamed, “They’re rushing up behind!”

“Steady, Thayla! They’re just fucking rats!” Victor roared and cast Inspiring Presence. Suddenly the golden light of his orb seemed to permeate the entire massive underground tunnel, and Victor saw all the black-furred, scrabbling shapes of the rats in front of them, in the water, and behind them. There were hundreds. “Thayla! We’re going to charge the ones in front of us! Come on! Stay with me!”

Victor glanced at her to make sure she registered his words and was happy to see a grin on her face and brightness in her eyes; she was also inspired. Victor rushed past his orb, nimbly leaping up and batting it forward so that it sped along the river, over the humping, wriggling mass of rats. Then he was in front of them, unleashing more inspiration-attuned Energy with Project Spirit. A visible wave of black-tinged, sickly yellow Energy rolled out in front of Victor onto the rats, and their narrowed yellow eyes suddenly grew wide and round. They squealed in a much different pitch and turned away from him, scrabbling back and jumping into the river.

Victor knew more rats were on their heels, so he kept pushing forward, shouting, "Keep moving!" He swung his axe in narrow cleaves, catching a few slower rats with the blade and dampening Lifedrinker's edge. He saw Thayla jabbing her spear to the side and in front of them, and he couldn't help exulting in the rush of battle with a high-pitched howl. To his surprise, Thayla picked up the howl and ululated in a perfect counterpoint.

As they broke through the crowd of rats and stretched out their legs, really moving, Gorz spoke up in Victor's mind, "Victor! Another five hundred meters, and then you'll want to take the passage on your left!"

"Come on, Thayla! Five hundred more meters before we turn!" They tore along the hard stone riverbank, skidding through the little depressions holding sand and silt, putting more distance between them and the pursuing rats. Victor knew he was in better shape than when he was on Earth—he had numbers on his status screen to prove it, but his empirical evidence was pretty strong too. This sprint, for instance—he knew he had to cover five hundred meters, but it was only a matter of thirty or so seconds before Gorz was screaming in his mind.

"Here, Victor! Turn here!"

"Here, Thayla," Victor yelled, cutting in front of her and dashing toward a dark cleft in the stone tunnel wall. He found himself charging through a narrow smooth-walled passage, his glow stone shedding just enough light for his barreling, bobbing progress to throw crazy shadows up and down on the high walls. He could hear Thayla's heavy breathing behind him and, further back, the clawing skittering progress of their pursuers.

Suddenly he burst out of the high-walled, narrow passage and into a round, stone chamber with a crazily steep set of stairs winding up the curved walls. "Your next passage is three hundred meters up this shaft," Gorz said helpfully.

"Thayla, get up the steps a bit; I'll be right behind you. Let's make a stand here; you can stab around me, and I'll hack any rat that comes up!" Victor said, slowing to pull her arm and propel her up the steps. "C'mon! Run up a ways, so they can't pile on each other to flank us!"

"Right!" Thayla said, taking two steps at a time with her long strides. Victor was hot on her heels, and he could practically feel the rats scrabbling at his back as they climbed.

When they'd mounted a good fifty or more steps, he panted, "Here! We gotta make a stand, or they'll run us down!" Victor spun, arcing Lifedrinker in a downward, sideways cleave, anticipating the rats right behind him. He hadn't been wrong; two rats met their end at that moment as the axe's gleaming, silvery edge tore through their snouts in a wet, crunching gash.

As Victor recovered Lifedrinker's momentum, Thayla jabbed her spear beside him, catching another rat on the point and flinging it down the steps into the bucking, thrashing river of giant, hissing, growling rodents that were scrabbling up the narrow steps after them. Victor lifted his axe and ended another rat, but a dozen more were clawing toward him as he lifted the blade. Wanting to give himself some space, he cast Project Spirit again, this time with rage-attuned Energy. The closest pile of rats went into an absolute mad frenzy as the wave of shimmering red Energy rolled over them. They began to bite at each other, screaming in their madness, turning the stairs into a slick, bloodsoaked self-serving abattoir.

Victor backed up a step and breathed heavily, enjoying the break as the rats ravaged each other. "They have weak wills," Thayla said, behind him, also watching the mad rat melee.

"Fuck yes, they do," Victor replied, still holding his axe sideways, ready to smite any rats that broke out of the frenzied, snapping, clawing ball of vermin. One rat did slip free and lunged at them, but Thayla stabbed it in the air, knocking it off the stairs to fall to the bloodsoaked stone at the bottom.

By the time the madness left the rats' eyes, dozens were dead, and they were so bloodsoaked and battle frenzied that it took them a while to redirect their aggression on Victor and Thayla. By the time they did, Victor was ready with a fresh Inspiring Presence. He and Thayla cut apart five, then ten, then twenty rats as they bounded up the steps and leaped at them. Blood and rat parts liberally soaked the steps beneath them, and as their footing grew gory and crowded with corpses, he and Thayla slowly backed up, higher and higher, leaving a trail of broken, twitching, screaming rats and corpses.

When Inspiring Presence wore off, Victor was ready with another projection of rage Energy, and the ensuing mad melee gave him and Thayla another breather. "I don't see any more coming out of the tunnel. This is it, just what's on the stairs—we can do this!"

"Yeah," Thayla said, breathing heavily beside him. "I can't believe we've killed so many already." It was true; the number of dead giant rodents was staggering. A huge mound of black, twitching fur rose at the base of the stair, and the steps were slick and cluttered with guts, blood, and corpses.

"Gimme a drink, please," Victor said, holding out a hand. He had a hankering for some of her wine, and Thayla got the idea, grinning and pulling out a bottle. She drank half of it and gave him the other half, and Victor quaffed it with a grin, watching the rats maul

each other a few feet down the stair. Just as he stowed the empty bottle in his ring, the rats seemed to recover their senses and redirect their frenzied rage on him. His Inspiring Presence wasn't off cooldown yet, but he and Thayla were rested and ready, and the fight was on.

By the time the last of the growling, yellow-eyed beasts died with Lifedrinker in its head and Thayla's spear in its breast, they were painted red and exhausted but exhilarated. Victor fell back onto an empty step, and Thayla collapsed on the step above. They both were panting and sweat-soaked, but it was a good kind of bone-deep weariness they felt, the kind that came with victory, and Victor couldn't help looking back at Thayla and grinning. "We fucking did it! We killed a damn army of rats the size of pit bulls!"

Golden motes of Energy started to gather on the mounds of dead rats along the stair and piled at the base, and soon it was all flooding into Victor and Thayla.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 22 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 20 attribute points to allocate.

"Shit, I forgot to spend my attribute points from the last fight!"

"You get free points? Mine all go into strength, agility, and vitality."

"Yeah, my class gives me some 'unbound' points to spend each level." He looked at his gore-covered arms and sighed. "So much for that bath we just had."

"You're much filthier than I am. It's a benefit of having a longer weapon."

"Yeah, I guess." He looked at the scene of the slaughter beneath them, noticing the heavy reek of expended bowels and souring blood now that the adrenaline of combat was wearing off. "Let's move up a ways, and then I want to rest for a minute and look at my attributes."

"Agreed," Thayla stood and started stalking up the steps, her spear still held ready. Victor tried not to focus on her ass, and he knew it was creepy even to realize he was doing it, so he pushed his gaze past her, up around the turn of the spiral, making sure there weren't any ambushes in wait. He hadn't really thought of Thayla that way—she was so damn tough and angry most of the time. It's not like his current life had room for romance, anyway. He softly laughed to himself, imagining it.

"What?" Thayla glanced back at him over her shoulder.

"Nothing. Laughing at my own idiocy." He thought of something else and tried to steer the conversation, "I'm not going to get a chance to get revenge on the jerks who robbed me and tried to kill me."

“In my hometown, there’s a saying: ‘life’s roads aren’t made in straight lines.’ You never know if your path will bring you back to the mine, or it might lead you to those people in another place; not everyone is destined to die in this pit.”

“You’re sounding more optimistic; think we have a chance to make it through that dungeon?”

“Oh, don’t spoil the mood by making me be realistic.” Thayla chuckled.

“This is good; I can’t smell the corpses anymore.” Victor turned his back to the wall, then sat on a step, contemplating his attributes. Thayla sat just above him and also seemed to be staring into space. “Did you level, too?”

“I did. Fastest level I ever gained—I think those rats were tougher than the usual huge rats we run into in the delves.”

“They were tough for rats, but we showed them who was boss, right?”

“Sure, but I think your inspiration abilities had a lot to do with that.”

“Teamwork,” Victor muttered, trying to figure out what to do with his attribute points:

Strength:

66

Vitality:

90

Dexterity:

33

Agility:

33

Intelligence:

24

Will:

103

Points Available:

20

His class made sure his will and strength were going to keep going up, and his vitality was already solid. Did he want his strength to outpace his dexterity and agility so much? Gorz didn't think it would be a problem until it was "two or three" times his other attributes. "My strength is twice as high as my dexterity and agility."

"Strength is important, but so are speed and skill," Thayla muttered, clearly preoccupied.

Victor knew his intelligence wasn't as crucial for physical fighting, but it bugged him that it was so "low." "Gorz, I don't feel stupid, and my intelligence value is more than twice what I was born with. I'm not going to start feeling dumber or something if all my other stats keep growing, but my intelligence doesn't, will I?"

"Not exactly, Victor, though you will eventually run into people with much higher intelligence than you, and their thoughts will be faster, they'll have more raw Energy, and could prove to be very dangerous to you."

"So, you're saying there's no easy choice. Why can't anything ever be easy?"

"Oh, surely there will be times when things will seem easy, Victor. Look for the sunshine after the storm."

"Hah, I love it! My talking necklace is giving me counseling." Victor started to smile, but then his face sobered. Thinking of counseling made him think of Ms. Marshal and how she'd seen his potential and helped him graduate. Had he let her down? How many people knew he was even gone? His girlfriend, for sure. His Abuela. Did any of his "friends" care or notice? Did people think he'd just run away? God, what if his grandma and aunts were looking for him. What if they'd gone to the police and put up missing person flyers? They probably had.

"What's wrong with you?" Thayla asked suddenly, and Victor realized she had moved up a step and was eating a piece of bread and staring at him.

"What?"

"Your face. You look like you just ate something sour."

"My mind ran away from me. I've been so busy surviving that I haven't spent much time thinking about what everyone in my life would do after I disappeared. My grandma, she, well, she didn't have a lot going on; I think making me dinner and asking me about my day was about all that kept her going."

“That’s hard.” Thayla shook her head, and Victor appreciated that she didn’t try to cheer him up. He sighed heavily and then allocated his attribute points. He put five into intelligence, five into dexterity, and ten into agility. He didn’t want to let his minor attributes stagnate, but right now, while he was fighting for his life, he figured agility was slightly more important.

He sat back and basked in the warmth of the Energy that flowed into his body as his allocations took effect. There wasn’t anything he could do about his family and what they thought of him. Marcy hadn’t been that serious, and he didn’t worry about her. His aunties probably were convinced he’d run away to his mom’s side of the family. Hopefully, they’d convince his Abuela not to worry. If he couldn’t find a way to travel home, maybe he’d find a way to send a message. This world was full of magic; surely, there was someone who could help. “Are there a lot of wizards in Gelica?”

“People with the actual Wizard class? Or do you mean just strong Energy users?”

“I don’t know. Both?”

“Well, that’s the answer; there are both. Hundreds of thousands of people live in Gelica.”

“Awesome. You think they’ll know a way to contact my world?”

“I don’t know. I know people can travel between worlds, especially System worlds. It’s just extremely costly to use the System Stones. I’m sure if people can travel between worlds, there must be a way to send messages. You gonna try to contact your grandma?”

“Yeah. I’d sure sleep better knowing she wasn’t worried about me. I think we should get going,” he said, gesturing to the stairs above. “You ready?”

“Mmhhh,” she said, and Victor looked at her again. She’d leaned back against the stone wall and was chewing her last bite of bread with her eyes closed. She had spatters of dark, dried blood on her red cheeks, but she looked relaxed and peaceful, and Victor wished they could rest longer.

“This isn’t a good spot to rest, I’m afraid,” he said, grunting as he stood up. “Let’s go a bit further.” “Gorz, is there any good spot for resting coming up?”

“If nothing’s changed, Victor, you’re going to be traversing a lot of constructed hallways and rooms soon. Ancient ruins. You should find a suitable space.”

“Alright, thanks.”

“Yeah, I’m coming, I’m coming.” Thayla opened her eyes and lithely stood. Victor started up the stairs, Lifedrinker held crossways in front of him. The axe’s wide, bearded

blade gleamed in the light, and Victor realized he'd never seen blood linger on it. On her, he corrected himself.

"You're a thirsty lady, aren't you?" he asked the axe suddenly, on an impulse, and, he swore, Lifedrinker shuddered slightly in his grip.

"Are you talking to me?" Thayla said from behind him.

"Nah, Lifedrinker. You think it's true what Lam said? Do you think she can gain consciousness? Like, come alive?"

"Maybe. I don't know; I've never heard of whatever she said it was made of. Some kind of silver?"

"Heartsilver, I think."

"Add it to your list of things to check out when we get to Gelica."

"That's the spirit! When we get there!"

"The passage you want to exit through is coming up, Victor."

"Right. Thanks again, Gorz." Victor lifted Lifedrinker into a more ready position and kept climbing, focusing ahead now, ready for anything that might be lurking in the upcoming passage. His precautions proved unnecessary; the passage was a smooth stone tunnel that led away from the stairway, dust thick on its floor and no monsters in sight.

"How much further do we have to go?" Thayla asked, looking into the tunnel.

"You're more than two-thirds of the way, Victor."

"We're about two-thirds of the way there. I think we'll find a good spot to rest soon."

"Okay," Thayla nodded, adjusting the grip on her spear.

Victor started into the tunnel, carefully watching the dusty ground as his glow lamp illuminated it, searching for signs of previous occupancy. Nothing seemed to have disturbed the dust in a very long time, and soon, the two of them came to a wooden door that was rotted off its brass hinges but still propped, crookedly, in the doorway. Victor looked back at Thayla and motioned with his head toward her spear, mouthing, "Ready?" She nodded, and Victor grabbed the door between two of its old, warped boards and yanked. When it flopped open, he regripped Lifedrinker and peered into the room beyond.

It was a square, stone room about twenty paces across with dusty piles of broken, rotted furniture partially obscuring the space. Victor thought some of them looked like

old bookcases or cabinets. He stepped forward, Thayla right behind him, and a warbling shriek was the only warning he had before a heavy creature with lumpy yellow skin smashed into him. It screamed as Thayla's spear bit into its side, and Victor pivoted, pushing his axe between him and his assailant, using his lowered center of gravity and prodigious strength to shove it back.

The monster looked like a bulky, naked, boil-covered old woman. Her skin was yellow, her nose exceptionally long, and her eyes crazed and red. She waved her long, claw-tipped arms about in a frantic, warbling display of insanity. Her strange dance made her long, narrow sack-like breasts wave in pendulous loops, and the pus-filled boils that liberally coated her thick, wrinkled skin erupted and oozed with her gyrations. "Fucking hell!" Victor recoiled away from her, imagining the pus splashing onto his face.

Thayla hadn't withdrawn her spear and drove forward, pushing the disgusting creature across the room. It wailed and shook, dark blood pouring out of the wound Thayla had inflicted but seemingly more concerned with its strange dance than getting away from her. Victor wasn't an expert on monsters or their tactics. Still, he had a bad feeling about whatever she was doing, so he used Channel Spirit to ignite his arms and axe with rage-attuned Energy, and then he took two long steps forward and brought Lifedrinker down on the hag's skull. He split the monster from forehead to breastbone, and the quivering body shook for a moment, then stilled. Lifedrinker pulsed in his hand, and Victor saw rivulets of green-yellow Energy flowing into her sunken edge.

Moments later, golden motes rose up from the hag's horrible corpse, and Victor knew she was dead. Neither he nor Thayla leveled from the encounter, and the monster's body was so offensive to their senses that they decided to quickly vacate the room. They had a choice of three doorways, but, with Gorz, the choice was easy, and Victor led the way through the broken doorway to the left, Lifedrinker at the ready.

"That thing was disgusting," Thayla softly said as they advanced down yet another long, stone passage.

"Yeah. I fucking need a bath like never before. She was practically hugging me." He shuddered at the thought but kept moving. Soon, Gorz directed him to turn down a side tunnel, and they continued that way for a while until they came to a large, empty hall with several small rooms lining one wall. Broken, rotten furniture littered the space, and most of the small rooms stood empty and open, but two had mostly intact doors. With Thayla at his back, spear ready, Victor opened each door, revealing mostly dust in the first and an ancient, partially collapsed table in the other.

"Let's rest in one of these," Thayla said.

"Yeah, I'm beat." Victor went into the room with the old table, pleased that its long, polished top was still quite solid. "This one. We can barricade the door with this table." Thayla helped him close and barricade the door, then they sat down on the dusty stone floor and shared some of their food. "How much more of this wine do you have?"

“Eleven bottles.”

“Nice. I filled the empties you gave me with water from the river. You think it’s safe?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know—bacteria, monster piss, rat shit?”

“Well, that’s disgusting, but we’ll live. No one with as much Energy as we have really gets sick from things like that.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you noticed? You heal faster? You’re more resilient? The more Energy you have suffusing you, the more that will happen. Someone who made it to level ten or higher hardly ever gets sick. Well, unless they’re dealing with some nasty attuned-Energy attack.” .c om

“Still, I prefer the wine.” Victor grinned and bit into one of the sausages Lam had sent with them.

“I notice you don’t drink or eat as much as I do. Have you improved your race?”

“Yeah. I won a big fight for a rich lady. She gave me a fruit that advanced my race a few levels.”

“Seriously? How many?”

“Three.”

“Wow—quite a prize.”

“Yeah, the asshole that held my contract was pissed. I think he saw it as a waste of money.”

“He’ll be surprised if you come knocking after clearing your way through a dungeon, hmm?” Thayla grinned, her eyes closed, and Victor saw her long, sharp canines. Was she imagining him taking revenge and savoring the image?

“I wouldn’t mind paying him a visit someday, I guess.” If he were being honest, Victor hadn’t hardly thought about Yund, but he definitely owed that big asshole a thing or two. He’d sold Victor out at the first opportunity. He might have been scared of the nobility, but he could have handled it a hundred different ways. How about a head’s up? Maybe Victor could have “escaped.” Who was he kidding? Yund wasn’t sticking his neck out for anyone, least of all one of his slaves. “Yeah, I’ve got a few people in Persi Gables that I need to pay a visit to one of these days.”

Thayla didn't respond, and Victor realized she was sleeping. He sat back against the wall and watched the door, letting his mind drift. He thought about home, about the Wagon Wheel, and about the mine. He remembered his glimpses of Persi Gables when he'd been led around to different fighting venues and imagined walking those streets a free man with money in his pockets. His lips spread in a smile as he thought of meeting Vullu and taking the goat-man out for a meal. Then he frowned, thinking about the people in the cages at Yund's and all the ones who died during every "pit night."

Victor had ideals, but he wasn't stupid, and when he thought of trying to stop the whole system that allowed the pit fighting and all the other things that went with it, like selling people to the mines, his mind spun at the complexity of the problem. Like Edeya had said, what was he going to do, take on the whole Ridonne Empire? "Maybe not, but I can help a few people and see what happens from there," he whispered to himself. "Wouldn't hurt to get a little payback in the process, either."

When his eyes grew so heavy and he worried he'd fall asleep, he shook Thayla's shoulder. Her eyes sprang open, and she looked panicked for a second, but when she saw Victor's face leaning over, she sighed and nodded. "Your turn."

Victor slept a few hours, and when Thayla woke him, he felt stiff but ready. His neck and back were sore, but he figured a bit of walking would sort him out. "Ready?" he asked Thayla after they'd picked up their belongings and stowed them away.

"Yeah, feeling a lot better. I was practically sleep-walking earlier."

Victor nodded and moved to slide the table out of the way when he heard a sound like boards clattering onto the stone floor in the next room. He held his finger to his lips, and Thayla nodded. Victor moved to the side of the table they'd propped in front of the door and pressed his ear to the wood, holding his breath. He didn't hear anything at first, but then the sound of something snuffling came to him. It reminded him of the sound a dog makes when sniffing around at the ground for a bit of food you dropped, but it was deeper and slower, like it was coming from a much bigger nose.

Victor turned to Thayla to whisper what he'd heard when a howling roar, loud enough to vibrate the wood of the door and table, broke out in the next room, and then the door rattled as something big hit it. Victor threw a shoulder against the table, trying to hold it in place, but the door rattled and shook, and the table kept bouncing into him like it was being hit by a charging linebacker. "Something fucking big is hitting this door!" As he hollered, a flash of red light erupted on the other side of the door, bleeding through the dark cracks in the wood, and then three long, knife-like claws speared through the planks, sliding through it like it was made of paper. Long chunks of wood fell away from the cleaving claws. A moment later, a big, round, orange eye with a vertical black pupil peered through the hole.

Another howl erupted from the monster, shaking the wood and making Victor's ears ring, and he backed up, holding Lifedrinker. "This thing's coming through. Get ready!"

“Stop telling me to get ready! What do you think I’m doing? Sleeping through this?”
Thayla snarled, stepping up beside him with her spear leveled at the door.

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Chapter 37: Things Unknown

Another red flash bled through the gaps in the door, and the claws ripped away another considerable chunk of the ancient wood. The opening was large enough now that Victor could see the scaled, horn-bedecked head that housed the livid, bulging orange eyes. “The hell is that thing?”

“I don’t know!” Thayla said, her voice shrill with stress. The monster howled again, a deep, reverberating siren sound that hurt Victor’s ears, and then it smashed into the mangled door, and it burst open in a shower of broken planks and splinters. Victor was ready, having prepared a Project Spirit spell, and he sent out a sickly wave of black-tinged yellow Energy that gave the hulking monstrosity pause.

While the hulking beast, hunched, struggling against the urges Victor’s spell put into its mind, Thayla dove forward and put her spearhead deep into its thick, scaly neck. Victor, shaking off his bewilderment at the sight of the monster—a hunched, broad-shouldered, hound-shaped lizard complete with thick scales—chopped down with Lifedrinker. The monster’s scales parted for the axe’s shiny edge, and she bit deeply into its flesh, carving a gouge between its neck and shoulder, and spilling hot, steaming blood onto the dusty stone floor.

The two wounds seemed to break the stalemate between the creature’s will and Victor’s spell, and it shook its head, roaring and exposing a double row of pointy triangular teeth. It lunged at Victor, and he held up Lifedrinker almost like a shield, trying to press her edge into the monster as it crashed into him, but he couldn’t measure his success—he’d been driven back into the wall, and the gaping snapping maw of the monster grunted heavily next to his ear, centimeters from his flesh. Victor screamed and used Channel Spirit to fill his limbs with rage Energy, still trying to push the monster back.

He couldn’t see Thayla because of the monster’s bulk, but he knew she must be going to work with her spear because the beast seemed distracted, shifting left and right as it struggled against Victor. It drove him further toward the corner as he strained to keep his neck and head out of its snapping maw. He finally remembered to cast Sovereign Will as his shoulder jammed into the corner, and his muscles surged with the additional twenty-five strength. His sudden burst of vigor, combined with whatever Thayla was doing, allowed Victor to slip around the creature’s side and use its momentum to drive it into the corner where he’d been pinned.

Victor chopped and chopped with Lifedrinker, cutting huge gaping wounds in the side and haunches of the monster before it could get turned. One of his chops opened the soft side of its belly, and glistening entrails slipped free of the gash like a mass of giant,

shiny worms. Thayla was on the other side, pointy teeth bared in a fierce grimace as she, too, drove her weapon into the monster, over and over. The beast thrashed and moaned, smashing itself into the wall in desperation, but its death throes were short-lived—they'd done too much damage to it.

When the bear-sized lizard-hound was finally still, Thayla and Victor stood leaning on their weapons, panting and sweating, and then the purple-tinged golden motes of Energy that rose from the dead monster surged into them.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Sovereign Will - Improved.

Sovereign Will - Improved: As an act of concentration, you can apply up to 33% of your total Will to any physical attribute.

"Nice!" he said, reading the description.

"Level, already?"

"No, but one of my skills improved."

"Ahh, good..." Thayla's further words were cut off by a howl that echoed through the dark chamber beyond the outside hall. It sounded distant but far too familiar for Victor's taste.

"Another one of these things? Let's get moving; what if this thing had a big family?" He turned and started walking, and Thayla was right behind him. "Which way, Gorz?"

"Take the tunnel straight ahead, and then the first left, which will put you in a tunnel you'll follow for quite a long distance."

Victor followed Gorz's instructions, and soon they were hustling down a long, winding tunnel with a slight downward slope. The howl was repeated a few times in the distance but didn't seem to be growing nearer.

"I think that monster was tier-three," Thayla said suddenly.

"Why?"

"First, its strength and vitality; I put enough holes in it to kill five bull roladii by the time you threw it off. Second, the Energy we got from it had some purple in it. I've never seen that killing tier one or two monsters."

"The slug monster under the ground that almost dissolved you gave a lot of purple Energy."

"No wonder it healed me so well," Thayla said, a shudder in her voice.

“Well, good thing we can handle a tier-three monster.” Victor looked at Thayla and grinned.

“Why?”

“Well, the dungeon we’re going to is full of tier-two and three monsters. Or that’s what I heard when I learned about it, anyway.”

“What? That’s pushing our luck, Victor! Do you know anything else?”

“Um, yeah, let me see,” Victor thought back to Gorz’s words, trying to remember what he’d said about the dungeon before the little amulet spirit piped up and reminded him. “I think the monsters in the dungeon are undead.”

“That’s right, Victor!” Gorz said.

“Tier-three undead? Oh, Ancestors!”

“Not good?”

“Not good! I’m lowering our odds at success; we’re going to be worm food, I’m sure.”

“Awe, come on! What do we have to worry about from some zombies?”

“Zombies? I thought you said tier-three?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“So, more like crypt horrors and blood ghouls.”

“That sounds familiar,” Gorz added.

“Ahh, I get it. Well, try to stay positive—probably some good treasure in there, and we’re tougher than we look, right?” He gave her shoulder a nudge with his elbow, grinning.

“Speak for yourself! I look tough!” She growled at him, displaying her sharp canines, and he laughed.

“Una mujer peligrosa,” Victor said, with a low whistle.

“I am a dangerous woman! Remember it!” She chuckled, too, and they kept walking, both of them occasionally looking over their shoulders to ensure no giant lizard-hounds were stalking their tracks. Victor followed Gorz’s directions until they came to a tunnel that opened onto a ledge overlooking a wide, perfectly round tunnel that crossed their path. Hung from brass-colored chains, hexagonal glow lamps were regularly spaced in

the long tunnel, shedding an eerie, pale green light. Victor looked left and right and saw no end to the enormous, lighted passage.

“What the hell? How long have these lights been burning down here?”

“No idea.” Thayla shrugged.

“Reevus-dak, too, remarked about those lights; he called them ‘strange, deathless lamposts from an ancient era.’” Gorz’s tinny voice was hushed as though he were being reverent. “You and your companion need to cross to the far ledge and continue along this narrower passage.”

“We need to get across—over to that far ledge.” Victor pointed to the ledge that matched the one they stood upon, perhaps twenty normal strides away, should there have been a bridge over the gap.

“Too bad we can’t fly.” Thayla began looking around over the ledge. “We’ll need to drop down and climb up to the other one—it’s only about ten feet to the ground.” She sat, hanging her legs over, and moved to drop, but Victor grabbed her shoulder.

“Wait!” He’d seen a shadow lurch in the distance to the right, and as he watched, it did it again. He laid flat on his belly, using the ledge to hide from anything moving below, and Thayla quickly pulled her feet up and lay next to him. Soon a sucking susurrations came to their ears, and a slithering nightmare came into view.

A pale, round body the length of a passenger bus, but lower and narrower, with stalks along its lengthy bulbous body, each housing an eye that blinked around at the surrounding tunnel, came slithering toward them. The front end of the eyestalk-covered slug was dominated by a large, round mouth that perpetually opened and closed like a puckering sphincter lined with horn-like teeth.

Victor and Thayla inched back from the edge of their ledge, and they both held their breath without any consultation. Thayla’s black irised eyes were wide with fear or disgust, and Victor couldn’t blame her—that monstrosity wasn’t something he wanted to tangle with. They lay there in silence, utterly still, while the slithering horror inched its way past. Thayla slowly let out her breath at one point and drew in another, but Victor managed to hold his breath for what must have been a world record back on Earth. He supposed it had to do with his improved racial level, much like his reduced reliance on food and sleep.

Finally, the thing was far enough down the tunnel that they couldn’t see the shadows its eyestalks cast on the walls. After studying the other direction for several moments to ensure another wasn’t coming, they hopped down and hurried across to the other ledge. They both leaped up, caught the shelf, and pulled themselves up. Then, after one last glance at the creepy slug highway, they continued down the narrow, stone passage.

“How much farther, Gorz?”

“Victor, you’re getting very close; just a few more turns and short passages, and you’ll be in the room where Reevus exited the dungeon!”

“We’re getting close, Thayla.”

“Pretty great trick you have, memorizing maps and whatnot,” she glanced at him sideways, and Victor felt a surge of guilt for having lied to her for so long.

“Listen, I haven’t been totally honest with you.”

“Oh really?” She stopped walking and turned to face him, amusement on her face. “Do you think I’ve told you all my secrets?”

“No, but have you been lying to me?”

“Oh, so you’re a liar? You want to clear some guilty conscious? What’s your big secret, then?”

“I’m not a liar,” Victor said through clenched teeth, her reaction starting to piss him off.

“Well?”

“Fine, I didn’t memorize a map. I have an artifact that told me about the dungeon. I found it while I was with Lam, and I didn’t tell you about it because I didn’t want her to take it or kill me for keeping it. I mean, at first. I should have told you after we both were on the run.”

“Really? What kind of artifact?” She suddenly sounded more intrigued than angry or judgemental, and Victor didn’t know if that was a good sign or a signal to watch out.

“It’s a necklace that kind of remembers everything you tell it and can keep track of every place it’s been.”

“You reduce me to those simple words?” Gorz sounded hurt.

“No, Gorz, sorry. It also has a nice personality and is good at listening to my problems.” Victor grinned at Thayla, trying to make light of things.

“It’s called Gorz? It’s listening to us all the time?” Thayla looked down at Victor’s chest. “Let me see it.”

“Alright,” Victor pulled Gorz out from under his armor, twirling the silvery medallion on the chain. Thayla peered at it for a while, then shrugged.

“That’s a lucky find. I’m guessing its previous owner came through this dungeon, and that’s how it knows about it?”

“Right.”

“Well, any other big secrets?”

“Well, sure, but they have more to do with dance moves and kissing.” His attempt at humor struck home, and Thayla snorted, unable to fight off her smile. “Alright, what about you? I told you my big secret; what are you hiding?” Thayla’s face got solemn suddenly, and then she shrugged and turned away from him, starting to walk again. “Hey, I was just joking, kind of, but now I’m really curious—you do have a secret, don’t you?”

“You really want to know?” She whirled to face him, and Victor was dismayed to see tears welling in her eyes.

“I do, but not if it’s going to upset you like that. Look, I’m sorry, I was just messing around.” He was a little surprised at how much her troubled face bothered him.

“No, I’m alright, these tears,” she wiped at her eyes, “they’re more because I have some hope now. My big secret is that I have a daughter. I’d resigned myself to missing her childhood while I was in the mine, but now I’m ever-so-slightly hopeful we might make it through that dungeon, and if I do, I’m going to find her.”

“Oh damn! Seriously? How old is she?”

“She’s six years old now. I last saw her when she was two.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Thayla. That’s rough as hell. Is she with your family? With her father?”

“She’s with a friend, a friend the Greatbone Mining Consortium doesn’t know about, and that’s enough said on the matter, alright?” She sniffed and wiped her eyes again, and Victor nodded.

“Hell yeah. ‘Nuff said. Let’s get through that dungeon, right?”

“Right,” she said, favoring Victor with a normal, non-murderous smile.

Following Groz’s instructions, they made their way through several more tunnels, up a short set of crumbling stone stairs, and then into a new sort of passage: a square, stone-block tunnel constructed of perfectly cut and fitted granite blocks. “This is the final tunnel, Victor. The entrance to the dungeon is just over seventy meters ahead, though it’s in a large cavern, and Reevus met with combat when he stepped out of the portal.”

“Gorz says the dungeon is seventy meters ahead, but there might be monsters around the entrance. His old owner had to fight when he came out.”

“Alright, let’s proceed slowly and quietly,” Thayla whispered, gripping her spear and raising an eyebrow for confirmation.

“Yeah, no going back now.” Victor hefted Lifedrinker, and the two of them began slowly to stalk up the square, stone corridor. The stone floor wasn’t very dusty at the center, but Victor saw clear scuff marks along the walls where the dirt and accumulated grime were thicker. As they advanced, the far end of the tunnel came into focus, and Victor saw a large space beyond backlit by an oscillating pale green and blue light. He crouched lower and closer to the wall, creeping forward with Thayla hugging tight in his shadow.

Coming closer to the corridor’s end, he started to notice shadows moving about in the open space beyond, and so he continued as cautiously and slowly as he could until his next step would put him out of the shadow and into the light, bleeding into the corridor’s open mouth. Peering from eight or so feet back from the opening, he had plenty to observe.

A stone dais rose in the center of an enormous, natural cavern, and pulsing at its center was a large oval disc of smokey green and white-blue light that seemed to hang in the air. He could only assume it was the portal. Hooded figures milled about in the cavern, some kneeling and rhythmically bowing their heads to the ground as they faced the portal, while others walked around the room performing some unknowable task, moving as if in a fugue state. Victor counted eleven of the black-robed individuals. He felt Thayla squeeze even closer to him and heard her barely uttered whisper, “Do we fight or make a run for the portal?”

“You sure we have to fight? What if they’re just, I don’t know, a weird cult that worships this thing?” He glanced back at Thayla and saw her arched eyebrow, but he didn’t take it back.

“Seriously? Black-robed weirdos deep underground, bowing to a dungeon portal and walking around like they’re mind-controlled?”

“I know, I know. Let me walk in; if they attack me, you can surprise them. If we’re getting our asses kicked, we run for the portal. Agreed?” He stared into Thayla’s dark eyes until she nodded. Victor nodded and stood up, lifting Lifedrinker to his shoulder and letting her rest there, one hand on her handle. Then, he strode out of the corridor into the stone cavern, walking right for the portal but watching closely for a reaction from the strange, hooded people. He pushed inspiration Energy into his pathways, getting ready to cast Inspiring Presence or Project Energy.

He’d only made it about seven paces into the cavern when one of the figures milling about to his right jerked its head his way and let loose a long ululating cry. As soon as it

started its high-pitched wail, lifting its head to project the sound, Victor caught a glimpse of its too-wide jaw and tightly packed jagged teeth. Worse, he saw its eyes and that they were pale white orbs, devoid of irises. As the creature pulled its hands out of its robe and extended a finger to point at Victor, he saw the long, black claws and gray-tinted skin and knew he wouldn't be negotiating access to the portal.

He immediately cast Inspire Presence, and the room brightened in his eyes, revealing the frayed, tattered state of the figures' robes, how they moved in a jerky, uncoordinated fashion and seemed more afraid of him than threatening. This wouldn't be so bad! He hefted his axe and screamed, "Come on, then!" Suddenly a weight was pressing on his mind, and he had an urge to drop Lifedrinker and prostrate himself, supplicating for mercy. Victor lowered Lifedrinker, but then a thought sparked in his mind, "Supplicate? What the fuck?" He shook his head and glowered at the cluster of figures in front of the portal. "I don't think so!" With an effort of will, he pushed back the notion and strode forward, Lifedrinker once again held high.

He was aware of the figures flanking him, but he kept moving forward, increasing his pace to a long-strided jog. He kept them in mind but trusted in his speed and Thayla's upcoming surprise attack. Soon he was bearing down on the four cultists or ghouls or whatever they were near the portal, and he was sure they were the source of the mental attack he'd shrugged off. It was like their projected will was a palpable thickness in the air, and he was slicing through it—an icebreaker through a thin, frosty expanse of water. When he was just a few strides away, he cast Sovereign Will, boosting his agility, Channel Spirit, filling Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy, and dashed into their midst, rapidly cleaving left and then right.

Whether the cultists were too busy concentrating on their attempt at a mental attack or were too slow to combat his sudden violent burst, he'd never know, but Lifedrinker felt no mercy or pity as she split shoulders, cleaved necks, and separated limbs. Victor saw and felt a couple of the creatures attempt to claw at him or bite at him, but he was so fast, and their attacks so obviously projected that he simply stepped around them and continued his constant flow of hacking attacks. Dark blood sprayed out on his backswings and spattered as he buried Lifedrinker in their robed bodies, and Victor felt her pull herself deeper, draining Energy with each solid hit.

When the four original targets were down, along with two others that had come to their aid, Victor whirled around. He scanned the room, looking for more targets and Thayla. He saw her back by the tunnel mouth, backing up slowly, her spear in front of her, warding off the remaining five robed figures. "Dammit, you were supposed to surprise them," Victor said, starting to charge toward her.

He felt something then, tickling his mind, and he shook his head, unable to discern what was happening. It felt different from when they'd tried to make him drop Lifedrinker; there was no command, just an unpleasant presence. Suddenly he realized his distraction; he'd stopped running, and now he heard Thayla screaming. He shook his head and looked to the cavern entrance. He couldn't see Thayla, only the robed figures

standing in a circle, clawing with their hands at something in their midst and throwing gore and blood into the air. “No!” Victor screamed and started running again.

As he charged toward the melee, something wavered in the air, and he felt that tingling presence in his mind again. Something wasn’t right, and he didn’t like that feeling in his head. He stopped again and screamed, “Get the fuck out!” He flooded his pathways with rage-attuned Energy and pushed at the presence. Suddenly the light shifted, and the scene at the tunnel mouth was very different: three unmoving cultist corpses lay on the stone floor, and two others were pressing Thayla, trying to flank her as she backed slowly toward Victor. “What the hell? On your left!” he yelled, running past her and burying Lifedrinker’s gleaming, silvery edge into the cultist’s chest. She bucked and pulled, and Victor saw dark, black Energy flow in little streams to the axehead.

“Thanks!” Thayla said, standing over the last cultist, pulling her spear out of its round, bulging white eye.

“Sure,” Victor said, about to describe how they’d messed with his mind, but then he saw something strange happen to Thayla’s face. Her expression changed from grim pleasure to panic, and she whirled her spear around and started breathing rapidly, eyes wide and unfocused. “Thayla! Something’s fucking with your head.” Victor backed away and scanned the cavern. Something was still out there, and it had a grip on Thayla’s mind.

Victor cast Orb of Inspiration, and the globe appeared in his hand, brightening his immediate surroundings and pushing back the strange, sickly light of the portal. “We need more of this,” he grunted and pumped every ounce of inspiration-attuned Energy he had into the orb, swelling its size to that of a cantaloupe and then a basketball. It pulsed and glowed with brighter and brighter light as his Energy flooded it. It became hard to see any of the green light through the white-gold radiance of his orb, and when Victor pushed the huge, swollen globe into the air, all the shadows in the cavern were banished. Then Victor saw what had been hidden—another black-robed figure lurked behind the portal, this one wearing a twisted silvery crown.

As his orb had grown and bathed her in its light, Thayla’s face had lost its panicked expression, but she still stood, listless, her spear hanging limply in her grasp. Victor didn’t waste any time, turning from where he’d thrown his orb to charge at the hunched figure. The cultist or monster was scuttling away from the portal toward the far wall of the cavern as if to get away from Victor’s orb. “Where are you going, asshole? Think you can fuck with my mind?” Victor felt violated, outraged, even, not just for himself but for Thayla; it was one thing to have someone come at you openly, trying to open you up with their creepy claws, but having someone hide in the shadows and slip into your mind—that wasn’t alright with Victor.

At the last minute, when Victor was bearing down on its back, Lifedrinker raised, the cloaked figure whirled, opened its oversized mouth in a croaking hiss, and pushed dark wispy tendrils of Energy out of its outstretched hands. The waves of dark Energy

coursed at Victor while he charged, but he nimbly dropped into a slide. He skidded over the dusty stone ground, right past the cultist, under its attack, and, as he passed, he chopped Lifedrinker through the cultist's robed leg, and she parted the cloth, the flesh, and the bone, as easily as woodsman cuts a sapling.

The creature fell back, screaming, and its metal crown clattered along the stone floor. Dark blood gushed from the severed leg, and Victor stood up, watching as it writhed. "Can you talk?"

"Fool," it hissed, then Victor saw it reach a hand toward a pouch tied to the robe's belt, and he stepped forward and put Lifedrinker through its neck. The cultist's head rolled away, a wide-mouthed gasp of surprise forever written on its face. A clatter made him jerk his gaze from the gory sight, and Victor saw Thayla's spear rolling on the ground while she held her hands to her head. He walked over to her and squeezed her shoulder just as a surge of golden motes flooded into them both.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 23 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

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

Globe of Insight - Improved: You create an orb of inspiration-attuned Energy that will help those within its radiance see the potential in their surroundings. Overcharge the spell with extra inspiration-attuned Energy to drive back confusion and mind-altering influences. Energy cost: Variable, Cooldown: minimal.

When the effects faded, Victor saw that Thayla's eyes were clearer, and she was standing up more easily. He waved away his notifications and said, "You alright? Their boss had a way to mess with our minds."

"I'm alright, but I didn't like that feeling; it was like someone was in my head with me."

"I know exactly what you mean."

"Nice job fighting it off. I felt your inspiration orb cut through the madness, but I still felt trapped until you killed that thing."

"Any idea what they are? That one called me a fool." Victor pointed to the dead cultist leader and started walking toward it.

"No, I don't. They weren't very tough, other than, you know, taking over my mind."

"Yeah," Victor said, nudging the corpse with his toe. "I think it had something in that pouch; it was reaching for it when I removed its head."

"Also, the crown," Thayla said, walking over to it.

“Careful. That thing gives me the creeps.” Victor didn’t like the sickly silvery-green metal of the crown, and the twists and whorls in the metal gave him a decidedly uneasy feeling in his gut.

“Really?” Thayla frowned briefly, then said, “Come stand closer and put your hand over it. Don’t touch it.” Victor shrugged and did as she asked. When he held his hand close to the metal, he felt a burning, crackling sensation in his skin, but it seemed fine when he pulled his hand away.

“It feels like it’s drying my skin out or something. Definitely unpleasant.”

“I think your higher affinity is picking something up; maybe it’s a dangerous attunement or a curse. Maybe it has an evil spirit within. Let’s be careful with it until we can get an expert to check it out, hmm?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Any ideas?”

“Sure,” Thayla produced an old burlap sack and held it open next to the crown. “Flip it in here with a stick or something.” Victor fished out an empty wine bottle and used it to scoot the crown into Thayla’s sack which she closed up and put into her storage ring. “Alright, you check out the pouch.” Victor untied the leather pouch, and when he lifted it away from the corpse, he saw that it was covered in dark runes.

“Dimensional container?”

“I think so,” Thayla nodded.

“Here goes,” Victor trickled some Energy into the pouch, and suddenly he was aware of the enormous space within. He could see a large pile of meat in various states of decay, some smooth and pale, some dark and furry, but all of it quite disgusting looking. He saw a stack of smooth stones with various runes carved into them. Next to the runes was a little pile of green-tinged vials, and next to those was a single, dirty, torn black robe. “He didn’t have a very diverse set of interests. I see potions, rotten meat, dirty clothes, and some runestones.”

“Maybe throw out the meat and dirty clothes, and we can have the runestones and potions checked out sometime?”

“Yeah.” While Victor dealt with the more unpleasant items in the cultist’s bag, Thayla inspected the other corpses, coming away with nothing but unpleasant memories. After they came back together, Victor said, “So this is a portal, huh?”

“Yes. I’m not sure how it will work—I’ve only heard of dungeons having one entrance. Will this take us to the dungeon entrance, or does it have more than one starting point? Maybe it will put us near the end, and we’ll be killed instantly by some powerful dungeon boss.”

“I love the positivity.”

“Do me a favor, will you?” She glanced at him, and Victor nodded. “Make your inspiration orb and keep it up in there. Higher-level undead can mess with our minds, kind of like this guy did.” She pointed at the leader’s corpse.

“Sounds good. We got this, Thayla. Just a little dungeon between us and freedom, now.” Thayla gave him a weary smile. “One sec.” Victor called up his attributes, not wanting to walk into his first dungeon with unspent points:

Strength:

74

Vitality:

90

Dexterity:

38

Agility:

43

Intelligence:

29

Will:

113

Points Available:

10

He decided to leave it to his class levels to keep bumping up his strength and will, and he put five points into agility, three into intelligence and two into dexterity. “Alright, I’m ready.”

“Your orb.” Thayla smiled.

“Right,” Victor used his improved spell to summon a substantial, softball-sized globe of inspiration Energy that glowed and pulsed with a pure, warming white-gold light that

pushed back the sickly green of the portal. He found it a lot easier to control now, simply willing it to float above and behind them.

“Perfect,” Thayla sighed. Victor nodded, and together they stepped into the portal, letting the cold, shifting Energy wrap around them, and pull them to an unknown destination.