

Victor BK10: Ch11

Book 10: Chapter 11: A Yellow Rose

“Hah!” the queen barked, her voice surprisingly deep and powerful. “This one has lost his nerve. What’s the matter? Don’t want to lose that pretty crown your queenie put on your head? Didn’t know she’d pit you against two devil-blooded war-hounds? Too late to save the embarrassment, but at least die like a man.” The crowd couldn’t resist a reaction to the drama; murmurs, laughter, and even jeers began to break out. Only Lohanse, flying a fast circle around the arena, glaring down at the thousands of spectators, brought back the silence.

Of course, her words and the crowd’s reaction triggered the heat of Victor’s rage-attuned Energy, and he had to concentrate for a moment to push it back before he spoke again. He glared up at the queen, trying to see her eyes beneath the ridiculous beak of her slotted helmet visor. “As you wish. These deaths are on your hands.” With that, he dropped Lifedrinker off his shoulder and held her ready in two hands. As Queen Madge chortled, he looked at Lohanse and nodded. “I am ready.”

Victor hadn’t been sure how he wanted to handle this fight. Should he go “all out?” How much should he hold back? Should he draw things out? The queen’s response to his words had settled the debate in his mind. These two men were brave and full of pride, but they didn’t realize how badly they were outclassed. Victor had read dossiers on them. Or, more honestly, he had Brynn read the dossiers and give him a summary. They were both bruisers—powerful men who could take a pounding and dish one out, too.

Hunt could create Energy barriers and perform an action similar to Victor’s new Guardian’s Rescue spell. He had a dozen deadly abilities he could employ through his warhammer, and, according to some rumors, he could regenerate his health to some degree. Vo Brahn, on the other hand, was a berserker.

He had a Spirit Core entirely focused on hatred, which was a rage-related attunement but rooted in deep, simmering resentment or malice. Where Victor’s rage was explosive and passionate, a berserker with hate-attuned Energy driving their madness was, according to Tes, more cunning and remorseless. A man without any balance for such an affinity wasn’t likely to be a pleasant individual.

None of it mattered. Queen Madge had sealed these men’s fates. Victor twisted his hands on Lifedrinker’s haft and built a spell pattern in his pathways, waiting for the Judicator’s signal. He watched the two men, one with beady black eyes, the other with luminous green orbs beneath his helmet’s visor. They looked ready. Their stances were low, their posture forward, and Victor could

feel the Energy building in their pathways. When Lohanse shouted, “Fight!” all three exploded into action.

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Tes watched the challengers down below. They fidgeted idly while the crowd’s clamor made their quiet conversation impossible to hear. She could cast a spell to listen to their words, but she didn’t need to. A delicate probe, just a tiny tendril of her aura, was all she needed to pierce their veils and see that Victor would prevail in the fight to come. Their equipment was fine—sturdy, Energy-rich materials with potent enchantments, but their armor wouldn’t stop Lifedrinker. The axe had grown hungry, and she had the teeth to feed herself.

A noise behind her and Bryn murmuring, “Stand up straight” to her squire told Tes that the queen had finally arrived. She turned to observe the regal woman and perform a delicate curtsy before returning to her seat. The gesture never failed to lower a person’s guard. Kynna wore a slight smile, a knowing twinkle in her eye, and Tes wondered what she and Victor had discussed. She could have listened in, of course; hiding from the likes of these folks wasn’t beyond her, but it would have been risky with veil walkers lurking nearby. It didn’t matter in any case; she wouldn’t do that to Victor.

“Hello, Lady Tes,” the queen said as she sat down. “I missed you at the Rannisday Celebration. I’d hoped Victor would bring you.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty, but I thought I’d be intruding and didn’t want Victor to feel burdened by me, him being my only acquaintance in this world.” In truth, Tes hadn’t wanted to perform a dance like this one, especially when, at the time, she’d only been on the planet for a month.

“We’ll have to remedy that.” Kynna nodded toward the arena. “Here comes our champion.”

Tes turned to see Victor striding in, clad in his ornate blue-black armor. A glint of something shiny on his chest drew her eye as he lifted a fist and turned to bask in the crowd’s adulation. She peered more closely, using her peerless dragon senses to study the lovely little rose broach. It was the signet of Gloria, so she supposed it made sense that he’d wear it as their champion. Still, it was awfully gaudy for a bloody brawl in an arena.

Thinking about it and Kynna’s knowing smile, she put it together rather quickly. “Lovely sapphires. It’s rare to find such bright, yellow ones.”

Kynna beamed at her. “Why, thank you! It belonged to an ancestor: Ranish Dar’s first daughter.”

Tes nodded, smiling delicately at the queen. “An heirloom? I’m sure Victor will keep it safe.” As if he didn’t have enough to worry about! She wanted to scold the queen but knew the game too well to fall into that trap.

“I’m sure he will.”

Tes nodded, resting her chin on her fist as she leaned on the arm of her seat. Was Kynna making a statement? Was she marking her “territory?” Tes almost frowned, but she was too disciplined for that. Let the queen have her fun; Tes knew where Victor’s heart lay, even if she couldn’t do anything about it yet. Of course, the thought reminded her of her obligations and her conflicting principles, and that nearly brought a frown to her face. The judicator, a veil walker of middling strength, was giving his spiel, and Tes tuned him out, focusing on Victor.

He stood easy—relaxed. He knew he was more than a match for these two men. One was a hateful brute, the other a...more durable brute. No, brute was the wrong word for the man in the silver armor. He wasn’t particularly clever, but he wasn’t an animal. She could find pity in her heart for him. When Kynna signaled her intention to follow the rules, and the other queen did as well, Tes felt the tension increase in the box. Not everyone was so sure Victor would win. She looked at Bryn—a woman she’d grown to like a great deal—and said, “He’ll be fine.”

Bryn looked at her and smiled nervously, nodding. “I hope so. At least he’s wearing armor this time. You missed some bloody fights, Lady Tes.”

The queen nodded, clearly wanting to be included in the conversation. “Fear not, Bryn. He’s assured me that he’s done playing about.”

Tes smiled, careful not to show her face to the queen. On the sands below, Victor was walking toward the far side. When he shouted, offering the Queen of Bandia a final chance to forfeit the duel, Tes clicked her tongue and sighed. “He’s so idealistic.” When the Queen of Bandia made a mockery of his gesture, she saw the heat of his Core and watched as he pushed most of the rage back into it. He clung to some threads, though; he was angry.

“I told him she wouldn’t accept the offer,” Kynna sighed.

Tes looked at her. “He asked you about this?”

“Oh yes. I could see he didn’t want to fight these men, but when I looked into his eyes, I knew it wasn’t fear but pity driving him.”

Tes narrowed her eyes. Perhaps this woman was cleverer than she thought. “You saw that, did you?”

“I did.”

Tes nodded and looked back at Victor. She saw a familiar pattern taking shape in his pathways. “Watch closely, Your Majesty. This will happen quickly.”

Before Kynna could reply, the judicator shouted, “Fight!”

Tes sped up her mind, and the world slowed in her perception. She saw the spike-clad warrior, the hateful brute, flare with red, seething Energy as his body expanded with tremendous muscles. She saw the silver-clad giant slam his shield downward as an Energy barrier expanded out of it, protecting his forward arc. But, at the same time, she saw Victor flare with white-gold Energy as he moved. His actions were like lightning, but he was easy to track with her enhanced cognition.

He darted forward, and while the baleful red Energy expanded through the brute, Victor hacked Lifedrinker through his knee, severing it. The man tilted to the side, but Lifedrinker was already up and descending toward his neck. She split his spiked gorget and slipped through the meat of his flesh like a cleaver through a piece of fowl. Even before the berserker’s Energy had finished surging through his body, he was dead.

As the brute’s corpse hung in the air, blood still erupting out of the wounds Lifedrinker had inflicted, Victor moved in an arc around the silver-clad warrior, and a tremendous clang rang out as the axe slammed into his back. Clang, clang, clang—Victor lifted and dropped Lifedrinker three more times, pounding the giant forward as the axe bit deeper with each blow. Gasps around her told Tes that the other spectators had finally begun to realize something was happening.

She slowed her mental operations to a normal pace and watched Victor move to stand behind his toppled enemies, Lifedrinker resting on his shoulder. While the Energy and blood fled his foes, Bryn gasped, “What happened?”

Kynna, too, was dumbstruck. “Did—did he hit them? I heard a crash, but I missed...” She trailed off as the crowd began to realize what had happened, and gasps and murmurs broke out, giving way to scattered shouts—some outraged and some exuberant.

“He slew them, Queen Kynna, and now you know why Victor’s heart was heavy. He’s not a butcher; he took no joy in this battle.” It was true. Victor was stomping out of the arena, crowned head down, axe on his shoulder, her blade dripping into the sand.

“Is he angry?” Bryn asked.

Tes was trying to think of an answer for her, but then the crowd started to chant—first a small section, but it spread rapidly. Before Victor was out of the arena, the roar of thousands of voices shouting, “Victor, Victor, Victor!” slowed his steps, and he halted. He looked up at the crowd, and though he didn’t smile, he lifted Lifedrinker high in both hands and pumped her up and down in time with the chant.

Tes smiled and shook her head. “He’s not angry now, but I think the other queen’s mockery irritated him. Otherwise, I don’t think he would have ended this so quickly. Still, perhaps it’s for the best.” Tes looked at Kynna. “He kept your flower safe, at least.”

Book 10: Chapter 12: Cruel Irony

“Nah, come on, Tes. I’d never feel right knowing you did that. It means a hell of a lot that you said you would, though.” He grinned crookedly, reaching up to gently cup the side of her head while he wiped away a tear with his thumb. “Dragons cry, huh?”

She sniffed. “Is this the first time you’ve seen me cry?”

“Yeah, I think so. How about kissing? Do dragons do that?” Victor leaned closer to her, and when she didn’t pull away but rather continued to stare into his eyes, his heart began to race, and he felt adrenaline like he was about to fight for his life. Gently and with no intention of taking it further, he pressed his lips to hers. When she kissed him back, he felt like his heart would burst. He heard a roaring in his ears, and he swore the world began to tilt sideways. Tes tightened her grip on his arms, though, and he grounded himself in that touch, savoring the warm softness of her lips for a second before pulling back with the stupidest grin he’d ever worn.

“We do,” she said, breathily.

“Shit, Tes. What are we going to do?” Victor was still reeling from the wave of emotion he hadn’t expected. Had he built her up so much in his mind that a simple kiss could floor him like that?

“I think you were right. I think I should give you some time. Prove yourself here. Conquer this world. Become a steel seeker. Gather your power and develop an aura that will silence critics. If it takes you a year or a hundred, I’ll—”

“No, fuck that, Tes! I’m not going to let you slip away for years and years! Give me a way to contact you. Can we share a Farscribe book, at least?”

Tes smiled. “I can do better than that. I’ll make us a pair of dream crystals; we can meet on the plane of dreams.”

Victor grinned. “Seriously?”

“Yes. It won’t take me long—a few hours. Go and see your artisan friend and check in on that poor disembodied Death Caster.”

“So,” Victor growled softly, reaching up to viciously scrub the side of his head, dragging his nails through his hair.

“What, Victor?”

“I kind of wish I’d just let things lie. Why’d I have to get all riled up and…” Unable to finish the thought, he jammed his hand into his palm, driving it in until his knuckles popped. “And now you’re leaving.”

“Hush. You did the right thing. Besides, I’m the one who brought up Kynna’s affections. We had to confront this. You need the freedom to become who you are meant to be.”

Her words triggered memories of Valla and her reasons for parting with him. He groaned, unable to fight down the feelings those memories evoked. Was he cursed? Was every woman he met going to say it wasn’t the right time? Valla wanted to grow beyond his shadow, and now Tes wanted him to grow beyond hers. What twist of fate had brought about this cruel irony? He almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. Couldn’t two people who liked each other just be together?

Tes sniffed, grabbing his wrist. “Are you well?”

Victor realized he was grimacing again. He wanted to say that he wasn’t, but he didn’t. Hadn’t he just told Tes he didn’t want to mess up her life? If he needed to get stronger to stand beside her among her peers, then that’s what he’d goddamn do. “I’m good.” He forced a smile and nodded. “I’ll go see Trobban and Arona later, though. If you’re leaving soon, then I’ll hang out while you work on the dream crystals.”

Her smile was gentle as she nodded. “That would be nice, Victor. We can chat while I work.” She nodded toward the table. “How about some wine?”

“Yeah. One of mine, or—”

“I have something I’ve been saving. It’s from a vineyard on my uncle’s lands on Aradnue.” She tugged his wrist. “Come. I have advice for your upcoming duels. Imagine how guilty I’ll feel if you die after I leave?”

Book 10: Chapter 13: Everybody Dies

13 – Everybody Dies

Victor withdrew into himself for several days after Tes left. At first, he let his loneliness and frustration get the better of him, and he languished in heavy, emotional doldrums, refusing audiences with Bryn and instructing her—through the door of his suite—to keep others away. That didn’t last long, though, because he found another emotional outlet: anger. He was angry at himself for pushing things to a confrontation with Tes. He was angry with her for worrying so much about the conventions of the society she was a part of. Ultimately, though, he railed at fate or God or whatever invisible forces had set his path through life on collision courses with women like Valla and Tes.

Fortunately for Victor and the citizens of Gloria, he’d been through all of this before and had grown resilient to the effects of heartache. After a few days, he began to force himself—a true feat of his prodigious will—to focus on the positives. Wasn’t it great that he’d earned the love of such incredible women in his admittedly short life? Shouldn’t he be happy to know that Tes wanted things to work out, that she was eager for him to continue to grow and one day, hopefully soon, be able to stand up to the scrutiny of her peers? Hadn’t it been amazing to kiss her and hold her and see the matching heat of emotion in her eyes when she left?

So, on the fourth day after her departure, Victor got himself up, took a nice long shower, dressed in fine clothing suitable for a duke and champion of a kingdom, and left his quarters, determined to make the most of the time remaining until his next duel. He’d yet to hear from Kynna, but he knew she’d be arriving with her retinue any day. He also assumed she was already hard at work trying to coax one of the great houses into accepting—or even preemptively issuing—a challenge.

“Are you well?” Bryn asked when he stepped out. Victor hadn’t provided much clarity when he’d hollered at her to keep people away, simply growling that he didn’t feel well and needed peace.

Victor smiled and nodded, stepping into the elevator. As Bryn followed him in, he said, “I’m good, thanks for asking. How are you? How’s Feist doing?”

“I’m well, though I admit to some worry over the last few days. I reasoned you were probably going through some sort of breakthrough—another natural treasure you’d been holding onto. Such thoughts quelled my fears and provided an excellent excuse to keep your administrators at bay.”

“You told Draj I’d eaten a natural treasure?”

“Not in so many words. I simply hinted in that direction. Where are we off to?”

“To see Trobban. Any word from him?”

She nodded. “He inquired about your status; he wasn’t aware you were back in the palace.”

“All right. Oh, and Feist? The wedding went well?”

“It was a very festive affair, and his family was appreciative of your gesture. I’ve submitted their expenses to the treasury. I hope that’s all right.”

“Yeah, of course. I was going to pay out of my own pocket, but... Yeah, let the duchy cover it. Feist may only be a squire, but he’s earned some hazard pay after our expedition to Iron Mountain.”

Bryn was quiet as they exited the elevator and walked for a while, but then she hesitantly asked, “Victor...have you heard anything about your next duel?”

He looked at her sharply, her tone making him wonder what she had heard. “Are there rumors?”

“Oh, many rumors, but it’s said that King Bayle is clamoring for your head. He wants to mount it, along with Queen Kynna’s, atop the gates of his palace.”

Victor snorted, scratching his chin. “Yeah? What kingdom does he rule again?”

“Alvessia. It’s a large kingdom on the southern point of the eastern continent. Those of us who grow up here on Ruhn are taught of that kingdom because it boasts the longest coastline of any kingdom

—eleven hundred miles along the Central Sea and thirteen hundred on the other side, facing the Vast Deep.”

“Well, I guess that’s good. If he’s so eager, then Kynna won’t have trouble getting me a duel.” Victor turned down the long hallway leading to the ballroom that Trobban had taken over. “Do you know anything about his champion?”

Bryn nodded, her heels clicking on the marble floor as she walked beside him. “Yes, but only because of the king’s outrageous vitriol. His champion is named Loss Chenasta, and he’s an off-worlder, or was until last month. More than that, I can’t tell you.”

“Loss, huh?” Victor resisted the urge to make a stupid joke, partly because he feared he’d jinx himself.

“Yes, a strange name and rather at odds with your own.”

Victor looked at her just in time to see a sly smile on her lips and laughed. “Nice one, Bryn! And the queen? Any word?”

It was her turn to look at him sharply. “I thought that was why you came out today. Her chamberlain came through the portal and announced her imminent arrival. The palace staff is in a frenzy!”

“Ah.” Victor shrugged, smiling ruefully. “Maybe I felt her shadow falling over me.” By then, his long strides had taken them to the ballroom door, where two guards stood on duty. He nodded to them, and the one on the left pulled the door wide for him.

“Welcome, your Grace,” the man said from within his shiny helm, slamming his right fist into his breastplate.

“Thank you.” Victor stepped into the doorway but paused, looking at the guard holding the door and then the other one. “I’ve heard good things about your work, soldiers. Excellent job keeping this important work safe.”

“Milord!” the other guard cried, imitating his colleague’s salute. Victor nodded, then stepped into the ballroom. The space still looked like a formal dance or gathering hall; the white marble floor gleamed with fresh polish, and the wainscoting around the perimeter shone with a deep cherry luster in the bright light thrown by the high, crystal chandeliers. At the center of the space, however, was

an improvised workshop: a dozen long tables strewn with equipment and materials, sheaves of paper, and stacks of books.

At the center of the loose circle of tables, Trobban leaned over something metallic, wielding a crystalline implement that ticked and buzzed as he did something that required close concentration. Victor nodded to Bryn, who took up a position near the door and walked quietly around the tables until he stood by the Artificer's side. "How goes it?"

"Ah, Victor!" Trobban's voice was pleasant and warm. "Give me just a moment to finish this, and then you'll have my undivided attention."

"No problem." Victor turned and walked over to a table at the center of all the others. It, too, was stacked with books and scribbled notes, but in the middle lay the new "vessel" that Trobban had been building for Arona. Victor hadn't laid eyes on it for a while, and he sucked in his breath at the sight of it. The last time he'd visited, Trobban had been learning how to work with the silvanite—Victor had given him half the ingot before giving the other half to Lifedrinker. Now, though, Arona's new body was clad entirely in the smooth, silvery stuff.

For the first time, Victor could get an idea of the final form—not just the bones and innards in a vaguely humanoid shape. He'd expected Arona to be out, helping Trobban, but when he saw her future body there, he suddenly felt glad she wasn't; the vessel was anatomically correct. Small breasts, complete with areolae and nipples, rose from the chest, and there was a definite cleft between its legs. "Chingado," he hissed, summoning a cloak from his ring and draping it over the vessel, leaving only the arms and head exposed.

Leaning close, he saw delicate lines around the finger joints and even carved nail beds. Victor turned his attention to the head and was stunned by how eerily the monochrome, silvery flesh resembled the Arona he'd come to know back on Sojourn. Even her hair had been sculpted—hundreds of thousands of tiny filaments hung in short, wavy curls around her oval face. The vessel's eyes were open, and within those metalline orbital bones sat two crystalline spheres that glowed with soft, silver-blue light.

"It almost looks alive already, doesn't it?" Trobban asked, stepping close.

"She's going to be silver?"

"No! When we complete the ritual to transfer Arona's spirit into the vessel, the silvanite will take on a flesh-like appearance. It's very malleable and easy to impress. Arona's self-image will imprint. Of

course, I've had to sculpt it into an approximation that conforms to the skeletal structure I built, but the details will come from Arona's mind."

Victor nodded, reaching to touch the vessel's small, dimpled chin. To his surprise, the silvery surface yielded to his touch, soft like flesh. "Is it finished?"

Trobban grinned broadly. "Nearly! Your friend rests, gathering her strength, and I'm attuning the Azurite Star to her chosen affinity." He gestured to another table where a spherical, dark metal container hummed, emitting faint pulses of yellow-hued light. "At its current rate, it should be ready within the week."

"What affinity, Trobban?" The last time Victor had spoken to the crafter and Arona, they'd yet to decide. The Azurite Star could, apparently, take on any affinity given enough of an Energy infusion, so Victor gave Arona the five Energy Hearts he'd won in The Crucible of Fire to choose from.

Trobban grinned. "She's truly going against her old nature; she's chosen a solar affinity."

Victor grinned. "I like it. It's not exactly the opposite of death, but the undead pendejos definitely don't like the sun or its light." He nodded, his mind drifting back to a conversation he'd had with Arona while they'd been in the Iron Prison. She'd spoken about a member of the ruling council, a woman of Fae heritage who was feared and respected by all—Consul Rexa. Arona had dreamed of earning the woman's respect, but the Fae wouldn't abide a Death Caster. How would the consul feel now if Arona showed up in this new vessel with a solar affinity? For Arona's sake, he hoped it would be a happy meeting.

"Honestly, Victor, if all goes well, we'll be ready to perform the ritual this time next week. Do you think you'll attend?"

Victor nodded, still staring at the strangely beautiful glowing eyes in the vessel's serene, smooth face. "I want to, yes. Whether it will align with my schedule, we'll have to wait and see. I'll meet with the queen soon, so I imagine I'll have a better answer for you in the next day or two. Don't do anything until you hear from me!" He nodded to the cloak he'd draped over the vessel. "And keep her covered up, dammit. She might not be in there yet, but have a little respect for her future body."

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“Well, Victor, I’ve had to carve and craft every small detail on this vessel. You could think of me as a physician in that regard—”

“Don’t give me that! How many physicians would leave their patient nude on a table in the middle of a ballroom where others might wander by to observe those tiny details?”

“But, Victor...you don’t let anyone else come in here, and—” He must have seen Victor’s glower, and he stopped short, nodding and bowing slightly. “My apologies, Your Grace. I should have had more thought for Arona’s, um, future modesty.”

“Good.” Victor took one more look around the gathered tables and then asked, “Anything else you need before I leave you to it?”

“No, no. You’ve been so generous. This space will work perfectly for the ritual.” Trobban looked around, mimicking Victor’s earlier perusal. Victor took a minute to give him a good look. The Artificer looked much the same as when Victor first met him, though he was undoubtedly more disheveled. His beard had grown, his hair was in tangles, and his robes were filthy with ink and other fluid stains. “If something comes up—”

“You’re taking care of yourself, right? Sleeping enough? Eating?”

“Oh, certainly!” He smoothed his robes while looking down at himself. “I apologize for my appearance; it’s just that this project is the greatest undertaking I’ve ever attempted. I can’t stop thinking about it. I would leave to clean myself up more often, but my mind is constantly gripped by the many little tasks ahead. Even now, I’m working on the inscriptions for the rune tablets that will guide Arona’s spirit into the new vessel. We have to attune them perfectly so that the latent Energy in her aura can be properly altered from death to solar attunement. It’s a delicate process, and I’m constantly thinking of new ways to tweak the patterns.”

“Well, listen. Here’s an order from me: before we go through with the ritual, you’re to have two solid days off to think about everything you’ve done to prepare. Sometimes, you need some distance and a clear mind to see mistakes.”

Trobban nodded, his ink-smudged face severe with his conviction. “Very wise. I swear it, Your Grace.”

Victor clapped him on the shoulder, nodded, and then turned back to the door where Bryn stood waiting. “See you soon, Trobban.”

When he approached Bryn, she smiled. “If you’d hoped to get any peace today, you should prepare for disappointment.”

Victor arched an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“There’s a page waiting outside. He wanted to speak to you—a message from the queen. I told him to wait.” Bryn’s smile turned a bit wicked as she added, “When he insisted his message was urgent, I might have mentioned that if his voice distracted you while you were in this room, I wouldn’t be able to save him from the curse you put on this threshold.”

Victor chuckled. Bryn had a way of surprising him, and it was clear his influence had rubbed off on her. Hadn’t she been straight-laced and by-the-book when they’d first met? He couldn’t imagine that Bryn, the one who rarely smiled and kept her helmet on through every waking minute, would have teased a poor page like that. “Well, nothing wrong with a bit of harmless teasing. Come on, let’s see what this is all about.”

He pulled the door open, nodded to the two guards, and approached the young man wearing a tunic emblazoned with a golden rose. “What have you got for me?” he asked by way of greeting.

“Your Grace! Her Majesty, Queen Kynna Dar, would have you know that she’s resumed residence in the eastern wing of your palace and would appreciate a meeting with you as soon as possible.”

“Anything urgent?”

“Your Grace, the queen’s time is always precious. I pray that you won’t keep her waiting.”

Victor glowered at the young fellow. It wasn’t really his fault that he was enthusiastic. After all, Kynna was the most powerful monarch on the continent; a little hero worship was to be expected. He nodded to the kid, probably only fifteen or so, and, with a grunt, waved him away. “I’ll be along shortly. Let her know.” The page didn’t waste time. He bowed and, before straightening, turned and sprinted down the hallway, his polished black shoes clicking in a staccato rhythm on the hard floors.

“Enthusiastic,” Bryn observed.

“Yeah. I haven’t seen that one before.”

“Gloria has absorbed quite a few new nations recently thanks to the threat of your challenge. I’m sure the Queen has had to take on many noble children to serve in one capacity or another.”

“Huh. That’s a good point, Bryn. Well, lead the way, Baroness. Let’s see what’s in store for me.” Bryn smirked in reply, but she did as he asked, taking the lead through the palace, waving away servants, guards, and dozens of nobles, staff, and attendants whom Victor wasn’t familiar with. His palace had been serving as a second capital for the queen’s burgeoning empire for a while now, and Victor had been quite happy to pass obligations off to the Haveshi clan. Draj and his mother, Tyla, had been hosting dignitaries on a regular basis.

His presence outside the area directly adjacent to his tower, walking through the long, opulent corridors of the central palace, was unusual, and many of the aforementioned folks were eager to try to meet him. They undoubtedly hoped for some favor at court or, at the very least, a story they could barter for influence with their peers. Victor smiled and nodded but was happy to have Bryn take on her role as his escort and personal guard, growling and shouting with a voice from somewhere deep in her belly for people to “Clear the path!” or “Make way for the duke!”

Before long, they entered the eastern wing of his palace, and once they’d passed by a squad of the Queensguard, things calmed down, and fewer people crowded their path. Nearly everyone was familiar with him, and they knew better than to slow him on his way to see the queen. The guards directed them to her current location, a study Victor was rather fond of with tall glass doors that opened onto one of his gardens. Bryn took up a position with the Queensguard outside, and he let himself in.

Kynna sat before the garden doors, the sun’s rays warm and bright on her silvery blue gown. Her thick hair was pulled up with silver pins, somehow woven between the spires of her crystal crown. When she heard the door close, she turned and regarded him pleasantly. “Thank you for coming right away, Victor. My messenger said that you were in the midst of something important when he found you.”

“Just speaking to my artisan friend. If I’d known you were waiting, I would have hurried, but the guards told your page to wait for me.” Victor shrugged, stepping toward the empty chair near hers. “It’s my fault, really. They know they’re not allowed entry to that room, so of course, they wouldn’t allow a page inside.”

“Of course. This is the man who’s working on your...friend’s new vessel?”

Victor grinned at her tone, taking his seat. “Yeah. He’s nearly finished.”

“Excellent! I do hope I’ll be able to meet your—”

“Her name is Arona, My Queen, and yes, of course, I’ll gladly introduce you.” Victor leaned back in his chair, enjoying the warmth the cushions had absorbed from the sunlight. In a more informal tone, with a bit of a smile, he asked, “How are you, Kynna?”

“I’m well, Victor, thank you. I’d heard rumors... Well, I won’t insult your intelligence. I received reports from some of the staff that you’ve been keeping to yourself in your chambers. Is all well? Is aught wrong with your other companion, Tes?”

“Everything is fine. Tes is gone, however. She was called away to attend...other matters.” Victor tried to keep his voice even and his face pleasant. The last thing he wanted was for Kynna to get involved in his relationship with Tes.

“I see!” She leaned forward, her hands clasped on her lap. “Will she be returning soon?”

Victor wondered what was running through her mind. Did she think her little gambit with the rose broach had struck gold? Did she believe Tes had given up because of Kynna’s implied interest in Victor? He almost chuckled, but he just shook his head and shrugged. “I don’t think so, Your Majesty. She has many obligations. I was lucky to have her here as long as I did.” Hoping to steer the conversation away from Tes, he added, “I heard there’s some king on the eastern continent who might be eager to accept a duel.”

Kynna’s eyes widened, and the fires inside those crystalline orbs flared brightly. “That’s right; it’s the reason I called you to me. The fact of the matter is that Rogan Bayle already issued a challenge!”

“Shit, seriously?” Victor wondered if Loss Chenasta was one of the champions Tes had been worried about. She’d seen two with her own eyes and learned their names: a young dragon masquerading as a giant who styled himself Haz and a Death Caster named Osk Graveborn who’d conquered an entire world before answering the call of one of the great houses. She’d heard rumors of other deadly mercenaries coming to serve as champions but hadn’t had a chance to set her eyes on them.

“Yes, and Victor, know this: Gloria has too many borders, including a coastal one, for him to force my hand easily. If you wish to stop our forward momentum here and now, I will understand. In fact, I’ll be happy. You’ve already done so much! Why risk everything?” Kynna looked sincere, and she

wasn't wrong; Gloria had grown its borders ten-fold since he'd arrived. More than that, she'd absorbed some very wealthy nations.

Kynna's legacy was assured. Stopping now wasn't what Victor had agreed to, though. He'd promised Dar to help her conquer this entire world, and, more importantly, he needed to keep challenging himself if he was going to build up his strength—his gravity. The kind of man who might impress a world full of dragons or a city full of equally powerful beings wasn't the kind of man who settled for "good enough." Victor had ambitions, and he had enemies, and an iron ranker who'd won a few duels wasn't going to measure up to either.

"That's not what your ancestor wanted for you. It's not what I promised him I'd do. More importantly, Kynna, this will give us a foothold on the eastern continent, and it does so without you having to declare a succession war. Honestly, you couldn't have asked for anything better. If King Rogan Bayle wants to invite calamity, let us give it to him."

"All true. Those are all wise words. However, King Bayle was at your last duel. He saw you slaughter those two iron rankers. No doubt his champion was also in attendance. He would not issue this challenge if he didn't think he could beat you, so, considering those circumstances, some of the wisdom in your words falls a bit flat. His champion is an unknown. None have seen him fight. He came from off-world only a month ago—after you killed Trinnie Ro and the Great Houses got an inkling of your threat."

"Even so, Kynna, you know what I think, and you know what Ranish Dar will say. If you want to fight your ancestor on this, go ahead, but I'll stand by what I said: we should push on."

"And my ancestor will listen to you! Should we risk everything? This champion is a killer for hire, and he can't have come cheaply. Perhaps Rogan won't be able to employ him through a protracted siege. If I can hold out for a decade or three, he might back off and then—"

"Kynna, I'm sorry, but I've got..." Victor thought about his words carefully before continuing, "I've got other obligations to consider. I'll keep at this as long as we're trying, but if we're just stalling, I'm going to have to have a heart-to-heart with Ranish Dar. I can't sit around for decades."

Kynna's eyes grew stormy, and a deep frown marred her expression. It was always amazing to Victor how a mood could alter a person's entire persona. She looked mean and cold now, whereas moments ago, she'd been sunshine incarnate. "You don't leave me much choice, do you? Very well, then, Victor. I'll accept the challenge and put everyone's fates in your hands once again. Do you find such a burden so comfortable? Are you content to risk death?"

Victor stood, his mind fighting with his tongue, trying to keep him from saying something flippant or cruel, something harsh or angry. He considered it a well-fought victory that he managed to say what he considered the simple truth. “Everyone dies.” With those words, Victor nodded to the queen, who seemed stunned by his bluntness, and walked briskly out of the room. As he strode past Bryn, she hurried to catch up, saying something, but his mind was too busy to hear her.

He wasn’t sure what had upset him. Was he angry that Kynna wanted to grasp peace and content herself with the power she’d gained? Was he angry that she—again—doubted his ability to win? Was he frustrated to realize that now, more than ever, he was the one pushing this conquest? Kynna wanted to stop, and he could probably convince Ranish Dar that they’d accomplished enough. He knew it was more than that, though. He was angry at himself for putting Kynna into that corner. He’d given her the illusion of choice, but she had no control over this situation.

The question he had to ask himself was a simple one: why? Why was he doing this? Did he simply like killing? Did he like the risk? He hadn’t been lying when he indicated a lack of fear. He wasn’t worried about dying. If he went out fighting, if he did his best, if he made his ancestors proud... well, then if he died, he’d be content. His spirit would find its way to the next world, and he’d try harder in his next life. The truth was, none of those motives explained his behavior.

No, the truth of the matter was that Victor hated having a boot on his neck. Ranish Dar might be a pleasant master, but he was a master nonetheless. He’d taken advantage of Victor’s need to help Edeya. Just as bad as Dar were all the implied threats made by stronger and stronger people. The veil walkers of Ruhn, the Consuls of Sojourn, the Warlord of Zaafor, the Ancient Masters of Dark Ember—everywhere Victor went, he met more and more people who used their strength to lord over him and others. Above them all, lurking and listening, shaping things through its connection to nearly every living thing, was the System. He was sick of it.

“So,” he growled, startling Bryn, “if I’m going to get out from under these boots, I’ll need to keep goddamn fighting.”

Book 10: Chapter 14: A Lovely Day

14 – A Lovely Day

For the next few days, Victor mostly kept to himself. Not entirely, though; one morning, he visited Trobban again and reclaimed the Energy Hearts that the Artificer hadn’t needed for Arona’s ritual. They were all rare attunements—void, healing, mind, and metal—and Victor knew he could trade them for what he sought. He gave the job to Bryn, and it only took her a single day to teleport to the capital city, Gloria, and barter on the auction house to get Victor a heart attuned to blue ice.

He'd given her permission to trade aggressively, wanting to get the job done, so he wasn't surprised or upset to find she'd traded away two hearts for his one new one: healing and mind. When trading for rare Energies, one must be prepared to make sacrifices. So, with his heart of blue ice and the one attuned to magma that Dar had given him, he'd embarked on a new project—a cultivation chamber designed to focus Energy into his Breath Core.

His chambers atop the largest, tallest tower of his palace were extensive, including a workshop and two storage rooms beyond his small library and study. Combined, the three chambers took up a third of the tower's top level, and, considering his lack of interest in crafting, he felt it was a bit much; he hadn't set foot in the workshop since he'd first toured the tower. So, Victor brought in a palace work crew, and he had them redesign the space.

He walked the crew through his plan: he wanted to add a wall, effectively cutting the workshop in half and leaving one storage room available to it. The wall would be built from sturdy stone blocks, and in its center, the crew would leave a round doorway designed to fit a vault-style door that Victor would commission from an artisan in the city. On the other side of the wall, the crew was to remove the wall that separated the other storage room from the remainder of the workshop space, and then, to the foreman's delight, they would remove most of the ceiling.

Inside that ample, open space, the work crew would build a perfectly round chamber constructed from stone molded and made smooth by an Earth Elementalist employed by Iron Mountain. Because of its curved walls and ceiling that rose above the tower's roofline, some void would be created at the corners, and Victor wanted them filled with stone as well; the chamber had to be sturdy because the interior would be lined with amber ore.

Even to a duke with the wealth of a duchy like Iron Mountain behind him, so much amber ore would have been a prohibitive expense, but Victor had a plan for that. He established a new mining company and gave it the exclusive right to plumb the ore from the enormous wall that the ancient King of Iron Mountain had built to keep interlopers away from the Crucible of Fire. After all, it was no longer needed; the dungeon no longer existed on Ruhn but sat within the vault hanging from Victor's neck.

So, with things in motion and crews hard at work, Victor happened to be strolling through the palace a few days later when a young page found him and asked if he'd make time to visit with the queen. He'd just received a missive from Trobban—the ritual was ready, and he was embarking on Victor's mandated two days of rest. Victor had intended to visit with Arona or, more precisely, to see if she was available for a visit, but he looked at the page and nodded. "I'll go now. Lead the way, young lady."

The page, probably only twelve years old or so, blushed crimson and attempted a smart salute, fumbling the timing of her heel click. She looked mortified, but Victor just smiled and motioned for her to proceed. She turned and double-timed it, her little legs struggling to keep ahead of Victor's relaxed stride. He wondered what conquered noble's child she was. And decided he didn't have to wonder. "What's your name, page?"

She looked over her shoulder, moving to the side, attempting to bow and respond while maintaining course. She almost walked into a rack of spears but managed to right herself as she said, "I'm Revannah of House Bordany, Your Grace."

"Bordany? What nation?"

"Bandia, milord. It's just a province now, however. I am a proud citizen of Gloria."

"Ah, Bandia." Victor nodded, rubbing his chin as they walked. He had more questions but feared he might make the girl uncomfortable. For all he knew, she'd lost family members in the transition of power. He hadn't gotten the details from Kynna about which relatives of Bandia's ruling house would be banished. So, he pushed his curiosity aside and walked in silence, nodding to the many nobles, retainers, staff, and soldiers they passed along the way.

Kynna was, once again, in the parlor that opened onto the garden, or so her guards assured him. However, when he entered, he found the parlor empty, and the garden doors opened wide, letting in a cool breeze. Frowning, wondering if some coup was about to be sprung, Victor summoned Lifedrinker and, with her held ready, stepped outside into the early afternoon sunlight. To his relief, Kynna greeted him with a smile, standing not far away, leaning close to a row of flowering hedges.

"My Queen."

"Victor—" Her smile widened, taking in his axe. "—did you fear for my safety?"

"It wouldn't be the first time you were threatened, and, as you know, the great houses aren't too happy with you or me."

"No, you're quite correct. My Queensguards are stationed nearby, but I feel safer here in Iron Mountain. Your palace is nicely situated outside the city, and we've got the portal chamber well-regulated. I didn't expect you to arrive so quickly, or I would have prepared some refreshments."

Victor smiled, sending Lifedrinker back to her container. Kynna's tone had certainly changed in the days since their last meeting. He'd regretted his coldness and abrupt departure, but only a little. He was tired of the queen's doubts and irritated that she'd effectively put the succession war firmly on his shoulders. He'd counted on her ambition and willingness to move forward; with her as a partner, he could allay some guilt, but now... Now, he had to come to grips with the fact that everything that occurred moving forward was all on him.

"I'm sorry about how things went in our last meeting, Victor. I won't dwell on it, but I just want to say a few words if you will allow it. I'd like you to understand me a little better, and I'd like to show that I understand you. Will you listen?"

Victor moved further into the sunlight, folding his arms over his chest as he regarded her. She was, as always, dressed in a fine gown, though this one was more sheer than usual, and its pale green material was shot through with silver embroidery that reflected the sun's light. Of course, her crown did the same, making her seem almost ethereal as she stood there beside the flowers. "I'm happy to listen, Your Majest—"

"First, will you please stop that? You know I prefer you to be informal when we're alone."

Victor nodded. "Of course, Kynna."

She moved a little closer, and when they were just a yard or so apart, she began to speak. Her voice was soft at first, unsure, but her words picked up steam as she made her points. "I understand ambition. I had an older brother; did you know that?" She didn't wait for Victor to answer. "He was meant to be king, and my father pushed him to be great long before he was ready to give up the throne.

"My brother worked so hard, Victor! He fought in wars on other worlds, traveled to attempt challenges and dungeons, and even served as my father's champion for a short while. He was nearly out of the iron ranks when he died. He was alone on a distant world, consumed by a great behemoth. An ignoble end with nothing left behind for his troubles, not even a body to send home."

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She clicked her tongue and looked toward the sun, shielding her eyes as though trying to see something in the clear blue sky. "I was never so ambitious. When the weight of rule fell on me, I depended greatly on Galentine, Tomorran's father. When he left, it wasn't long before I found Gloria surrounded, besieged by Xan and Frostmarch. The truth is, I've never sought great power. I

doubted I'd ever become a steel seeker. Why would I when the next step would take me from this world?

“Of course, that didn't mean I wanted to die or lose the kingdom. Ranish Dar wasn't the first person I went to for help. He's not the only member of our family who has left this world for one reason or another. I sent out dozens of pleas for aid. None were answered. How little we must mean to those people, I thought. Or, I supposed, perhaps it was only me. I wasn't significant enough to trouble the great members of my kin. It was in desperation that I sent my request to Ranish Dar. I had little hope of a response.

“Are you aware he didn't respond immediately? It was years before, out of the blue, I received his reply and his intention to send a disciple—an iron ranker who would serve as my champion and free Gloria from her troubles.” Kynna tentatively stretched out a hand and rested her cool fingers on Victor's crossed forearm. “I could scarcely believe it when I set my eyes on you the first time. I didn't think you could possibly do what Dar sent you to accomplish.”

She let her fingers drop, shaking her head and chuckling softly. Victor wanted to say something, but she didn't wait before continuing, “Your victories, one after another, were hard to fathom. When you told me of Dar's desire for our house to rule this world, you know I was reluctant. I was fearful. I still am. You saw the trouble Gloria was in when you arrived; I am unfamiliar with the mindset of the truly ambitious. I failed one negotiation after another over the course of years to bring our nation to that lowly state. Of course, the decline had begun long before I was queen, but that doesn't...”

When she trailed off, Victor seized the opportunity to get a word in. “Kynna, I know all that. Well, most of it. I don't blame you for—”

“Let me get this out, Victor. Please.” She looked up at him again, the fire in her eyes very dim in the sun's bright light. “I fear for myself, my family, the future of our nation. I fear my ancestor and what he'll do if I refuse. I fear you. I fear our enemies and—” She took a deep, shaky inhalation. “—I fear what will happen if you die or, more biting, what will happen if you win. Victor, I barely believe I can be the queen of a small nation. Now, I'm struggling to believe I am the most powerful ruler on this continent. Here I am, hiding in your palace to avoid the drama and in-fighting at my court. How can I possibly be an empress? How can I rule an entire planet?”

At first, Victor felt angry at her words. Was she trying another tactic to get him to back down? However, the more he thought about it, the more he began to understand her. She was trying to confess to him that it wasn't doubt in him that was terrifying her anymore; it was her burgeoning belief that he might actually pull the whole thing off. “You doubt yourself?” He unfolded his arms and took hold of her shoulders. “That's fine, Kynna!”

“It’s not—”

“No, it’s my turn. Listen.” Victor took a deep breath, nodding as he gathered his words. “You’re not ambitious. You weren’t raised to rule. You’re fearful.” He saw moisture building in her eyes and smiled. “I’m not insulting you, Kynna. I’m describing you. You have virtues, too, chief among them being the love you engender from your people—they’re devoted to you. You know that, right? So you’re not a great conqueror, not in the traditional sense, that doesn’t mean you can’t be a great ruler. You’ll manage a small nation or a great empire the same way—with love, empathy, and a desire for every person in your care to be happy. That’s more than most ambitious, cut-throat conquerors can boast.

“Of course, your nature left you open to trouble. You allowed people to take advantage of you, and you would have backed off this campaign and been content with too little. That’s why you have to be wise and surround yourself with people you trust, people with the qualities you lack. Right now, that’s me. I know about pushing an advantage. I know when to recognize that mercy isn’t the right choice. I know you’ve already shown yourself to be a threat to the great houses, and, Kynna, they aren’t like you. They won’t let a threat fester.

“So, we need to clear the table. We need to put you in charge, and you need to fill this empire with kings and queens who are loyal to you. I’ll help you get there, but you’re going to have to keep what I earn. You should be spending the time between now and the day you ascend the final throne building up a close inner circle of people you can trust. People with the qualities you lack. Let them help you keep the empire. House Khaliday has been in power how long?”

“Eleven centuries.”

“A long time, in my opinion. Do people love the Emperor?”

Kynna shook her head, her voice small as she replied, “No.”

“Well, they’re going to love you. I’ll write to Ranish Dar and let him know that he needs to find you a strategist—an advisor, someone you can trust and who will help you control the other monarchs. I’m not an expert at diplomacy, but even I know that when you rely on ambitious people, that very ambition can lead to your downfall. You’ll need someone crafty to help you keep control. You’re the kind heart; someone else must be your iron fist.”

Kynna reached up, resting a palm on Victor's knuckles where he gripped her shoulder. "What's wrong with this fist?"

Victor smiled and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Kynna. I think you're wonderful, and I've come to truly care about this world. I have other ambitions, though. I didn't come here with any intent to stay."

She inhaled deeply through her nose and then sighed out the breath. "I know. I know, but I hate it." They stared at each other for a few moments, and then she asked, "Will he listen to you?"

"Ranish Dar?" When she nodded, he answered, "I think so. He has thousands of iron-rankers vying for his attention—people dreaming of being his students. I'm sure among them are a few crafty strategists. Let them earn his tutelage by helping you."

She sniffed and let go of Victor's hand. She gently brushed away a small tear that had leaked from the corner of her crystalline eye, and, at that moment, Victor wanted very badly to hug her. He knew better, though; the gesture would do too much to encourage her burgeoning affection for him, and he didn't want to lead her on. "I feel better." Again, she sighed heavily. "Much, much better. Thank you for helping to clear the air between us. Thank you for giving me hope that I won't fail as a ruler. I don't want to feel too hopeful, but I find it difficult not to trust your word by now. If you think my ancestor will send me advisors, I will try to believe."

"Thank you for being so open, Kynna—for sharing your fears. There's nothing shameful in that, you know? I've had to battle my fears for my entire life."

Kynna chuckled, shaking her head. "It's hard for me to believe. Thank you for saying so, Victor. There were other reasons I asked you to come here, chief among them being to tell you that I've accepted Rogan Bayle's challenge. We'll discuss terms in three days, and if things go well, you will fight Loss Chenasta the following morning at dawn."

Victor nodded, pressing his lips together. "Four days. All right."

"I also have a gift for you." She reached into the neckline of her dress and lifted out a silver chain, from which dangled a large, ornate, platinum-colored ring. It was made for a much larger finger than Kynna's, and as she pulled the chain over her head, he saw that it was set with a beautiful gemstone that shimmered between amber and ruby hues. "This is a very durable and capacious dimensional storage container. I've been assured that it can hold the equivalent of ninety thousand tons. Moreover, it's been designed to allow Energy to stream in and out; conscious items will not suffer within."

“Wow,” Victor said, opening his hand so Kynna could place the ring in his palm. It was heavy and cold. He wore many rings these days, but he had room in his right pointer finger and slid the new ring onto it. “I need to get rid of some of these old rings. I’ll confess to being a bit of a hoarder.”

Kynna chuckled. “It’s easy to do when you don’t have to see the contents! When I was a child, my governess would make me sort my storage devices twice a month.”

Victor flexed his fist, nodding. “Thank you, Kynna.”

“You’re welcome. I sent an emissary to Sojourn to buy that at their auction house. We couldn’t find a suitable one locally. I’m not complaining; you’ve more than earned it. In fact, I know I owe you more growth items per our arrangement with Ranish Dar. However, it isn’t easy to find items that will appropriately affect you. I don’t know your exact level, but growth items for iron rankers near the peak are few and far between. Moreover, I have it on good authority that your bloodline is within the epic tier, and epic-level racial advancements are even harder to come by.”

“I trust you, Kynna.” Victor smiled and nudged her shoulder. “See what I mean? People believe in you, even me. I know you won’t hold out on me. Just let me know when you find something.”

“I will, Victor.” She nodded toward the garden path. “It’s such a beautiful day, and I feel more at peace in my heart than I have for months. Will you walk with me?”

“Yeah.” Victor crooked his elbow so she could take it with her hand. “I’d like that. Let’s enjoy the day.” He’d almost said, “Let’s enjoy the calm before the storm,” but aside from it being too cliché, he didn’t want to throw a dark cloud over Kynna’s good mood. So, feeling better about things and glad to know the fate of the world wasn’t solely on his shoulders, Victor walked Kynna through the garden, enjoying the scent of the blooming flowers, the trilling tunes of songbirds, and the soul-warming rays of the sun.

Book 10: Chapter 15: Solar Caster

For the next two days, Victor spent his time supervising the workers as they made progress on his cultivation chamber. Having access to master artisans, all the materials he could ask for, and Elementalists who could shape and mold stone made for much quicker progress than he’d imagined. The demolition phase was done in the days leading up to his meeting with the queen, and, in a single day, the masons employed by the duchy, combined with the efforts of an Earth Elementalists, constructed the new wall and the spherical chamber beyond the round portal—ready for the amber ore once it arrived.

Victor had established his new mining company with Draj's help. His chancellor had all the necessary connections; he was familiar with every major private mining company and even had dossiers on their owners, managers, and supervisors. Victor made it clear that the "Amber Mine" would be a private endeavor, though he would pay the duchy its taxes like any private miner would, and Draj agreed to find him an available manager and crew. All that had been left was to show them where the ore was, and Victor tapped Bryn's squire, Feist, for that.

Feist, newly married and only recently back to work in the palace, was all too eager for some time on the road. Victor found his enthusiasm funny, but Bryn only shook her head in disgust, promising a renewed focus on weapons training when the squire returned. Victor didn't envy the squire the beating he likely had coming his way. Along with the duty of guiding the company to the amber ore, Victor had charged Feist with the job of securing oaths and contracts with each employee; they weren't to disclose the richness of Victor's stake to anyone on their visits to town.

Draj had been concerned that if word got out about Victor's claim on the amber ore, people would decry the injustice, so he'd suggested Victor personally pay for the mining lease in addition to the taxes he'd pay on his profits. He'd also suggested that the proceeds from the mine's fees be set aside and used for infrastructure improvements around the Duchy—let the people see with their own eyes how Victor's good fortune was theirs as well. Victor wholeheartedly agreed because, despite those expenses, he stood to extract an enormous fortune from his "mine." It made him wonder just how wealthy Iron Mountain had been as a kingdom before it had fallen to the empire. He couldn't imagine spending so much to guard a dungeon from competitors.

On the morning of Arona's vessel ritual, Victor summoned Draj to have breakfast with him in his quarters. As they both finished eating, he sipped his coffee and regarded his chancellor over the rim of his cup. "How long do you think it'll be before I see the first shipments of amber ore in the city? I've hired an artisan for the mechanical pieces I'll need, and our Metal Shaper is standing by; all I need is the metal."

Draj cleared his throat and dabbed his napkin at the corners of his mouth. "Have you had an update from your man? Is the crew in place?"

"Yes, they were setting up their operation yesterday."

"Well, it's my understanding that the primary obstacle is the removal of the warding runes carved into the, um, ore." Draj chuckled. "Petallis is one of the best Glyphbinders in all of Gloria, and she spoke confidently when I hired her onto the job. However, it may take her days or weeks; I honestly don't know. I'm sorry, Your Grace, but it's outside my expertise. I'm sure she has an idea by now, however. Perhaps your man can wring a commitment out of her."

Victor nodded. "I'll have Bryn message Feist." He pushed his chair back. "Listen, I've got a commitment this morning. Will you walk with me? I have a couple of things to go over with you."

"Of course!"

Victor nodded and led the way out of his quarters, past the waiting kitchen staff who rushed in to clear his table. In the elevator, he said, "Tomorrow, I'm going to join the queen as she negotiates the terms of my next duel. I want to get a look at the champion I'll be facing."

"Understandable, milord." Draj frowned and opened his mouth but closed it before speaking again.

"Go on, Draj. Speak freely."

"Are you concerned? Do you..."

"I don't intend to lose. I'm not concerned so much as curious. Nobody knows this guy, and King Bayle is very confident."

"I can see why you'd want to assess your opponent." Draj's tone was carefully neutral, and Victor figured the man was trying not to say something that might shake Victor's confidence. Victor would be lying if he said he hadn't had a few sleepless nights while his mind ran through a million scenarios. There were just too many possibilities for him to build a coherent strategy; he figured he'd have to adapt on the go, and it might be painful, but he'd pull through. It wasn't like Loss Chenasta was in a much better situation; despite his duels up to this point, the people of Ruhn had yet to see the vast majority of Victor's abilities.

"Well, I mentioned it to you because I have another ally who will soon be joining me here at Iron Mountain. In fact, if all goes well, she'll be here today. I was hoping you'd familiarize her with the duchy and show her around. Let her shadow you tomorrow and the next day while I'm busy with the duel."

"Shadow me, sir? Am I to be replaced, then?"

Victor chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder as they stepped out of the elevator. "You wish, Draj! No, you're stuck with this job, I'm afraid. Arona—that's my friend's name—will be advising me and spending most of her time by my side. I think it's important for her to know what sorts of responsibilities I have. You know a lot about the duchy, but you're also familiar with the other

nations of Ruhn—the rulers, champions, and all the rumors that go along with them. Get her up to speed for me, will you?”

“Ah!” Draj smiled and nodded emphatically. “I will do so, but if it pleases you, I’ll also introduce her to my mother. If I’m a journeyman on court intrigue, she’s a grandmaster.”

Victor nodded. “Excellent idea. Between you and Tyla, I think Arona will be up to speed in no time.” They reached the central junction of major corridors in the palace, and Victor nodded to the right where Trobban and his makeshift workshop awaited. “I’m going this way. Perhaps I’ll track you down later today and introduce you to Arona.”

“Very good, Your Grace. I’ll let you know if I hear any news on your mining endeavor.” Draj bowed and departed, walking toward the east wing, and Victor turned the other way. A few minutes later, the guards opened the doors, and he was striding across the ballroom to Trobban. The floor was clear; all the tables and paraphernalia were gone. In their place was an elaborate ritual pattern drawn in liquid metal that shimmered and sparkled in the chandelier lights.

Arona’s new vessel lay at the center of the pattern, clad in a spectacular, silken mauve gown embroidered with pale pink gemstones. Other than the gown, the vessel looked exactly as Victor remembered it—silvery flesh and hair, with softly glowing blue, crystal eyes. Trobban walked around the pattern, placing the artifacts necessary for the ritual in key locations. Victor saw Arona’s phylactery bone and dozens of Energy stones—gems charged with pure, unattuned Energy that would power the transfer ritual.

“How goes it? Will Arona be present?” Victor hadn’t spoken to her since he’d come to collect his extra Energy hearts.

“No, Victor. She should be assuming a meditative trance inside her phylactery. This process will be trying for her. As to your first question, it’s going well. I successfully implanted the Azurite Star in the vessel, and it was, as far as my probing could discern, completely attuned to solar Energy.”

“And everything else?”

“Everything is in place. The only object that gave me any trouble was the egg of crystalline sentience. Such a delicate, powerful artifact—I toiled for months just to make the runic connections from it to her heart, Core, and nervous system. Still, it sits ready to receive Arona’s intellect.”

“How can you be sure it’s right?”

“I have probing spells, Your Grace. Certain Classes grant such abilities. I can test connections and gauge the perfection of my work before committing. This vessel is as perfect as I can make it. Every part of it is at least of epic-tier quality.”

“So Arona won’t lose any levels?”

“Ah,” Trobban chuckled. “I would promise that if she’d maintained her original affinity, but when her spirit goes through the pattern here—” He gestured to the glimmering silver lines and runes. “—her accumulated Energy will be transformed so that it can find purchase in her new Core. She may lose a small percentage in the process.”

Victor nodded, thinking about Lam and Edeya. This was a very different process than they’d gone through; he’d already had that discussion with Trobban. The main difference was that Arona had been a Death Caster with a phylactery. When her body had died, she’d had a “backup” of sorts in her phylactery—an artificial battery that would hold her Energy, along with her spirit. Ideally, a Death Caster who lost their body but had a phylactery wouldn’t be any weaker when they entered a new vessel. If everything went right here, despite her desire to abandon her death-attuned Energy, Arona would still be close to the same power level in her new body.

“Will she be able to gain levels?”

“Of course! The Azurite Star, once it’s infused with her Energy and connected to her spirit, will function just as any natural Core. It will expand as she cultivates Energy. Her vessel, likewise, can gain Energy density. Our preparations ensured that she could reach the rank of steel seeker and beyond.”

“The ‘epic-tier’ materials.”

“Correct. Of course, academically speaking, there are tiers beyond epic, but nobody I know has reached them.”

“That you know of.” Victor was more than confident that many veil walkers and probably some steel seekers had reached “legendary” in one or more aspect of their development—skills, spells, bloodline, even Classes. People like him and Trobban simply weren’t privy to such knowledge. Great masters didn’t like to advertise their secrets; if they wrote them into books, they didn’t tend to fall into the hands of iron rankers.

“Exactly so, milord.”

“Well,” Victor asked, looking around the pattern, “what’s left to do? Can I help?”

“Not at all. I’m nearly finished. If you’ll but stand to the side there, a few feet away from the pattern, so there’s no risk of your aura interfering with the process, I’ll be ready to begin in five minutes or so.”

Victor moved several paces back, folding his arms over his chest as he watched the man move about, tracing his lines and muttering softly. He could only imagine how nerve-wracking this process was to him. He’d worked tirelessly for months and months. There were priceless artifacts involved, not to mention Arona’s life. Honestly, Trobban had spent more time with Arona now than Victor had. He doubted it could be easy to shoulder so much responsibility.

At the thought, he almost chuckled. He wasn’t a stranger to having weight on his shoulders, either. As Trobban worked, another thought came to him, and he asked, “Hey, Trobban. If this works, do you think you’ll gain a level?”

“Hah!” the Artificer laughed, shaking his head. “I would say so, milord. More than that, I anticipate several of my harder-to-improve skills will advance. This has been a wonderful opportunity.”

“You’re not nervous, huh?”

“I’ll admit to some anxiety, but I’m more excited than worried. As I said, I’ve tested everything a hundred times. Barring some calamity, I’m confident things will go as planned.” Quietly, Victor took several steps back and knocked his knuckles against the dark, wooden wainscoting—no sense in letting Trobban jinx things. “I’m ready, Your Grace!” Trobban announced, moving to the far end of the pattern where a single, large Energy gem sat, pulsing with yellow-white light. “Once I initiate the spell, things will happen quickly. Watch her phylactery!”

Victor nodded and focused on the dark, rune-etched bone. He remembered when Arona had given it to him, her scratchy voice coming to him in the dark cave, asking him to bury it for her if she died. He remembered watching Ronkerz’s Big One ripping her body apart in his crocodilian jaws and nearly losing himself to his rage.

Clicking his tongue, he watched the bone, hoping everything they’d done wouldn’t be for nothing. Trobban began to chant, his words strange and foreign, the System failing or choosing not to interpret them. Victor felt a great rush of Energy, and the gems around the pattern all blazed like

thermite flares. With a rush of cold wind, a fountain of dark-blue, death-attuned Energy rushed out of the phylactery.

The Energy rose into the air, forming a cloud that exuded frigid darkness, but then it began to seep downward into the pattern, flowing into the metallic lines. In moments, the entire cloud of death-attuned Energy soaked into the pattern, and Victor could see it tracing through, almost like watching water running through a channel. The pattern was enormous and complex, and despite the speed of the Energy, it took a long time to flow through it.

The Energy was still tinted blue in the pattern, but as Victor watched, the leading edge began to shift, paling toward white and then picking up a bright, golden hue. “It’s working!” Trobban cried. Victor felt some relief at those words, and he continued to watch as the Energy traced through the pattern, first around the perimeter, then spiraling toward the center where Arona’s new vessel awaited.

It took nearly five minutes, and by the time the leading edge of Energy hit the thick circle of silver that surrounded Arona’s body, it was clear that it had taken on the solar attunement; it blazed white-yellow, almost too bright to stare at. Once the thick silver circle was filled with Energy, it began to fill tiny, spiderweb veins that ran directly into the vessel’s palms where they lay against the ballroom floor.

“The pattern provides resistance, allowing the Energy to trickle into her safely, lest we overwhelm her pathways!” Trobban yelled.

Victor was a good thirty yards from the pattern’s center, but he had good eyes. He squinted, peering at the vessel’s hands where the Energy poured into them, and when he saw the first sign that Arona was imprinting, he smiled broadly. Her fingernails had taken on a lifelike hue—opaque but no longer silver. More than that, the flesh beneath them was pink, and while he watched, the fleshy color spread down her fingers, over the backs of her hands, and up her wrists and forearms.

As the Energy gathered in the ring around her body, it grew brighter and brighter, and the glare made it impossible to see Arona’s vessel, even for Victor’s eyes. He shifted his gaze to Trobban and saw the man pacing near the circle, wringing his hands with nervous energy. At first, Victor thought something was wrong, but when he looked up, Trobban’s face told the tale—he was ecstatic, not worried. A flickering pulse from the pattern’s center stole his attention, and Victor looked back toward the vessel.

The Energy was dimming, more than half of it having been absorbed, and as Victor watched, the body began to lift off the floor, hovering in the air as the final threads of bright Energy flowed into

it. Victor couldn't believe his eyes. Arona's hair hung in black, luxurious curls; her flesh was pale but vibrant, just a hint of rosiness to her cheeks, and, as Victor held his breath, the vessel's chest began to move—up and down with slow, steady breaths.

When the last of the Energy streaked into her, Arona's aura came alive—warm, vibrant, powerful, washing through the ballroom as she opened her eyes, no longer crystalline, but fully alive, blazing with brilliant Energy behind her pale, sky-blue irises. She arched her back and gasped, and then the ritual ended, and she floated down to the floor, murmuring and writhing weakly.

Victor started toward her, worry warring with excitement as he wondered if everything was all right. He'd only taken a few strides when a thud drew his attention to Trobban. The artificer had collapsed, arms and legs spread-eagled as a look of pure ecstasy washed over his face. "What the hell?" Victor chuckled and hurried to Arona's side, kneeling beside her. She was human-sized, so he concentrated and threw more Energy into his Alter Self spell, reducing his size to match hers.

"Arona!" he said, taking her hand in his. It was warm and soft. Could it really be made of metallic flesh and crystalline bones?

She blinked her eyes rapidly and then looked at him. At first, she frowned and pulled away, but after a second, she blinked again and smiled. "V-Victor?"

"Did I get uglier?"

Her soft pink lips spread into a smile, revealing regular, white teeth; her old, sharp teeth were gone. He wondered about that. Was it a decision she'd made when Trobban crafted her skeleton, or had her spirit decided she wouldn't have sharp teeth any longer? She spoke again, proving she still had her trademark scratchy voice, "No, but things are different with these eyes—brighter, clearer. I wonder if it's the lack of death's miasma in my pathways. I feel so good!"

She struggled to push herself upright, and Victor pulled on her hand to help her sit. "It looks like everything went well."

"I believe it did." She stared into space, her face blank, and Victor thought something was wrong, but then she spoke again. "I lost three levels, but I'm still tier-nine. Dammit, but that stings—something like eight years of work."

"Was it worth it?"

“To be alive? To be free of Vesavo Bonewhisper? To have a bright, life-loving Energy at my Core? I would have traded far more!” Despite her scratchy voice, it practically bubbled with happiness, and Victor felt a weight disappear, a worry he hadn’t realized he’d been clinging to.

“I’m happy for you, Arona. Here, let me help you up.” He stood and tugged on her hand, and she lithely sprang to her feet.

She stared into space momentarily, leaning on Victor, but then she straightened and smiled again. “My intelligence attribute has improved! The mind you gave me! Victor, I’ll never be able to repay you!”

“Nah, that’s not true. Having a friend by my side will be worth more than any artifact. Come on—” He gestured at Trobban’s prone figure. “—let’s see how our friend is doing. When the spell succeeded, he collapsed, no doubt struck dumb by the Energy infusion and skill improvements he reaped.”

“Oh!” Arona looked at Trobban’s twitching form and giggled. “Are you sure we shouldn’t give him some privacy?”

Victor laughed. “Maybe.”

Arona stopped and tugged on his arm until he turned to look directly at her. “Thank you, Victor. I’m so happy! You spoke lightly before, but I swear to you: while I live, you will have a loyal ally.”

He smiled and nodded. “That’s all I can ask for, Arona.” He’d never spoken truer words. What more could he want than close friends? If he’d kept all of those treasures, hoarded them away in his vault, what joy would that bring him? The warmth in his heart at seeing Arona break free from her cursed life was worth a hundred Azurite Stars. He tugged her toward Trobban again and yelled, “Get up, Trobban! This isn’t a private room!”

Book 10: Chapter 16: The Void

16 – The Void

Victor stood before his ready gate, fists clenched around Lifedrinker’s haft, leaning heavily on the mighty axe as he fought to push doubt from his mind and focus on a strategy. At the meeting to discuss terms, he’d been disappointed to find King Rogan Bayle there alone—no Loss Chenasta.

So, despite his desire to get a look at the guy, he'd been left gnashing his teeth, staring into space while the monarchs hashed out terms.

He'd grouched all night, ruining Arona's celebration of her new vessel; she'd wanted to have a party but had relented, bowing to Victor's stress about the upcoming duel and leaving him in peace, gamely suggesting she had new spell variants to study in any case. Thinking about it, Victor snorted, shaking his head. "Pendejo." Even being self-critical, though, he couldn't fault himself for being nervous. Why was King Bayle so eager for this duel? Why was Loss Chenasta such a mystery? He wished Tes were there.

He almost confided to Lifedrinker, but he knew what the axe would say. Imagining her words—something about showering Chenasta's blood over the sands, no doubt—lifted his mood, though, and he was almost grinning when the signal came for him to enter the arena. Like last time, the stands were full of rowdy, vociferous spectators. As Victor made his way across the red sand, he glanced up to see Queen Kynna and her retinue watching him. Her guards and retainers were cheering, and he lifted Lifedrinker's massive blade high in salute.

He was pleased to see Arona sitting close to Bryn. The former Death Caster waved, and Bryn leaned forward, shouting something like, "Fight well, Victor!" He couldn't quite discern her voice among the clamor, but he could almost read her lips. Victor looked toward King Bayle's box. The man was there with a retinue of nobles and guards, much like Kynna's. He was a formidable figure—nearly as large as Victor in his non-berserk state. He carried a massive broadsword and wore gem-studded, flat, gray armor that looked like it would be difficult to pierce.

The king glowered at Victor from beneath his heavy golden crown but then looked away, dismissing him. Victor almost frowned but kept his face neutral as he finally forced himself to look across the sands to his opponent. His first view of Loss Chenasta didn't exactly impress him, but it did nothing to assuage his doubt. The man was tall for a humanoid, but not giant-sized—maybe seven feet. He wore a black leather vest covered with straps and buckles as though he had to fight the material to stay bound to him. His arms and legs were wound with frayed, black, rope-like rags, and his feet and hands were bare.

Victor frowned at the man, irritated that he couldn't see his face inside the black cowled hood. Darkness met his stare, so Victor looked down, examining the champion's only exposed flesh—his hands and feet. They were longer than a human's, gray-fleshed, and tipped in pointed black claws.

"Huh," Victor grunted, then he realized Grand Judicator Lohanse had already begun his spiel and was asking the monarchs if they were in favor of the terms and whether they'd stand by the results of the duel. Bayle had been so arrogant during the negotiation that he'd allowed Kynna the

opportunity for banishment while he'd agreed that he would give his life should his champion die. Victor had difficulty understanding such a risk, which said a lot, considering his own titanic pride.

“Champions! You will not be permitted to access storage devices or use potions, tinctures, salves, or other consumable aids during this duel. Are you each equipped to your satisfaction?”

Victor sighed at the same old warning and watched as Lohanse swooped over to Chenasta. “Champion of Alvessia?”

Victor held his breath, eager to hear the stranger's voice. Chenasta disappointed him again, though, simply inclining his head and shoulders in a bow of acquiescence. Victor ground his teeth as Lohanse swooped toward him.

“Champion of Gloria?”

“I'm ready,” he grunted.

Lohanse locked eyes with him momentarily, and Victor remembered his softly-spoken warning after his previous battle. Was Loss Chenasta one of the champions he'd thought Victor should fear? Victor knew he was putting words in the Judicator's mouth; he hadn't said Victor should be afraid. What had he said? Victor wasn't the only monster in this world? Something like that. Chenasta was a steel seeker. That was enough reason to take him seriously, so Victor flexed his hands on Lifedrinker, put himself into a fighting stance, and primed his Velocity Mantle spell. He wouldn't be caught flat-footed when—

“Fight!” Lohanse screamed, and Victor cast his spell.

Like before, the world grew slow as he darted forward. The crowd's roar became an incoherent wall of white noise, Lohanse swooping upward in a loop, slowed like a feather drifting through thick air. Loss Chenasta lifted one hand and, in slow motion, as Victor advanced, a length of black nothingness extended from that hand—a dark void shaped like a sword. Victor was there before he could bring that weird weapon into play, though, and he hacked Lifedrinker in a deadly cleave, one that would surely split the man in two.

Something crackled, and weird sparkles devoid of color or light—the absence of light, perhaps—surrounded Chenasta. Then, he was gone, and Lifedrinker split the air and nothing more. Victor spun faster than thought and lifted Lifedrinker again, just in time to parry that flickering sword-shaped void. The impact hissed and sizzled, and Lifedrinker screamed through her connection to him—fury, pain, and a desperate desire for vengeance.

Victor spun away, using his speed to put some distance between himself and Loss. He glanced at Lifedrinker's blade and was relieved to see only a faint discoloration—a streak of dark gray in her depthless black that was rapidly fading. He could feel the Energy pouring out of his Core to keep his Velocity Mantle running, so he canceled it, circling Loss warily. Was he fast, or was it only his ability to teleport that had allowed him to contend with Victor's speed?

He still hadn't seen the other man's face. He hadn't heard him make a sound. He still didn't, as the strange champion began to stride toward him, unhurried, his sword held out to the side. "Can you take it if I get into a fight with that pendejo, chica?"

Fight, Battle-heart! Fight! I will have my vengeance! Every wound I take, every pain I feel, I will deliver back ten-fold with your brave, strong hands to guide me!

Victor nodded, growling, as he lifted her into a high guard, ready to lash out. He built his pattern for Velocity Mantle again but held it ready. He'd test this champion a bit. When the weird warrior approached, Victor used his much greater reach to begin pressing him with attacks. He hacked down, frowning as the swordsman slipped the first blow and swung that black sword toward his hands. Nodding, Victor showed him what an epic-tier master of the axe could do.

He wove Lifedrinker's blade between those flickering, brain-twisting sword feints, pressing Loss into a steady retreat. He cut ever closer, learning the man's patterns and growing accustomed to his uncanny slipperiness. Lifedrinker took several hits from the void-sword but didn't scream again. She let her fury build, and she shared it with Victor, and he felt his Core responding, filling his pathways and lending speed and power to his strikes.

He was beginning to think he might be able to beat the other champion with simple, good, solid axe work, but then the air around the other champion flickered again, and that weird static-like sound of light and air being unmade crackled through Victor's mind. Chenasta was gone, and before Victor could cast his Velocity Mantle, something smashed into his back, sending him stumbling forward.

He completed the spell and, with his enhanced speed, whirled around in time to parry another blow. He'd taken a full-on assault, but he wasn't hurt—his aegis had turned the void-sword, or, at least, hadn't been destroyed. He couldn't see his back, so he wasn't sure how well it was holding up. Growling, going for broke, Victor kept his Velocity Mantle up and pushed the attack, whipping Lifedrinker's multi-ton blade faster than most people could see. She ripped the air with cracks that sounded like thunder, and Chenasta fell back, weaving, ducking, and even performing a backflip.

He was fast, but not as fast as Victor, and, to Victor's great pleasure, Lifedrinker caught his shoulder—a glancing blow, but enough to darken her edge with purple-black blood. Victor bared his teeth in a savage grin as Lifedrinker howled her triumph, but then the world came apart around Chenasta again. The air crackled and complained, and Victor, sure he knew what was happening, whirled, hacking Lifedrinker downward in a deathblow—only to smash her into the sand, shaking the ground for a twenty-yard radius.

Chenasta wasn't there, but as soon as Lifedrinker bit deep into the sand and Victor canceled his Velocity Mantle, afraid his Core would be drained, the other champion appeared again and drove his void-blade into his back. This time, Victor heard the enormously dense material of his aegis give way, parted by the anti-material of Chenasta's weapon. As it happened, the breach in his armor pierced the air like a high-powered rifle round, and Victor stumbled, then rolled, barely keeping his grip on Lifedrinker. Despite his armor's damage, he hadn't been cut.

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Victor spat, holding Lifedrinker ready, keeping Loss in his sights. He glanced inward, measuring the Energy in his Core. It was doing better than he'd feared despite the hungry Velocity Mantle. He was sitting on more than two-thirds. He sniffed, slowly pacing to the side, watching the other champion. He wasn't as fast as Victor when under his elder magic speed boost, but Loss was fast enough to defend, fast enough to cast his weird teleportation. Victor had to come up with a plan, and he thought he had one; he just needed to be sure his Energy was topped off for it.

He strode toward Chenasta, axe ready, and when he heard the air crackle and his mind bent around the strange sight of a void gobbling Chenasta out of existence, Victor dove forward, rolling. He'd learned that the champion didn't have to appear immediately. He seemed able to lurk wherever he went between one point in space and another, so Victor didn't try to time a strike or parry. He dove again, rolling, and then, just as he gained his feet, he used Titanic Leap—not wanting to give away his ability to fly—to send himself high into the air.

As he reached the apex of his jump, he scanned the arena, looking for a clue as to where Loss Chenasta might be lurking. The sands were empty, though—no sign of the other man. He braced himself for a landing, ready to dodge again, but the air crackled, and the light bent in weird refractions, and Loss appeared a dozen feet from where Victor would land. “Got you, pendejo.” It seemed the man's ability to hide was limited; he couldn't do it forever.

As he smashed into the sand, sending a force wave rippling through it, he charged for the other caster, and, this time, Chenasta didn't disappear. Was there a cooldown for his teleport? He barely lifted his sword, and Victor was sure he was about to cleave the little bastard in half, but then a

wave of rippling black—no, worse than black; it was the absence of light, of anything—poured outward from Chenasta and suddenly Victor was floating in a void.

He tried to breathe, but nothing came into his lungs. He tried to face Chenasta but had nothing to push off from—his movements only sent him spinning in that emptiness. He held his breath, and with no other means to directly his view, he craned his neck, straining to see where his enemy was. His heart hammered, his mind raced, and his face beaded with sweat, but it didn't drip—it crystalized instantly. That's when Victor noticed the cold. The void had no warmth, no Energy—absolute nothingness. It was a place where even time felt frozen.

If he weren't a titan with a breath core of Blue Ice, he wondered if he'd be dead already. If his bloodline weren't epic, would his flesh be dying? He could feel his skin prickling, a numbing chill sinking in like death's blanket. He could hold his breath for a long time—an hour or more, but how long could he survive in a heatless void? Could he outlast the spell? Could he break it? Could he—

Something slapped his chest, and a blinding pain erupted there, right at the center of his sternum, despite his armor. A sibilant, raspy voice whispered, seemingly from everywhere, "Enjoy the Curse of the Void. You're dead already."

Suddenly, the void was gone, and Victor fell to his back, hot sand under his palms and against the back of his head. The crowd was roaring, screaming, and jeering, but Victor couldn't hear them. He couldn't even breathe. All he knew was pain, as something unmade him, something in his chest, something under his armor. In a panic, he slapped his hand to his chest, gripping his aegis where the high gorget collar came up around his neck. He pulled, and, of course, it did nothing. He was panicking, struggling to think through the blinding, burning, freezing, electric pain that rocked through him.

He tried to send the aegis into his ring, but Lohanse's magic wouldn't allow dimensional containers to work. Finally, something clicked in his brain, and he remembered how to open the seam on the side of the armor. He ran his hand over it, and when the tightness relented, he pulled the top half and rolled out of it, screaming as the pain continued in his chest, radiating through him. He heard footsteps as he flopped onto his back, and then he saw Loss Chenasta standing over him, arms folded.

Victor ignored him, scrabbling at the pain in his chest, trying to grab what hurt there and throw it off him. Pain ignited in his hand, and, with another scream, he held his hand up to see his fingers and thumb truncate, the tips simply gone! Even as he watched, his regeneration began to regrow them, and, seeing that, he realized what was happening in his chest.

Gasping with pain, he pushed himself up onto an elbow and looked down to see a ball of utter blackness slowly sinking into his chest. His shirt was destroyed. His skin near the void was gone. His sternum was tougher, dissolving more slowly, but the ball of—of nothing was slowly growing, slowly eating into him despite his regeneration.

Victor screamed again, panting, desperately looking around. He saw Lohanse floating above, watching, eyes sorrowful, head shaking. He saw his enemy, standing ten feet away, watching him. Why didn't he finish him? Victor knew: he wanted to see him suffer, or maybe he'd been ordered to do it. This was a lesson. This was an example for other upstart kings and queens who might challenge a great house. The crowd's noise, coupled with the pain as the void ball slowly ate him, was too much. Victor blocked them out, squeezing his eyes shut.

He turned his gaze inward, and, with every ounce of his prodigious will, he pushed the pain down so he could think. An idea immediately came to him: he was healing against the destruction, but too slowly. He had a way to heal faster, though. A way to make his flesh even more durable. If he used it, he'd burn Energy rapidly. Would it be enough for him to finish the fight? No, he needed something more. A refinement to his plan came to him, but it would drain him even more quickly. He'd have to be perfect.

"One shot," he hissed, pulling blue-ice-attuned Energy out of his Breath Core and rage from his Energy Core. He wound them into a perfect pattern, and when he opened his eyes, he cast Glacial Wrath. The void had consumed his sternum. It was eating into his innards, dangerously close to his heart, but then Victor's body exploded with power and size. His bones and flesh reknit, and the pain of the void curse became a minor irritation.

He clambered to his hands and knees, enormous now, towering over Loss Chenasta even in that position. Chenasta didn't stand still. He darted forward, slashing his wicked sword-shaped void at Victor's neck. Victor put an arm in the way and grunted as the blade stung his dense, thick flesh, but nothing more. He swiped at the Void Caster, but the air crackled and warped, and his enormous hand hit nothing. Victor stood, stepped toward his fallen axe, scooped her up, and then, as cold fury radiated from his bloodshot, icy eyes, he scanned for his foe. He was hiding.

Victor almost didn't care. He had so much hate—so many things that deserved his cold, calculated destruction. Still, he supposed the foe at hand should suffer first—time to plan the ruination of his many foes after Loss had been dealt with. With the patient, frozen fury of a glacier, he reviewed his earlier plan and modified it. This would be better. He gathered the bright, clever Energy from his Spirit Core and bent it into shape with a tiny flex of his will, casting Spirit Domain.

In his persistent rage, Victor couldn't appreciate how the arena changed. A wall of shimmering white-gold Energy expanded outward from him, encompassing it from wall to wall. Overhead, the

Energy arched into a dome, and within that space, the sand bubbled as tiny crystalline prisms floated up, creating a shimmering rainbow-filled field of pebbles that danced with light and color. More important than its beauty and brightness, the space had become Victor's domain.

As the master of a domain of inspiration, Victor could feel the tiniest change in that space. He could contemplate his options and plans, running through them by the hundred in the time a person might blink. He hefted Lifedrinker, the mighty weapon light in his enormous, thick fist, and as soon as he felt the air change, as soon as the first crackle of Loss Chenasta's void magic tickled the hairs on his eardrums, he whirled and whipped her like a tomahawk—a tomahawk that weighed tens of thousands of pounds.

Chenasta appeared and managed to throw up his arms and take a half step before Lifedrinker smashed into him and then tore through the air like a cruise missile, crashing into the arena wall and reducing Victor's foe to a black and purple smear of paste. The impact sounded like a bomb; the facade of the magically reinforced wall shattered into rubble, and even the thick stones behind it cracked and crumbled, sending a dangerous quake through the high arena stands.

As stone dust exploded into the air and the concussion of the impact faded, Victor delighted in the sounds of screaming. His cold heart couldn't rejoice, but it could take wicked pleasure at the idea that the amoral spectators who fed on his bloodsport had felt a bit of the danger they so loved to see inflicted on others. He strode toward the ruined wall, Lifedrinker in his sights. He'd need her in hand as his frozen deliberations devised a plan to deliver his wrath.

He took four long strides, but then, to his initial dismay, he felt an aching pull in his Core, and he realized his Energy had run dry. Without the rage from his Spirit Core, his blue ice Energy could no longer sustain his transformation. Victor shrank into himself, even as his glittering domain of inspiration flickered and faded away. When he shook his head and looked around at the chaos he'd unleashed, his lips spread into a stupid grin.

Everywhere was pandemonium—people were streaming away from the damaged portion of the stadium. Others, in the more stable sections, were cheering or howling or cussing—Victor couldn't be sure in the riot of noise. He wondered why Lohanse hadn't restored order, but then his gaze drifted toward a flash of light above and to the right, and he realized the veil walker was caught in a battle with King Bayle and the guards he'd brought to the duel. They were trying to kill the veil walker!

Victor stomped over to his aegis and slapped his hand on it, sending it into his new storage ring, and then he jogged toward Lifedrinker. He intended to aid the veil walker and wanted her in his hands. As he stooped to pull her from the pile of rubble where she'd been buried, though, he felt a twinge of pain at the center of his chest. He slapped his hand to his sternum but quickly pulled it away

when he felt the sting transfer to his finger. Looking down, to his horror, he saw a tiny mote of swirling nothingness slowly eating his skin. It didn't go far before he regenerated, but it only started eating again in a cycle that was none too pleasant.

As a cataclysmic bolt of lightning ripped through the bright sky—some spell of Lohanse's, no doubt—Victor groaned. “What the hell, chica? How do I get rid of a curse when I already killed the asshole who cast it?”

Book 10: Chapter 17: Triumphant Return

17 – Triumphant Return

As a horrific scream split the air, Victor pushed his curse to the back of his mind and hefted Lifedrinker, looking up to the box where Lohanse struggled against King Bayle and his six remaining defenders. He could see smoldering body parts scattered over the sands and figured they were Bayle's fallen guards. Even so, Lohanse seemed pressed; Bayle and his guardians had to be steel seekers to put up such a fight against the veil walker.

It wasn't lost on Victor that he hadn't received any Energy for killing Loss Chenasta. Did the System consider him a part of the ongoing battle? Was it waiting to see if he'd join in? Victor grinned, ignoring the pain in his chest as he glanced at his Core. It was rapidly recovering—close to ten percent full already. He twisted his hands on Lifedrinker's haft, bunched his legs, and used Titanic Leap to send him into the fray.

As luck would have it, Lohanse was fighting defensively, his back to the stands, moving up, row by row, as the king and his men pushed him. Naturally, this put their backs to Victor, and he took full advantage, coming down like a screaming, axe-wielding comet falling from the heavens. Lifedrinker's edge split one of Bayle's guardians from shoulder to crotch. The man's armor screamed as her edge peeled through it, and he managed a tortured scream before his body fell away in two pieces.

The battle was chaotic, with lightning, blades, fire, and all manner of Energy abilities exploding in the air like a fireworks display set ablaze—another advantage for Victor. The King didn't realize one of his flanks had been exposed by Victor's decisive stroke, and Victor knew how to capitalize on the momentum. He whipped Lifedrinker up, her blade dripping gore and trailing stolen Energy, and brought her around in a terrible sideways cleave, aiming to relieve the rebelling monarch of his lower half.

Lifedrinker's edge hit something in the air, an orange-tinted shield of Energy, and she slowed while Victor strained. His shoulders and arms, his back and legs—every muscle in his body exploded with

effort, straining like great, rippling pythons under his flesh as he pushed Lifedrinker forward, inexorably carving a path through Bayle's steel-seeker-level personal protection spell.

"My flank! Guard me!" Bayle shrieked, and then two of his guards broke off from pressing Lohanse to dash toward Victor, one with a halberd and the other wielding a greatsword. Victor wouldn't be dissuaded from his goal; he meant to put Lifedrinker's edge into Bayle's flesh no matter the cost. He cast Roots of the Angry Mountain, and then he cast Voice of the Angry Earth as he let his aura loose and roared, "Back off!"

To his glee, both guards—steel seekers!—stopped, and one fell to his knees, his sword clattering on the spell-blasted marble as he slapped his hands to his ears. Meanwhile, Victor pushed, and Lifedrinker bit further through Bayle's magical shield. The King stepped toward Lohanse, perhaps driven by Victor's pressure or the stone-shattering sound of his voice, but the veil walker was there, slapping aside the other guard's attacks and pressing against Bayle's defenses.

The king wielded a huge, thick shield and a one-handed, broad-bladed sword. The shield had to be some sort of artifact because despite Lohanse's mighty attacks—lightning bolts and hammer blows—it kept the king safe. Victor couldn't concentrate on that, though, as his world narrowed to focus on the herculean effort of breaking Bayle's other line of defense: his magical Energy barrier. Lifedrinker screamed her fury and eagerness to break through, and Victor watched as her brilliant edge crackled with Energy—it burst away from her in little explosions and arcs of lightning. He could only imagine the pressure along her magnificent edge.

One of the king's guardians had regained his will and smashed his halberd toward Victor's unarmored neck. Victor dipped his shoulder and tilted his head, letting his Crown of the Dark Colossus take the halberd's edge. The impact rang like a church bell, and the enormous force of the blow might have thrown Victor back, but his Roots of the Angry Earth was in full effect, and he didn't move an inch. Instead, his attacker's weapon rebounded wildly, flying back over the guard's shoulder and carrying him with it for several steps, giving Victor another moment to focus on his efforts.

"Let's go!" he roared and drove with everything he had. In the back of his mind, he wondered if he had enough Energy to cast Iron Berserk, but some stubborn part of him wanted to break that damnable barrier without it. Lifedrinker was game, and as his muscles strained like never before, she finally broke free of the resistance. Bayle's Energy barrier came apart like a bomb going off. The waves of force rolled over Victor without moving him, thanks to his roots. Sure, his flesh was burned and torn by the power, but he didn't move.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the blast and held onto Lifedrinker as her sudden explosion of forward momentum threatened to pull her from his grasp. She found her mark, though, biting through Bayle's thick, gem-studded armor and digging her hungry blade into the flesh above his

hip. His armor wasn't useless; it slowed her enough to keep her from carving him in twain, but she dug in, and Victor felt her ecstasy as she dragged torrents of Energy out of the king and into herself.

He let go of her and whirled on the two guards, again pressing an attack. With his Gauntlets of the Mountain's Might clenched in enormous metalline fists, he ducked under a greatsword cleave and darted forward, inside the halberd's reach. Then he punched upward with everything he had, catching the halberd-wielding guardian under the chin. The man's jawbone and teeth shattered, his eyes instantly rolled back, and he fell—a tree cut free of its roots.

Victor felt the lust of battle and the madness of glory overcoming him. He laughed, darting toward the sword wielder as the steel seeker retreated, his eyes wide, dancing from Victor to his king—now on his knees, coughing blood as Lifedrinker wormed her massive blade deeper and deeper—to his fellow guardians, only two of whom were still standing. Their lives were measured in seconds as Lohanse finished them one by one.

Seeing the end of the battle at hand, Victor burned his Energy again, casting Velocity Mantle to keep his quarry from escaping. He exploded with speed, and then, from the man's flank, he delivered a flurry of terrible blows, crunching armor like it was aluminum and shattering bones like they were glass. As Bayle's last guardian fell, coughing blood, Victor delivered a decisive finishing blow to the side of his helmeted head. The gauntlets amplified his already prodigious strength; he might as well have been swinging a wrecking ball, considering how the man's skull came apart.

Victor turned to see Lohanse standing before Bayle, his hands gripping both sides of the king's head. "As decreed by the ancient laws of Ruhnic Conquest, you will accept the terms of your champion's challenge. Death." With that, Lohanse's hands exploded with lighting, and Bayle's head smoldered, blackened, and dissolved—ash blowing in the wind whipped up by Lohanse's spell.

Lohanse surveyed the scene, and so did Victor. The crowd had fled the battle, pushing their way up and to the sides of the stadium, piling on top of each other in their haste to escape. Victor looked across the arena to see Queen Kynna and her retinue still there. Arona was standing, her eyes bright with brilliant Energy, and she didn't look happy. Had she wanted to join the fray? Victor could see why the queen would hold her back. The battle would have been catastrophic if everyone piled in—thousands of high-level iron rankers and hundreds of steel seekers. Besides, Victor and Lohanse had made quick work of the rebellion.

"You've done well to exact the justice of the duel, Victor. You may claim your prize." As he spoke, Lohanse none-too-subtly nudged one of King Bayle's hands with his foot, tapping his silver-slippered toe on a thick ring resting on the giant king's thumb.

Victor thought about it briefly, then said, “I want Chenasta’s heart, too.”

Lohanse shrugged. “Two fights, two rewards. I will allow it.”

Victor smiled and ducked his head—the closest he ever intended to come to bowing again—then bent to pull Lifedrinker from the corpse of the fallen king. “Good work, beautiful.”

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Mmph, the battle is done, and I will rest. Thank you for the feast, Gore-king.

Victor chuckled, sending her into his new, spacious storage ring. Then he squatted to pull Bayle’s ring from his thumb. It was large and heavy, made of something that looked like gold but was even denser. “A storage ring?”

“Aye, explore it later in private.” He gestured to the fallen bodies. “Your Energy will be upon you soon. Quite a haul, I’d imagine. You helped to slay four steel seekers, though the king...” Lohanse shook his head, clicking his tongue. “The king was close to a veil walker. These others were no champions, but with him to lead the charge—suffice to say, I felt some pressure.” He nodded down to the arena sands. “That one was something else. I thought you would die for a moment, but yet again, you surprised me.”

Victor reflexively touched his chest, feeling the sting of the tiny void on his middle finger. Lohanse followed the movement, and his eyes narrowed. “Still troubled by Chenasta’s attack, I see. Don’t let it linger, Victor. That man held a disturbing level of power for a steel seeker. I sensed death and void in him—a deadly combination.”

Victor nodded, frowning. Death again—would Death Casters ever cease to trouble him? The air brightened, and he looked down to see glittering silver-hued balls of potent Energy rising from the corpses. A glance to the arena showed him a similar sight near the wreckage of the wall where Chenasta lay buried under the rubble. The crowd had begun to clamor, shouting and screaming, some even cheering, and Lohanse spoke over the noise. “While you’re struck dumb by this Energy, I’ll calm this rabble and clear the arena. Luck to you, Victor.”

He timed his words perfectly because Victor barely opened his mouth to reply when a torrent of Energy slammed into him, lifting him high off the cracked, burned arena stands. He spread his arms, soaking it in, luxuriating in the ecstasy of the healing, replenishing influx. His mind wandered of his own volition for a change, and he thought about King Bayle and his attempt to escape. Why

hadn't he just run? Why attack Lohanse? Victor had a feeling Lohanse had locked the space down, preventing teleportation.

It made sense, then, why the king and his men would try to kill the veil walker. If they could take him out before others arrived to help, they could try to flee. How confident Bayle must have been in his champion! Victor could only imagine the man's horror when he'd suddenly expanded into the shape of a gigantic, frost-rimed titan. The king's world must have shattered before his eyes when he saw Victor's domain of inspiration and then witnessed Lifedrinker destroying Loss Chenasta.

Even as he hung there, infused with Energy, radiating pleasure at both the physical renewal and the mental savoring of his victory, Victor felt a nagging needle of pain in his chest. It gave everything a bit of a sour taste, like eating an apple, savoring the sweetness as you swallow, only to find a spot of rot in the core—the corpse of a worm or bug. With that unsettling image fresh in his mind, he fell to the ground and blinked, peering at the bright sky and taking in the silent arena.

Lohanse hadn't lied about his intentions; there was no one present. The platform where he'd helped to kill King Bayle was cleared of bodies, though blood and charred marble remained. Victor grunted, climbing to his feet, and then he saw the System messages blinking in the corner of his eye. He focused on them:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 84 Warlord and gained 48 intelligence and 34 vitality.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Tactical Reposition – Basic.

Tactical Reposition – Basic: Casting this spell will allow you to move yourself or a nearby ally to a position within your line of sight. The movement is near-instantaneous and will ignore terrain and enemy interference. This spell cannot be used to move into other objects that occupy the same space. Cooldown: Long. Energy Cost: 10,000.

Victor read the announcement that he'd gained two levels several times and then the spell description twice. He wondered how much he could credit to King Bayle. He chuckled, grateful that the ruler had decided to try to fight his way out of the challenge terms. Instead of one steel-seeker kill, he'd gotten to help with an additional four others.

“So, what the hell?” he asked the empty air. “I can teleport now?” He focused his gaze down on the sands where the remains of Loss Chenasta awaited and cast his new spell. A torrent of Energy rushed into the spell pattern, and the world shifted

. Suddenly, he stood on the sand near the wall. “Holy shit!” He laughed, clapping his hands. “Badass!” Almost subconsciously, he reached up to itch his chest and then cursed, pulling his fingers away. “Pinché, son of a bitch! This goddamn curse!”

He looked down through his ruined shirt and saw the tiny mote of blackness swirling there. He stared for several seconds, peering closely at how it consumed his flesh, fighting against his regeneration. He wasn't certain, but it seemed like it might be a tiny bit bigger than when he'd looked earlier—after killing Chenasta. “Speaking of,” he grunted, moving over to the rubble. He grabbed two-hundred-pound stones and tossed them like playthings, uncovering the broken, smashed body of his foe.

Lifedrinker had split him right down the middle, and her enormous weight had smashed the guy into the wall so violently that most of his bones and flesh were literally a paste. Frowning in disgust, Victor pulled the fragments of his robes apart, digging through the purple-black flesh and viscous fluids, trying to find the man's heart. “Hell no,” he grunted, trying to imagine eating the disgusting slop. Reasoning that the man had been a type of Death Caster, Victor decided to let it go; what if he'd been some undead variant? Hadn't he learned his lesson about eating undead hearts?

Taking a few steps back, he gathered his Energy and cast Honor the Spirits instead. With a satisfied warmth in his heart, he watched his foe's remains flare brightly, consumed by ghostly white flames. As the spirit smoke faded into nothing, Victor grunted his approval. He might not have gotten his heart, but maybe his ancestors could make use of the bastard's foul remains. He hoped Lohanse wouldn't be angry that he took the whole corpse and not just the heart.

Victor turned to the far side of the arena and tried to cast Tactical Reposition again, but the spell wasn't ready. “Damn, that is a long cooldown.” While he walked, he thought about it and figured the spell's cooldown would shorten as he improved it. If it didn't, he could always try to make an improved variant using elder magic. Ten thousand Energy wasn't a light cost, though; it was nearly a fifth of his total pool, and if he improved the spell with elder magic, he'd probably significantly increase the cost. “I need more Energy,” he sighed, trudging down the tunnel to his ready room.

He was almost relieved to find no one waiting for him. Lohanse had been even-tempered and patient with him, even grateful, but he was probably inwardly furious by King Bayle's attempt to kill him. Victor could see him telling everyone to get the hell out. He chuckled, making his way to the teleportation chamber, and, with no one to say goodbye to, stepped through the portal to Iron Mountain.

Almost immediately, he was swarmed with attention. Kynna, Bryn, and Arona, along with the queen's attendants, were all waiting in the portal chamber. They applauded, some cheered, and the queen stepped forward, her face beaming. “You made Gloria proud today, Victor! What an honor to

say you bested a Great House and then aided the Grand Judicator to mete out justice! Well done, Champion!”

“Hear, hear!” Bryn cheered, and the Queensguard took up the cheer.

Victor sighed, waving his hand—half acknowledging the praise and half trying to dismiss it. “Thank you. I appreciate the love—” He absently rubbed his chest through the hole in his shirt, careful to keep from touching the void. It felt good just to massage and scratch the raw, stinging flesh around it. “—but I really need to rest after that one. I’ll go to my chambers if you all don’t need me for anything.”

“Of course!” Kynna turned and waved to her retainers and guards. “Give the champion some space. We’ll celebrate him soon with a royal feast!”

The crowd cheered again and filed out. Victor reached out to take Kynna’s wrist. “Uh, Your Majesty —” He grunted as he accidentally dragged his nail through the void. He pulled his hand away from his chest and continued, “Do you think you could send Florent to my tower? I need to speak to him about void magic.” He looked to Arona, who also stood nearby. “I need to consult you, too.”

Kynna’s dark brows narrowed. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing too serious, but I think I have some lingering effects from that pinché Void Caster’s spell.” He waved his hand. “Seriously, nothing to worry about.”

“Very well. I’ll have Florent come to see you immediately.” Kynna didn’t look happy, but Victor knew what she was thinking: anything Victor didn’t want to tell her would flow like water from a spigot out of Florent’s lips. He didn’t care; he just wanted to be spared going over the damn curse at that moment.

He nodded his head. “Thank you, Your Majesty. Let’s meet soon.”

That brought a small smile to her lips, and she inclined her head. “Very well, Champion. Rest well.”

Victor waved to Arona and Bryn. “Let’s go.”

Arona frowned but nodded, and Bryn was all too happy to hurry after him as he stomped out of the portal room and stretched his long legs. He wasn't sure why he was hurrying, but he figured that, on some level, he wanted to get his "curse of the void" looked at so he could put it out of his mind, one way or the other. He also had a king's storage ring to examine. Why had Lohanse steered him toward it? He hoped it was more than just riches—maybe it held a natural treasure of some sort. Despite the nagging, itching pain in his chest, a grin spread on his lips, and he slowed to allow Bryn and Arona to catch up. He might be cursed, but at least he had friends.

Book 10: Chapter 18: Fire Tempers Steel

18 – Fire Tempers Steel

Florent peered through a square he made with his thumbs and forefingers, staring at the mote of void Energy slowly devouring Victor's flesh. The cursed ball of nothing seemed to be almost stable, Victor's regeneration holding it at bay, but he knew that perception was deceiving. It only seemed so because it grew very, very slowly, but in the hour since he'd finished his duel, he could tell it had grown ever so slightly. Would the pace of expansion increase? Why had it grown so rapidly when Loss had first cast it?

Florent frowned and lowered his hands, turning his gaze on Victor's face. "A troubling bit of magic, milord."

"No shit. And?" Victor wasn't in the mood for small talk or beating around the bush.

"And I'll need to study it further. The simple fact of the matter is that void magic, at least to my knowledge, doesn't generally incorporate curses. I know how to destroy matter, teleport, and even sustain myself in the void, but curses—"

Arona interrupted him. "Curses are the province of darkly attuned Classes—Witches, Necromancers, Doomspeakers, Occultists, Gravehexers—I could list a hundred more. Most of them have an affinity for death, shadow, entropy, dread, pox—again, I could go on all day."

Victor looked at her as some hope fought to take root amid the dour thoughts dancing through his mind. "You know how to get rid of one?"

"Some, certainly. There are different sorts of curses, though, Victor. There are curses of the flesh, of the mind, and of the spirit. On the surface, this curse seems to be one of the flesh, but if that were the case, I feel like you would have resisted it by now." She frowned, folding her pale arms over the bodice of her dark blue gown. She stared at Victor's chest for a moment, then nodded, and in her raspy voice, continued, "We can test the theory, though it will involve some pain on your part."

Victor snorted. “We’re past that point. This damn thing hurts!”

Arona nodded, glancing around the room. They were in Victor’s parlor, near the balcony doors. He was sitting on the sofa, his legs kicked up on an ottoman. She moved to sit beside him. “If this is a curse of the flesh, if we carve the offending void Energy away from you and Florent destroys it, then you should be well again.”

“Okay.” Victor nodded, willing to try anything at this point.

“The void Energy would destroy a blade. I can slice it away with this,” Florent said, holding out his finger and projecting a beam of void Energy that looked like the absence of a knife blade.

“I’ll be precise, and as soon as I’ve carved it away, I’ll simply absorb the void Energy.”

“Do it,” Victor grunted, gritting his teeth.

Florent nodded and held the slightly crackling dagger of nothingness close to his chest while he splayed the fingers of his other hand. Florent gently, precisely guided his void blade underneath the tiny ball of void Energy in Victor’s chest. Victor sucked in a sharp breath as he felt the burning, electric pain of having his flesh dissolve before his eyes, and then it was gone. Florent had absorbed the Energy as soon as he carved it away from him.

Victor stared at the spot on his chest, watching as the bone of his sternum filled in, then the vessels and layers of skin, and then he was whole. He stared at his smooth, pain-free chest for several seconds, then began to smile. “I think it worked—”

“Drat!” Florent sighed, and Arona cursed as the mote of nothingness appeared at the center of Victor’s chest and began eating away at his flesh again.

“I was going to say something a lot worse,” Victor chuckled, looking at Arona. “Not a curse of the flesh, then?”

She shook her head. “And not of the mind.”

“Which leaves spirit, right? I don’t get it. How does that work?”

“It simply means that he’s bound the curse to your spirit, not your vessel.” By way of illustration, Arona tapped one of her polished, perfect nails against the center of her chest. “If I’d had such a curse before I died, it would have followed me to this body.”

“I’m a pinché Spirit Caster, Arona! How can that pendejo put a curse on my spirit?”

She chuckled. “You’re a formidable fighter with so many synergies as to make people—” She pointed to herself. “—wonder if the gods truly do exist and if they’ve blessed you. However, something tells me that a steel seeker, one who may have been cultivating his particular brand of power for centuries, might have the upper hand when it comes to a simple battle of wills.”

“My will is—”

“Formidable. I know. However, you aren’t the only person in the universe who’s ever had the bright idea to focus on developing that attribute.”

“I…” Victor shook his head, frustrated and unable to think of another objection.

“Interesting,” Florent said, nodding. “I know that many of my destructive spells, especially those meant to utterly annihilate a foe, can be resisted; it boils down to a battle of wills. So curses operate on much the same principle?”

Arona nodded, still looking at Victor. “Exactly. And now the curse has taken root, and the longer it festers, the deeper those roots will dig and the more difficult it will be for you to carve them out.”

Victor groaned. “I have to carve them out? Can’t people help? Can’t you?”

“Even as a Death Caster, I didn’t have a spirit affinity. I wouldn’t know how to begin. Perhaps your master?”

Victor frowned, irritated by the term. Hadn’t he come to terms with it, though? Hadn’t he decided he understood that, for now, Ranish Dar was his master? Things had changed, though, hadn’t they? He’d gained significant power since then. He’d had visits from ancestors and spent time with a true primordial titan—a being so powerful as to make Ranish Dar seem a bug. He pushed the thoughts

aside and nodded. "I'll message him." He was irritable from the pain and the frustrations he'd experienced as both the people he'd hoped could help him came up short.

"At least it seems to be growing slowly." Arona tilted her head, trying to make eye contact with him, but Victor didn't look at her. He knew she was trying to help him turn his mood around, but he wasn't ready.

"Yeah. It was a lot faster in the arena when he first cast the spell."

"Because he was alive and was feeding it Energy." She held up a finger, and her eyes widened as though she'd just had an idea, but then she shook her head. "I was going to suggest putting yourself somewhere with little or no ambient void Energy, but everything is the opposite of the void. I don't know where you could go."

"I had the same thought," Florent added. "Void Energy is always at a low level unless I go into an actual void or approach an artifact that's rich in it."

"That's why it's growing slowly?" Victor looked at the little mote again. It seemed the same.

"Yes," they both said.

Victor looked at Florent again. "Can't you just siphon it off? Cultivate from it?"

He shook his head. "Have you ever tried to cultivate from another Spirit Caster? This is part of you." He pointed to the spot of void Energy. "Apparently, it's tied all the way through your Core and into your spirit. You would reflexively fight me, and I don't want to battle your will. In the worst case, it would weaken you further and allow this curse to dig deeper."

Victor sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, scratching viciously. "All right. Thanks for the advice. I'm going to write to Ranish Dar now."

Florent nodded and turned toward the door, but he paused. "I'm sorry I wasn't more help, Your Grace, but I will remain near at hand, ready to aid you should you discover a course of action. I will also do what I can to research things on my end."

“I appreciate it.” Victor was too preoccupied to say more as he dug through the stack of Farscribe books in his storage ring, looking for Dar’s. He heard Florent leave and was vaguely aware of Arona sitting down beside him, but he’d already found the book and was flipping through the pages. There weren’t very many messages; Dar was a “hands-off” kind of master, it seemed. He sneered at himself, mentally labeling Dar that way out of spite.

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As he wrote a long, detailed explanation of what he was going through, Arona sat quietly, but when he closed the book, she said, “I should have kept my death affinity.”

Victor jerked his gaze her way. “What? Hell no.”

“I might have been able to research a cure for the curse—a way to lift it. I could have returned to Vesavo and asked for his help. He would have been happy to see I was alive; I could have convinced him I wasn’t trying to flee, that—”

“Stop it, Arona. I’d rather deal with this pinché thing eating away at me for a hundred years than put you through that. Seriously, though, do you think a Death Caster could help me?”

She sighed and shrugged, her delicate shoulders rising and falling so naturally that Victor really couldn’t believe that she was made of metal and crystal. How did it work? Did she only look like flesh and bone, or was she becoming flesh and bone? Was that how the spell—

Arona interrupted his thoughts by saying, “It’s possible that a veil walker with a Class specializing in curses may be able to devise a cure. Spirit curses are notoriously difficult to shake, however. I think your mast—”

“Call him by his name, please.”

Victor didn’t mean to snap, but his irritation must have been evident because Arona looked abashed. “I’m sorry! I meant…” He must have interrupted her train of thought because it looked like she was searching for the words again. Part of Victor wanted to apologize, but another part was tired of apologizing, tired of being nice. He knew he wasn’t being cool, but he also knew that he had a curse slowly devouring him and was in constant pain. He decided to cut himself some slack and, rather than apologizing, prompted her.

“You think Dar is my best bet?”

“I do.”

Victor nodded and sat up. He was shirtless, but he didn't care. He pulled the thick golden ring off his thumb and tossed it in the air, catching it with a satisfying thwap in the center of his palm. “This ring belonged to King Bayle. Lohanse hinted that I should claim it as a prize. What do you think is inside?”

“Hmm—” Arona leaned forward, clearly intrigued. “—a dimensional ring belonging to the king of a great house?” She held up a finger to indicate she wasn't done. “A king who was prepared to attempt to flee before the terms of a duel could be executed. I think it must be filled with riches. Perhaps his most valued objects!”

Her breathy enthusiasm was a little contagious, and Victor appreciated her efforts to help him forget about his curse. He grinned and nodded. “I was hoping it was something like that, too.”

“Well?” she prodded.

“All right, let me see here.” Victor sent a trickle of Energy into the ring, claiming it for himself, and then expanded his awareness into it. It was an ample space, but nothing so vast as the ring Kynna had given him. At first, he was disappointed when he saw the majority of the contents. He would have been thrilled a year ago, but now, a mountain of sacks containing millions of Energy beads wasn't so exciting to him. Still, he continued to peruse, and then a slow smile spread on his lips.

Nestled among the sacks of beads were six ornate chests. Five were identical—about four feet long by two feet wide and embossed with gold leaf designs. The sixth was smaller by about a third and made entirely of silver. He could feel what was in the five identical chests: Energy Hearts—dozens of them. Each was worth a small mountain of beads; he knew that much, and that was before finding out if any of them had rare Energy affinities.

He couldn't sense what was in the silver chest, so he kicked his ottoman back and summoned it out, placing it on the floor before him. He glanced at Arona and smiled. “So far, I've found maybe fifty million Energy beads and a few dozen Energy hearts.”

Her eyes opened wide. “A king's fortune!”

He nodded. "I don't know what's in here, though."

"Open it!" She slid from the couch and knelt beside the chest, watching with wide, bright eyes. Seeing her there on the floor, eagerly awaiting the opening of the chest, reminded him so strongly of a certain Christmas when the cousins had all gathered at his abuela's house to open presents that a powerful wave of melancholy struck him. He closed his eyes and tried to savor the memory. He'd fought with his cousins more often than not, but they'd been happy then. Everyone had a present to open, and his dear, sweet abuelita had made tamales and—

"Victor? Is something amiss? Does the void pain you so?"

Victor realized he had a tear running down his cheek, and he opened his eyes, blinking away more of them. He shook his head and inhaled deeply, shaking his head. "I'm all right. To be honest, it was a happy memory that hit me." He leaned forward and flipped the latch on the chest. "Let's see what's in this sucker." As he lifted the lid and let the hinges hold it open, he stared at the contents and wrinkled his brow in consternation. "The hell is this stuff?"

The chest was lined with black felt and, nestled in cutouts, were seven polished, ovoid crystals. Each was about the size of a soda bottle and shone with a faint pink inner light. At the center of the seven crystals, also surrounded by felt, were two other objects: a rune-etched cube of golden metal and a matching sphere about the size of a billiard ball.

"It looks like an array—a, um, formation. You set the crystals up in a pattern, and then those other two objects must be part of it," Arona guessed.

Victor reached into the chest and lifted out the golden cube. Either he was lucky, or some intuition had guided his hand because beneath it was a rectangle of cardstock imprinted with neat lettering. He set the heavy cube down and picked up the card, reading aloud, "Portable teleportation array instructions for operation." He looked at Arona, who lifted her eyebrows in interest.

"Well? Read the rest!"

Victor grinned. "Step one: Arrange the pattern crystals equidistantly from the control cube. Each crystal will glow with steady, bright light when positioned correctly. Step two: Allow the array to absorb ambient Energy. When the crystals begin to flash with a steady rhythm, the array is ready. Step three: With the destination orb in hand, concentrate on your desired destination. This must be a location familiar to you. After completing steps one through three, a portal will appear and remain active until the array pattern is broken."

“Victor! This is...” Arona shook her head, apparently lost for words.

“I mean, I’ve seen portal arrays before...” He was thinking of the one Tes used on their quick trip back to Fanwath. He had no idea how rare or valuable such a thing was, but she’d acted like it was on loan from her order and that it was kind of a big deal.

“Like the portal room in your palace? Or at the arena? Those are very different! They have anchor stones on either end. Someone had to travel to that place to make the link. With this array, you can hold that orb in your hand and go anywhere you have ever been. I mean, as long as you remember it.”

Victor’s stomach dropped as, for the second time that day, he thought of his abuela. Could the array make a portal to Earth? He doubted it—there was no Energy flow on Earth, causing most teleportation means to fail. Still, he could try it. He still hadn’t forgotten that Tes said there was a way, but he couldn’t remember the details. He just knew he’d have to pack a ton of Energy to keep himself alive, considering his body now sustained itself on it.

“Are you going to try it?”

Victor nodded. “Sure. We could visit my home—Fanwath. We could go to Sojourn. Maybe I’ll go there right away if Dar says he can help me.” Victor put the card back in the chest and then closed the lid. “I mean, if there’s someplace you want to go—”

“No!” She shook her head. “I don’t want to see my family, and I certainly don’t want to run into Vesavo. I will accompany you where you need to go, though; I’m here to help.”

Victor inhaled deeply, nodding as he picked up his Farscribe book again. “Thank you, Arona, but I honestly don’t want you to feel so indebted to—”

She interrupted him for a second time. “It’s not just that. I want to help you. I want to see you through this problem.”

“Well, thanks.” Victor flipped the book open, very much doubting Dar would have replied so quickly, but he was surprised to see a lengthy—for Dar—note from the Spirit Master:

Victor,

I'm sorry to hear about your predicament. A curse upon your spirit is no small thing, and this one sounds particularly pernicious. I have some words of encouragement for you and, unfortunately, some words that might bring a bit of gloom to your no-doubt already troubled mind. First, the encouragement: you are a Spirit Caster and a strong one at that. You can beat this curse, but it will take everything in you and some hard work and resources besides.

This is a matter of will. To do battle with the curse, you must enter the spirit plane as pure spirit—set aside your material being and possessions. To carry them over is to mask your spirit, and when masked, you will not see the corruption of the curse. I believe, instinctually, you'll know what to do when you see the aspect of the curse. You will do battle, but, as I said, victory will come with the strength of your will, not muscle. I would not attempt this until you are ready. Retreat is possible, though not guaranteed.

Now for the gloom. I believe I could rid you of this curse, but it would cost you two-fold. One, I'd have to cut it away; as I am not you, and I cannot exert my will from within your spirit, I would have to grasp onto the curse and pull—I am certain your spirit would be damaged in the process which could result in all manner of trauma: lost Energy, a fragmented Core, or even physiological damage such as lost memories or a weakened vessel. As you are undoubtedly aware, your spirit is intimately connected to all aspects of your being. Any damage to it will have repercussions.

I said the cost would be two-fold. The other half would be another debt to me. Call me cruel, curse me, do what you will—I have aided you before and will do so again, but this process would not be free. I say this for two reasons. Firstly, you must understand that I have my priorities, and there are many demands on my time. Secondly, I want to encourage you to solve this problem independently. I believe the trials we face push us to our true potential; why do you think you so cleanly thrashed the pampered children of the elite in Sojourn?

I can offer a few bits of wisdom to aid in your success. Most imperatively, do not trust another to solve this problem. Do not seek out a “curse-master” or some such thing. I know the spirit well, and I can assure you that any such specialist will harm you at the very least as much as I would. This curse has already taken root, and it will not go quietly.

Once you've come to grips with the situation and found the mental fortitude to commit to solving this problem on your own, you must do all that you can to strengthen yourself. Cultivate your will—if you are near a Class change, be sure to choose one that provides a boost to your will and then gain some levels!

If the curse begins to spread too quickly and you aren't able yet to battle it, try consuming a racial or bloodline enhancement treasure! It may slow the progression. The mightier your vessel, the more potent its resistance. And remember: your Spirit Core is linked to your spirit. Cultivate it. Build it. Do what you have been too lazy or too busy to do for so long.

As parting words, Victor, I will remind you that fire tempers steel, young champion. This curse may well be the impetus to significant growth. Good luck. Keep me apprised of your progress. Remember that I can and will aid you, but it should be a last resort.

R.D.

“This cryptic pendejo!” Victor groaned and passed the book to Arona so he didn't have to repeat all of Dar's bullshit.

Book 10: Chapter 19: Getting Organized

19 – Getting Organized

Victor spent the rest of the afternoon watching Arona experiment with his new teleportation array. He was interested, of course, but he was in a sour mood, uncomfortable, and too mentally distracted to really help. While she moved furniture around to make space and laid the array out on the ornate rug of his sitting room, Victor contemplated his future or the potential lack thereof.

It was hard to forget that he was facing a deadline, what with the painful reminder burning and boring its way into his chest. He wanted to be angry at Ranish Dar but knew he was being unreasonable. Considering the culture the Master Spirit Caster was a part of, he was actually a pretty decent guy. Yes, he put a virtual collar around Victor's neck in exchange for helping his friend, but there were many powerful beings in the Sojourn-controlled part of the universe who would have taken much more.

No, Dar's letter hadn't been overly spiteful or demanding. In fact, he'd been encouraging, and the man had offered to help Victor as a last resort. Sure, he'd said it would cost Victor, but he'd explained those costs, and though Victor thought further debt was a little out of line, he had no real idea; perhaps it would cost Dar, too. Maybe it would take something out of the man to battle the curse in Victor's spirit, or maybe he'd lose significant opportunities by taking the time to do so. The point was, once again, Victor wasn't the person in the position of power, and he couldn't fault Dar for that.

It was that feeling of powerlessness that rankled, multiplied by the pain and—barely suppressed—fear of his current condition. How much stronger had he grown since first being summoned to Fanwath? A hundred times? A thousand? A million? Whatever the amount, he was still weak

compared to so many. He was weak in the face of his current predicament. Perhaps that was why Dar's words had rubbed him the wrong way—they were true. He had to get stronger. He had to beat this problem on his own.

He'd considered using the dream crystal Tes had given him, reaching out to her for help, but Dar's warning struck true—if someone else solved this for him, he'd lose something. Even if Tes could do it perfectly or knew someone who could, Victor would lose the opportunity to prove himself to... himself. In the back of his mind, he'd had that option before. Hadn't he gone crawling to Dar? Before reading Dar's reply, he wouldn't have been bothered by that. Now, though, he couldn't stomach the idea—another reason to feel irritated by his mentor.

Dar had made it clear that Victor ought to be able to beat this curse, thereby making it impossible for Victor's pride to allow him to beg other, more powerful people for help. No, he had to solve this. He had the means: he was a duke in one of the wealthiest kingdoms on the planet, and, aside from that, he'd just gained a king's ransom of treasure. Kynna owed him natural treasures, and he could buy more. He needed to do what must be done to push his advancement.

"I've got it!" Arona said, clapping her hands.

"Yeah?" Victor looked to see she'd arranged the glowing crystal cylinders around the golden, rune-etched control module. Each of the crystals shone brighter than before, and Victor could see them slowly gaining brightness. Presumably, they were charging up. All in all, the array only had about an eight-foot diameter. "I was wondering—how long will the portal last if we pick up everything so we can travel through it? You know, like a one-way trip."

"We'll test that as soon as it's charged up. Here." Arona tossed the destination orb his way, and Victor caught it. It was just as heavy as he'd imagined—a solid ball of gold. He gripped it tightly for a minute, then stood, tossing it back to her. "Don't go anywhere, please. Keep an eye on it while I go and speak to Kynna."

"What about?" Arona made a strange face, and he could tell she felt like she'd overstepped, getting into his personal business.

Victor answered quickly so she could relax. "I want to ask her about the fallout from the duel and get an idea of how much time I have before the next. If I'm going to take Dar's advice, I could use a little time."

She nodded, uncomfortable expression melting into a solemn nod. "I'll keep the array safe and wait for you."

“I won’t be long.” Victor summoned a shirt from one of his rings and shrugged into it. When he buttoned the front, he left the top few buttons open so the spot of void wouldn’t destroy it. Thinking about that, he reached for the chain holding his marble-sized vault and key. It hung a few inches above the void, but what if it grew? If he lost the vault to this curse, he’d be furious. He removed it and looped the chain a few times around his wrist, turning it into a bracelet for the time being.

Outside his quarters, Bryn met him, frowning as she laid eyes on the void still swirling, the size of a fingernail, at the center of his chest. She’d seen it when they arrived but had left the room as Arona and Florent tried to help him brainstorm a solution. Victor shrugged. “Still there.”

“Hmm.” Bryn jerked her chin up and down. “You should cover it. We don’t want rumors to spread.”

“It’ll just destroy my shirt.”

She leaned close, peering at the void. “I think not. If your shirt is loose and if you don’t press on the spot. It seems to have sunk very slightly below the level of your flesh. Besides, your pectorals are significantly higher than the center of your chest.”

Victor frowned, but he supposed she was right. His other shirt had been ruined by his movements and constant reaching up to worry at the itching, burning wound. He buttoned his shirt, and when it didn’t immediately dissolve, he nodded and stepped onto the elevator. “Do me a favor and guard that door. Arona’s working on something valuable.”

Bryn frowned and folded her arms. “I fail to see what sort of threat I could stop that she couldn’t.”

“Well, maybe not, but you can at least alert her so nothing takes her by surprise.” Victor pushed the button to descend and, as the doors closed, added, “Thank you, Bryn.”

She continued to scowl but offered no more objection. Once the elevator descended, Victor hurried through the palace to the wing Kynna had commandeered. Her guards led him to her in the same study she seemed to favor, the one bordering the flower garden. When he stepped into the room, she looked up from the divan where she sat, wreathed in the red-orange glow of the sunset. “Victor! Tell me: how bad is it?”

He waved a hand. “It’s nothing. I suppose Florent squealed?”

“He was very worried, Victor. Don’t hold it against the man.”

“Why would I? I counted on him telling you. It saves me the trouble.”

“So? Has your other companion found a remedy?” She patted the cushion beside her, but Victor sat down in a wide, comfortable chair with its back to the garden; he enjoyed the feel of the fading sunlight on his neck.

“Not exactly, but your ancestor has given me guidance. This is something I’ll need to conquer on my own. However, there are ways that you can help.”

She set her wine glass down and leaned forward. “Anything!”

“Well, first, I need you to keep me informed, with as much accuracy as possible, on the dates of my duels. I’ll need to accomplish things between them, which will require careful timing.”

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“I will do my utmost to do so, but you know there are many unpredictable factors—”

Victor waved a hand, interrupting her. “I know. Just do your best.”

“What else can I do?” She looked so earnest. Her eyes were so wide and bright, the white flames dancing hypnotically behind their crystalline surface, that Victor struggled not to stare into them. She licked some droplets of wine from her bottom lip and almost seemed embarrassed by the act. It was endearing. “I’m sorry—I was torn between relief and celebration at your victory and then terror and dread when Florent made his report. I turned to the wine to try to ease my mind—”

“Hush, Kynna. I don’t begrudge you a bit of comfort. I’d be drinking right now, too, if your ancestor hadn’t lit a fire under my ass.” He chuckled at her arched eyebrow. “Anyway, the other way you can help me is to do everything you can to gather potent natural treasures or alchemical mixtures meant to advance my bloodline or, more generically, my race. I have to continue to strengthen my vessel if I’m going to beat this thing. Honestly, it’s the only reason I’m not dead already. Understand?”

Kynna nodded, and Victor saw moisture gathering in her eyes. “I—” To his horror, a sob choked off her words.

Victor leaned forward and grasped her wrist, pulling her hand to him. He squeezed it. Her skin was soft without the hint of a callus. “I’m not dead, and I won’t let this pinché curse do me in. All right?”

She sniffed and nodded. “It’s worse than you’re letting on, though.” Victor didn’t respond but held his expression steady, staring into her eyes. “I despair because I’ve been trying to find a natural treasure that will aid you. Epic-tier treasures of that nature are exceedingly rare. I will send more envoys further afield. We’ll plunder the auction houses of a thousand worlds if we must. I won’t spare any expense!”

Victor smiled and nodded. “Thank you. Don’t ruin the economy, but yeah, I’d appreciate even one.” He inhaled deeply and released her hand, leaning back in his chair. “Now, any idea how long until my next duel?”

Kynna nodded and leaned back on the divan. “I will be extremely pressed with political matters while we work to absorb Alvessia. Moreover, there will no doubt be some repercussions for Bayle’s attempt to slay Lohanse. Things have heated up, and when the veil walkers come under fire, their attention on the political goings-on tends to intensify. I believe assassination attempts and other such schemes will be set aside for a while, allowing me more time to negotiate and maneuver. Theoretically, we’ll need to work our way from the southern point of the eastern continent to the center where House Khaliday holds sway.”

“What’s the next logical target?”

“The kingdom that would move us the furthest north would be Voth.”

“Yeah? I’ve heard that name…” Victor searched his memory, but Kynna filled in the missing pieces.

“Trinnie Ro’s father was once champion there.”

“Ah.” Victor nodded, his lips curling into a frown as he thought of the champion he’d slain.

“Currently, Voth’s champion is a man named Resh A’kel. He’s a deadly combatant, Victor—well-feared by many other great houses. Bomar Lund, the King of Voth, has used A’kel’s reputation to

strike many favorable trade bargains in the last few decades; his kingdom's influence has risen quickly among the other houses."

Victor chuckled. "Always trying to caution me. I appreciate your honesty, My Queen. Now, setting aside your concern about Resh A'kel's prowess, if you would work to secure a duel with Voth, can you give me a rough idea of the timeline?"

She sighed and nodded. "Somewhere between six months and ten years. This conquest has been moving far more quickly than usual, Victor, thanks to a series of events that have worked out in our favor, but fights like this—kingdoms vying for everything—don't generally happen overnight."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that. So, let's take advantage of the lull and start pressuring Voth. In the meantime, you can continue to force the other kingdoms on this continent to bend their knees to you. After I beat Loss Chenasta, I don't see any of these lesser houses attempting to resist you. Once we finally take Voth down—hopefully in months rather than years—the other great houses will realize you have more power than they do. You're already, by landmass, a greater force than most of them. I'm sure your economy is growing apace. Yes?"

Kynna nodded. "Yes. However, you underestimate the amount of plundering some of the oldest houses have done over the centuries. Much of the wealth of this continent has already been stripped and taken by them. There's a reason there are no great houses on this continent." Victor opened his mouth to argue further, but she held up her hands. "Nevertheless, your point stands. If I control this continent, they will feel the pinch, especially if I start to deny trade with their nations individually. We can begin to apply true pressure. I'll do my best to accelerate our diplomatic efforts, Victor. In the meantime, you mustn't let people know of your condition."

"Nope. I intend to do some traveling, though I won't broadcast it. Honestly, I'll be in and out of my quarters atop my tower quite often, so don't fear that I'll be disappearing for long periods." Victor stood up. "Stay in touch with me via our Farscribe book. I'll always have a portal nearby so I can return quickly."

The queen, too, stood, and she stepped toward him, hesitantly stretching her fingers toward his chest. Victor took a step back, and she blushed slightly. "I'm sorry. Please do what you must to recover, Victor. I'll notify you the instant I have an appropriate treasure."

Victor smiled and inclined his head, suddenly feeling much better about things. He felt like he was beginning to build a plan, and having that structure in mind went a long way toward keeping his earlier frustration and the corrupting tendrils of fear at bay. "I'll speak to you soon, My Queen."

With that, he turned and marched from her room, barely pausing to acknowledge the folks who called out greetings on his way through the palace.

When he returned to the antechamber to his tower, Bryn was standing watch as he'd requested, and Victor's improved mood must have been evident because she greeted him with, "Something good happened?"

"Some good things are happening, Bryn. Do you suppose I can entrust you with a very important task?"

She straightened up, her golden glaive thumping the polished marble floor. "You know you can, Your Grace!"

Victor chuckled and reached into his storage ring to retrieve the plans he'd drawn up for his cultivation chamber. It was a simple leather-bound notebook with neat scribbles and detailed sketches. His intelligence and dexterity were so far beyond what he'd been born with that his old self, struggling to write neat letters or complete basic geometry problems, would have thought an alien or super genius had written the notes. Victor was no such thing—the super genius part—but he had an uncanny control of his fingers and a mind capable of grasping complicated concepts if he put the effort into it.

"You know I'm having a cultivation chamber constructed in there, right?" He nodded toward his quarters.

"Yes, of course. You've had workers coming and going for weeks."

"Well, I'm still waiting on the amber ore to line it, and the door and artifact chambers, which are being constructed by an Artificer in town, are a ways from delivery." He handed her the book.

"Here are my plans. I want you to ride their asses until it's done. Here—" He summoned several large sacks of beads from the ring he'd taken from King Bayle and set them on the ground before her. "That's about a million beads. Bribe people if you have to or hire more workers, but get that ore out of the mine and into my cultivation chamber as soon as possible. Tell the Artisan to hire more assistants if he needs to. His name's in the book."

Bryn nodded, reaching down to transfer the sacks of beads to her own storage ring. "I can do that. Are you leaving?"

“I’m going to be in and out, which brings me to another point: when I’m not here, there might be an active portal in my quarters. I’ll put it in the study, so don’t let anyone go in there. Put Faust on the door if you have to, especially when the workers are going in and out.”

“Understood. So—” She stopped short, eyeing his chest, and he knew she wanted to ask about his curse.

Victor let her off the hook. “I have a plan to make myself well again, and yes, this is all a part of that. Okay?”

Bryn nodded and saluted again. “You can count on me!”

Victor grinned, reaching out to gently thump his fist on the side of her armored shoulder. “I know I can.” He looked into her eyes for several seconds and then entered his quarters. Arona was there, in his sitting area, standing before a magenta rip in the fabric of reality.

“It works,” she announced.

Victor saw she held the destination orb in her hand. “Where does it lead?”

“A tranquil deserted little forest on a world I helped Vesavo to conquer a decade ago. I hope you aren’t angry. I stepped through to ensure it worked but came right back when I saw the destination was what I intended.”

Victor frowned, clicking his tongue as he walked toward her. “I’m not angry, but I wish you would have let me know. What if you got lost or—”

“Someone had to test it. It’s the least I can do for you.”

“I appreciate your loyalty, Arona, but let’s be smart about things, okay?” He bent to pick up one of the crystals. “Help me gather these. Let’s see how long it takes the portal to shut down.” The two of them walked around, picking up the warm, glowing crystals, and when they had all of them in hand, they watched the portal for nearly five minutes before it crackled and snapped shut with a soft, squelching pop.

Victor sent all the portal array pieces into his storage ring and then turned to Arona. “Okay. I’ve got a plan. I’m going to trust you with another one of my secrets.”

“Oh?” she arched one of her perfect, feathery dark eyebrows.

He jerked his head toward his study door. “Let’s go in there. We’re going to have a chat with a certain Dungeon Core named Du.”

Book 10: Chapter 20: Just Passing Through

20 – Just Passing Through

Wincing a little, resisting the urge to rub the nagging, burning, itching ache in his chest, Victor twisted the key in his miniaturized vault and set it down in the center of his study. As it steamed and jumped, rapidly expanding, he backed up to stand beside Arona. “Just a minute or so,” he said, looking past her to ensure the door was closed.

“Is it a travel home?”

“No, more like a vault. At least, that’s how I’ve come to think of it.”

“Ah, I understand,” she replied, running her eyes over the spherical construct as it surged to its final size, the thousands of bright, flaring runes in the dark metal slowly fading to a dim, ochre glow.

Victor stepped forward and turned the key the rest of the way, opening the circular door with a hiss of magical steam. “Just wait here a moment, please.” He stared at Arona until she nodded, then stepped inside, peering around the vault in the strange, magenta glow of the silent Dungeon Core.

He gathered up the satchel containing his most prized treasure—the ivid royal jelly—and ensured the silk Queen Crystal had given him was still wrapped snugly around the jar. Then he tucked it down into the satchel and set it on the far side of the vault behind some lesser magical treasures and other containers. He trusted Arona, but he remembered how just a whiff of the jelly had affected Tes. Of course, Arona didn’t have the senses of a dragon nor the power of a veil walker, so he doubted she would even be able to sense the jelly inside the shroud, but he didn’t want to take chances.

Stepping back around Du’s floating, spherical, gem-like body, he pushed the door wide. “Come on in.” When Arona eagerly stepped past the threshold and peered around the vault’s interior, Victor pointed to the floating, soft-ball-sized Dungeon Core. “Do you know what that is?”

She shook her head. “Since you brought me here after indicating we’d speak to a Dungeon Core, I presume that’s what it is; I can’t imagine you would have chosen a pink-hued light to illuminate your vault.”

Victor chuckled, shaking his head. “Yeah, that’s right. This is Du, and he’s been pretty damn quiet since I took him out of the dungeon he’d created in the bowels of Iron Mountain.” Unconsciously, he began to reach for the sore at his chest, but Arona reached out and snatched his wrist. He looked at her slender, strong fingers and how they failed to close around his thick bones. Still, she’d served to remind him, and he nodded. “Thanks.”

She let go, then gestured to the orb. “So how does this being fit into your plans?”

“Well, Du asked me to place him somewhere where he might attract more visitors. I wondered if such a favor would be worth some favors in return—”

“Have I not given you enough?”

Victor grinned and winked at Arona before saying, “Du! I’m so glad you’ve broken your silence. That’s what I wanted to speak to you about. The treasure you gave me was amazing, but so, too, were the challenges I faced in your dungeon. Are you capable of creating as many encounters like that as you want, or does it drain you somehow?”

“These are topics I’m expressly forbidden to speak about.”

“By the System?”

“What else?”

Victor grinned at Arona. “So the System grants you certain powers, right? You let that slip when we last spoke. You chose the treasures I earned in your dungeon. Since you’ve told me that much, you might as well clarify. Can the System even see you in this vault? Will it know you’re speaking to me?”

Du pulsed silently for several seconds, and then his voice warbled, “Oh, woe unto me! Am I held captive in this dimensional space? Thank the fates that my jailor has left the door open, allowing the benevolent System to monitor my plight in this pocket of the universe outside its influence!”

Victor almost laughed at the Core's antics, but he held his tongue while he turned and pulled the vault door closed. Putting the key into the interior slot, he twisted it until the many locks fell into place with loud thunks.

"Oh, wicked jailor! I will answer your questions, but only because you've cut me off from the benevolent System, and I fear for my very existence!"

Victor laughed, looking at Arona to see if she was enjoying Du's theatrics. Her expression was quizzical though—one narrowed eye, pursed lips, even a finger held up as she contemplated her words. "Is—is this Dungeon Core helping you to hide our conversation from the System?"

Victor nodded as he winked exaggeratedly. "No, no. Can't you see he's under duress?"

"Yes! Yes, such wicked duress!"

Victor sighed, his constant pain and irritation resurfacing to supplant his momentary amusement. "So, Du, tell me: can you repeat what you did for me in the Crucible of Fire?"

"Not exactly, no. I am awarded something called 'influence points' in the System's dungeon management protocols. I earn them passively over time and via certain activities and milestones. In your case, I spent a vast surplus of influence points with abandon to garner your favor, hoping you would return with companions who would then return with their companions, and so on."

"So you're out?"

"Oh, not hardly! I still have many, but more importantly, I'm a high-level dungeon, and even without my influence, the System will continue to allow me to access appropriate treasure; I just won't have a say in what it is."

"So you can make dungeons challenging for me? Like the Crucible?"

"So long as I have a steady flow of ambient Energy, yes. Of course, the type of ambient Energy influences the environments I can create."

Arona stepped closer to Du and asked, “The density of ambient Energy impacts how often or difficult you make your dungeons?”

Du flashed several times, then said, “Hello, stranger. I am Du.”

Arona let out a raspy chuckle. “Apologies, kind Dungeon Core. I am Arona Moonshadow.”

“Thank you for the introduction. Were we in an environment of my making, I would know more about you. We Dungeon Cores are granted certain insights as we progress through the System’s levels. How else would we know what treasures would best suit our visitors?” He pulsed a few times, then continued, “To answer your question, at my level, I can create low-tier dungeons by the dozens, day after day. If I want to create a high-tier dungeon, I must gather Energy, so, yes, thick ambient Energy will speed that process along.”

“If I give you a new home with a ready supply of Energy in the air, will you agree to always offer an appropriate challenge to the people who enter your portal?”

“Victor, there are different types of dungeons: static, meaning they don’t change from entry to entry—the monsters and the treasure are always the same; adaptive, meaning they will adjust their level and treasure to match their entrants; and progressive, meaning they keep track of their entrants and can only offer a stronger challenge after each successful completion.”

“And you?”

“I am a progressive dungeon. I cannot alter that about myself, though I think it’s the best of both worlds. If you fail and must flee the dungeon, I will not increase the difficulty for you, but if you succeed, I cannot open another instance for you until I’ve gathered enough Energy to create an even stronger challenge. Like an adaptive dungeon, I can change my layout and encounters, and I can influence the treasures you find. Static dungeons are so dull—I almost pity them.”

Arona cleared her throat. “If you meant to have your people use Du to gain levels, it seems like a good fit, Victor. He will challenge them appropriately.”

Victor nodded, rubbing his chin. “Well, I’ll give you a new home as long as you make a simple agreement with me.”

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“What are your terms, Sir Victor?”

Remembering some of the more deadly challenges Du had thrown his way, Victor said, “I want to make known to you a few people I care about, and I want you to agree never to give them an encounter from which they cannot flee—no deathtraps.”

“A few, you say?”

Victor nodded. “Yes, no more than ten. If they bring companions, though, don’t try to use that as a loophole to entrap them.” He looked at Arona to see if she thought he was making a mistake, but she met his eyes and nodded.

“I will abide by your terms so long as you give me a good home and allow access to people other than those on your...list.”

“I will. I’ll post warnings, however. I know how tricky you can be.”

“Excellent. An informed entrant is always more fun than a buffoon who stumbles upon me unawares.”

“Okay, Du, we’ll speak again soon.” Victor unlocked the vault and stepped out, holding it open for Arona. When she was out, he locked it and turned the key until it began to shrink again. “I gained several levels when I cleared that dungeon—most of tier seven.”

“Ah! You hope to use him to gain power and, thus, be more prepared to battle this curse!”

“Yep.” Victor smiled and stooped to pick up his vault, looping the chain around his wrist again. “Can you set up the portal array? I need to send a message.” Victor unloaded all the parts to the array, setting them in the center of the room, and then, while Arona got to work laying the crystals out, he summoned the Farscribe book he shared with Rellia. His message was short and to the point:

Rellia –

I'm coming to visit this evening. I hope you have a page or somebody like that watching this book; otherwise, I guess it'll be a surprise.

-Victor

He closed the book and looked up to see the portal array was already pulsing as it gathered ambient Energy. "You need to get anything together?" he asked Arona. She was perusing one of his bookcases, reading the titles of books his predecessor had put there. "We'll be gone a few days, probably."

"Did you tell the queen? Bryn?"

"Yeah. I mean, I didn't say we were leaving this second, but I've got Farscribe books with them both. I put Bryn in charge of my little construction project."

"Everything I have is here." Arona held up her left hand, displaying a few gem-studded rings.

"Good." Victor summoned another Farscribe book—the one he shared with Valla—and looked to see if she'd written anything new. The last message he had from her was a brief note saying she wished she could join him and Tes on Fanwath but was too busy with her obligations to leave on such short notice. He frowned when he saw nothing new written. Had she moved on so completely? Of course, he was aware of the hypocrisy of the thought; she still came to his mind now and then, but he was pretty much over the heartbreak of her decision to put their relationship in limbo.

Arona saved him from further contemplations by saying, "It's ready."

"Cool." Victor stood and walked to the center of the pattern and picked up the destination orb where he'd set it. "I just hold this and think of where I want to go?" Arona nodded, so he clutched the heavy golden ball and pictured the garden behind his home on Fanwath. He focused on the little fountain, the beds of flowering shrubs, the way the peaked, gabled roof of the rear solar reflected the sun's light—

A crackling sizzle sounded as a reddish-pink rip in the fabric of the universe appeared at the center of the array's pattern. "Okay, I'm taking the array with us, so we have to hurry." Victor gathered the crystals, sending them into his storage ring one after the other, and then he picked up the control box and did the same. "Ready?"

Suddenly, Arona held a silvery staff, thin and delicate. Its top end, about a foot higher than her head, was adorned with delicate branches of silvery metal that looped and bent into the shape of intricate glyphs. “I am ready.”

Victor grinned. “New staff?”

She shook her head. “Not new. It’s a more general focus of Energy than my death-attuned treasures. It’ll work better with my solar Energy.” Without another word or a backward glance, she stepped through the portal.

“She’s very direct,” Victor said to the empty room, then stepped through the portal after her. To his relief, it deposited them directly where he’d hoped, even though the sunlight was different than in his visualization—it was early morning, and the sky was gray. He gestured to his hermitage. “My house on Fanwath. I need to speak to my governor before our next stop.” He unpacked the array and set the parts, aside from the destination orb, on the lip of the fountain. “Can you set it up again? I don’t know how long it will take to charge here.”

Arona didn’t so much as frown. She just nodded and got to work. For a moment, Victor wondered if he was mistreating her in his haste. If he hadn’t had a void eating away at his chest, he might have taken some time to show her around and introduce her to people. He wondered if she would have objected to his constant requests if she weren’t so convinced that she owed him so much. Things were how they were, though, and he could only resolve to make it up to her later.

He stormed into the house, bellowing, “Gorro! Governor!”

One of the kitchen staff came charging down a dark hallway, eyes wide. “Lord Victor?”

“Yes. Sorry to startle you. I have to speak to the governor.”

“He’s likely up and about, I’ll—”

“I’m here,” Gorro said, striding around another corner. He was fastidious as ever despite the early hour. His hair was perfectly combed, and his suit was neat and clean—even his shirt was tucked in. “How may I be of service, milord? Is aught amiss?”

“No. I just have pressing matters and a big job for you. Let’s go to the study.” Victor led the way, and when he’d closed the door behind Gorro, he began to explain. “I need you to assemble a construction crew. An enormous one with skilled Earth Elementalists. We’re going to rebuild the road, the twin citadels, and the bridge leading up to the volcano’s caldera.”

To his credit, Gorro didn’t look stunned or even bothered. He blinked, rubbed his chin, and said, “I suppose Lady Rellia will be funding this endeavor?”

Victor grinned. He knew what the man was thinking; the volcano was north of his borders and fell squarely on Rellia’s lands. “Nope. I’m going to buy it from her.”

“You’re going to buy the mountain?” His eyebrows shot up. “The construction alone will require years to pay for with the income of your province. I’m unsure what we could use as collateral for a purchase of that magnitude.”

“No, Gorro.” Victor shook his head, chuckling. “I mean, me, personally. I’ll buy the mountain from her, and here—” Victor summoned ten bags of beads from his storage ring, piling them on the rug between them. “—add this to our treasury to pay for the construction. If it’s insufficient, let me know. I consider this an investment, and so should you because we’re going to be making a lot of income from the project I have planned for the caldera.”

“Do you have more detailed instructions? Plans?”

“I will have, but for now, just assemble a crew capable of rebuilding the road and the citadels. I’ll have detailed plans in your Farscribe book before you finish that.” He turned to the closed door. “If there’s nothing else, I should go and see Rellia.”

“Will you visit with Miss Cora? She and Lady Efanie are surely still abed, but I could wake—”

Victor shook his head. “No, Gorro. I’ll be back when I have time to relax. Right now, I’m feeling some pressure. Maybe keep my brief visit between—” Victor cut himself off. That was stupid. A servant had already seen him, so everyone in the house knew he was home by now. “Never mind that. Go ahead and tell her I said hello and that I’d be back to visit soon. I’m going to be here a lot more in the near future.”

Gorro nodded, clearly relieved by Victor’s change of course. “I’ll be happy to do so, milord.”

Victor shook his governor's hand, then he turned and strode through the house, nodding to the many staff members who happened to have something to do in the hallways between his study and the back doors. He supposed it was both exciting and alarming for him to arrive so suddenly, and he couldn't blame them for trying to get an idea of what was going on.

Outside, he found Arona sitting on the edge of the fountain, watching the crystals pulsing with soft, pink light as they charged. They were definitely pulsing more slowly than on Ruhn. "How long, do you think?"

She tapped her fingers on her staff and wrinkled her eyebrows as she contemplated the question. "I think ten more minutes or so. It's about twenty-five percent as fast as back in your palace."

"Perfect." Victor began to summon containers from his storage rings, sorting through a few valuables and preparing for his meeting with Rellia. She'd try to drive a hard bargain; after all, the mountain probably took up a couple of hundred thousand acres—a significant piece of property. More than that, she'd be curious what he wanted with it and likely assume it had some natural value. More than that, it was a hell of a landmark. He could imagine it was a bit of a point of pride for her to look at the massive, scoop-topped peak and think of it as hers.

"It's ready," Arona announced again.

"All right." Victor stowed away his treasures and summoned the destination orb. He stood in the pattern and pictured the courtyard outside Rellia's palace as he'd last seen it. A few seconds later, the rip in the universe reappeared. He gathered up the portal array's components and said, "Better let me go through first this time. The portal's probably already surrounded by guards."

Arona gripped her staff and stood ready. "I will be close behind."

Victor held up a hand, grunting in amusement. "But don't attack them!"

She gave him the barest of nods. "As you wish."

Victor narrowed his eyes at her briefly but then nodded and turned, stepping through the portal. Just as he'd presumed, a hundred soldiers surrounded him. Dozens of spear-wielding men and women in Rellia's livery and a hundred or more sharpshooters on the walls. He held up his hands and laughed, "Relax. I come in peace. I'm here to see Lady Rellia."

“Lord Victor?” one of the guards called out.

“Yes! And I have one companion coming through.”

“At ease!” the man’s voice rang out, and Victor thought he recognized Rellia’s guard captain. “Clear a path,” the man roared, and the guards began to break ranks. Spears were lifted, and a buzz of conversation filled the air as the soldiers who knew Victor made exclamations and those who didn’t asked questions. Arona stepped through the portal, her eyes blazing with brilliant white-yellow light, and Victor stepped in front of her, waiting for the captain, Rellia, or someone of authority to come into view.

“Victor!” Rellia’s voice rang out, and he adjusted his gaze upward, where he saw the red-haired noblewoman leaning over a balcony, waving. “Come inside! My chamberlain will meet you at the door.” Her voice deepened as she bellowed, “Captain Ap’Torrin, clear those soldiers away immediately.”

“Yes, milady!” the gruff voice barked. Victor still couldn’t see him. The man’s face was lost amid the plumed helms of his soldiers.

He turned to Arona and gestured toward the palace steps. “C’mon. Don’t worry; we’re just passing through here. I need a quick meeting with Rellia, and then we can go and get things started with Du.”

The two of them had only taken a few steps, however, when Rellia threw a verbal hand grenade over the railing of her balcony. “I’ve sent someone to wake Valla! She’ll be thrilled you arrived while she’s visiting.”