

Victor BK7: Ch11

Book 7: Chapter 11: A Clear Message

Victor couldn't have timed his Iron Berserk better if he'd tried. He'd just felt the swelling, burning, furious surge of rage-attuned Energy pour into his body when the first explosive shells struck. One hit his chest, another the crown of his head, and two exploded at his feet. His wyrm-scale vest took the impact with aplomb, the intricate layers of Tess enchantments helping to disburse the force of the impact and utterly ignoring the conflagration that erupted as the shell smashed apart. Victor was jostled, certainly, but he wasn't knocked over.

As for the shell that struck him atop his head, he hardly felt that. The Kethian Juggernaut helm was a hundred times more dense than whatever metal casing the humans had fired at him. The explosions nearby shook the ground and threw dirt on him, but all that did was further enrage him. Something itched at his throat, fighting to get out of his lungs, and Victor opened his mouth to let it loose a roar that echoed off and rattled the stones of the nearby wall. Victor suddenly didn't know why he was holding back, and with a rather mean-spirited laugh, he summoned his Banner of the Champion and let loose any semblance of control he still held over his aura.

More shells and cannisters hit him, unleashing fire and heat. Sparkling, weaponized Energy of various flavors rippled through him, shocking him, freezing him, burning him, though never enough to really harm him, never enough to do more than momentarily make his flesh a little raw before his hyper-paced healing washed away the discomfort. Part of Victor was amused, yet part of him was angry—who were these gnats to sting him so? Did they not know their place before one such as he?

As the smoke of the bombardment cleared, Victor saw the black metal haft of his axe thrusting up from the ground near his hip, so he snatched it up, ripping it out of the soil where it had lain buried. It was a big axe, true, but nothing he couldn't easily swing. He looked through the haze of smoke and ash, saw the glowing Energy limning the treads of a tank moving into position, and jogged toward it. Despite his relaxed pace, the vehicle's tracking and firing at him struggled to time their shots, and he was only struck a few times before he smashed the huge, slow-moving vehicle with the axe. It was trivial to destroy the thing—once hit, then two, and it was a pile of smoldering scrap.

While he dismantled the tank, he was hit in the back by several more explosive rounds. Something hot and wet splashed onto his neck, burning painfully, and the red haze of fury began to darken his vision. Though he wasn't in pain for more than a couple of seconds, the impudence of the incessant attacks and the irritation they caused him was beginning to take a toll on his clear thinking. He whirled, scanning the field, noting that four or five of the tanks had clustered together in their attempts to follow and aim at him. Grinning madly, Victor leaped into the air, aiming for the vehicles. None of the machines were able to effectively aim at and shoot him as he soared through the air, and when he smashed into the ground a dozen paces from the tanks, he stomped forward.

Victor stood before the group of Energy-driven war machines, lifted his axe into the air, and roared. His face flushed with his fury and the exertion of his bellow, and as it tapered off, he poured a massive surge of Energy into the pattern for his Wake the Earth spell.

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Silence had fallen over the crowd atop the parapet, and Valla turned to regard the governmental delegation. Darren Whitehorse stood with his hands on the ramparts, his mouth ajar and his eyes

wide and fixed upon Victor as he strode over to one of the tanks, shrugging off cannon shots and then, as quickly as a grown man might swat an offending gnat, he pounded the thing into scrap.

When Victor had emerged from the smoke and focused his attention on the tanks, some of the weight of his burdensome aura fell away, and everyone had stood or straightened, much relieved. Now, that relief was replaced with a mixture of fear and awe as the full-sized titan demonstrated his physical power and resilience. Victor was pelted with more missiles fired by the remaining automatons, but they seemed to do little more than irritate him. Valla could see it in the narrowed glare he gave the far line of machines when he whirled away from the one he'd just destroyed. He took two steps and then launched himself into the air, aiming for a cluster of the things.

How . . . Darren started to say, then trailed off, watching Victor's great bulk soar through the air.

How is he not burned? How is his flesh not pierced? Those shells are steel-jacketed! the young woman beside Darren wailed in dismay. She reached toward her face, touching her nose, then grasped the sides of her head. Valla could practically see her mind racing through scenario after scenario. Then, as Victor roared again, faintly vibrating the rampart stones so bits of loose mortar and gravel bounced about, she cried, We have to stop it! If we can't harm him, he'll just work his way through them, destroying everything!

He's using Energy, though, Darren said, nodding to confirm his own words. He'll run out . . . He might have intended to say more, but Victor stomped, and the world shook. Darren and most others atop the wall fell to the hard stones as the wall shifted alarmingly. Valla maintained her balance, but she had to work at it. It was a strange sensation having the ground roll beneath your feet; if she hadn't recently been involved in a battle near an active volcano, she might not have realized what was happening. The damage to the wall was significant; cracks emerged between the stones, parts of the crenellations toppled down to smash onto the ground below, and, with a loud, grinding, ripping sound, the attached, bronze-colored elevator pulled away from the stone, hanging precariously to the wall's inner surface.

If the wall was damaged, the battlefield where Victor fought was devastated. His spell had pulled great boulders up, surging out of the earth. It had split the ground with wide crevices that spewed hot steam. Half a dozen of the automatons had fallen in or been smashed by the boulders as they toppled, hot and steaming from their traversal through the ground. Through it all, Victor roared, jumping, charging, and smashing into the huge metallic vehicles. He seemed utterly unbothered by the bucking ground, dancing between rents in the soil, rolling stones, and blasting steam geysers.

The wall only shook for a handful of seconds, and as things grew still there on the ramparts, the citizens of First Landing scrambled to their feet, using the less-than-solid stonework to steady themselves. Wide-eyed and gasping for breath, Darren Whitehorse helped his assistant stand, as yet unaware of the destruction Victor was wreaking out on the field. Valla looked over his head to the crowd of government representatives and saw many of them scurrying for a stairwell, ready to be away from the wall they'd once thought the pinnacle of solidity. She turned the other way and saw Issa taking charge of the civilians, trying to encourage them to vacate the structure as well.

What the fuck! Darren gasped as he finally looked over the rampart to see Victor squat, grasp the bottom treads of one of the construct machines, and deadlift it up, flipping it over sideways to tumble into a steaming fissure.

Hes . . . the woman started to say, shaking her head and rubbing at her eyes as though she could banish the scene before her. Hes unstoppable.

What about Project Omega? Darren wailed, looking out at the smoking, ruined field.

The woman took a flat crystal slate from some storage device and began tapping her fingers on it. Oh, God! Its not responding! What if it sank? Those fissures! Theyre right where it was buried!

God dammit! Stop that maniac! Darren cried, turning to Valla with pleading eyes.

Valla smiled at him and then looked out at the blasted landscape. There were only two or three automatons that seemed to be whole. Victor was currently ripping one to pieces with his hands, his axe left buried in the wreckage of another. While he peeled the turret off his current victim, she said, I can try. Hes somewhat more reasonable while berserk than he used to be. I can probably calm him as long as he doesnt channel his volcanic rage.

Do it! Do it! Darren screamed. Valla almost stalled, almost insisted he speak to her with more respect and consideration. She wanted to rub his nose in things, reminding him hed insisted he wouldnt need the means to signal surrender. She wasnt mean-spirited, though, and it looked as though the poor fellow had just had his view of the universe shatteredeverything hed believed upended in a matter of minutes. Rather than salt his wounds, she spread her wings and leaped off the wall, soaring toward the mad titan.

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Victor hoisted the tanks turret, gripping the barrel like it was a handle, and with a spin and a grunt, launched it into the air, flinging it to the northern edge of the cleared field to bounce and roll away into the plains beyond. He laughed, turning to regard the smoking ripped parade grounds. Only a few of the tanks were still functioning, and none were currently shooting at him. He was picking out his next target, getting ready to bound over the fissure-riddled ground, when he felt a presence above him. He reached a hand for Lifedrinkers haft, jerking his eyes upward, only to see Vallas glittering turquoise-silver wings reflecting the suns light as she descended to land atop a rough boulder, facing him.

She shouted over the sounds of popping, crackling explosions as a dozen of the tanks burned, their ordinance losing its integrity in the flames, They cry mercy, Victor!

Oh? He grinned as his voice boomed out. Shall I grant it?

Forget the automatons; youve wrecked this field and greatly damaged their wall. I think some mercy is in order. Valla smiled, and he could see the pride in her eyes. Darren didnt say as much, but Im fairly certain that when you moved the earth, it ruined their surprise. They had something buried, lying in wait, and you . . . sent it to the depths.

Hah! Victor grinned, brushing his hands together, sending black soot and dirt falling in a shower to the ground. Im done smashing things, I guess. Its good I didnt cast Volcanic Fury. Victor turned toward the gate. Ill meet you inside. Tell em to open the gate, or should I jump the wall as one last lesson?

No, no. Perhaps you should cool your rage as you go. The people on the wall took a tumble when you did this. She gestured to the ripped ground and mountainous boulders. They dont deserve to be further terrified.

Ah, shit. Victor felt his rage seeping away as guilt took hold. He wouldnt mind seeing Darren and some of the other politicians taken down a notch or two, but he hadnt wanted to hurt anyone. Are they okay?

Im sure they are. It was just a bit of a scare. She spread her wings and waved. See you soon. Then she launched herself back into the air. Victor sighed and lumbered over to the giant axe, touching it to send it into his storage ring.

He touched Lifedrinkers haft. Well, chica, hope I didnt overdo things too much. As he walked toward the gate, he worked to pull his rage out of his pathways, sending it into his Core. He cut the connection to his banner and then to Iron Berserk, and by the time he was standing before the gate, waiting as it slowly ratcheted up into the wall, he was back to his usual size, having recast Alter Self. He stood there, rubbing some soot off his knuckles, waiting patiently as the opening gate revealed him. Issa, Alec, and Valla were the only ones in the tunnel, and they all looked somewhat relieved to see him back down to human proportions.

What a show! Alec crowed, pumping his fist. Issa smiled beside him, but she didnt speak right away.

Was that all right? Sorry about all the damage. That was the first time I used that spell, and I think I dumped too much Energy into it.

Issa nodded. It was an effective lessona clear message. Thank you, Victor. As the crews work to salvage the constructs and repair the field, it will be a good reminder of how ill-equipped we are to face a truly powerful Energy user. She turned and started back through the long tunnel, and everyone fell in around her. As they walked, she continued, The citizens were alarmed at first, but I hope you heard the cheers as you pummeled those machines. Your incredible show of power inspired many people. Theres quite a crowd waiting near the inner gate to greet you. Would you mind fielding some questions from them?

Victor shrugged. As long as it gets me closer to collecting our pay and heading back home, thats fine.

Arent you exhausted? Alec looked over his shoulder, eyeing Victor incredulously.

From that? Nah, Ive had sparring matches more tiring. I mean, to be honest, it was mostly just kind of fun.

Valla jostled him. Dont be so dismissive, Victor! They worked hard on those machines.

Well, Issa and I didnt, Alec laughed, but, yeah, maybe dont rub it in so hard when you see the others. Not that the P&Ds hung around.

Darren looked like his heels were on fire as he retreated! Issa laughed.

On the one hand, Alec said, winking at Victor, you cost the colony a lot of money; we've sunk much of our budget into building those tanks. On the other, you saved us from growing complacent, believing they could protect us.

Issa sighed, nodding along with him. Or worse, if Darren and his cronies gained power, trying to use them to intimidate the older powers in this world.

Such as the Ridonne? Valla asked.

Exactly. Issa smiled at Valla. This was a costly but valuable lesson.

Well, the Ridonne aren't a match for Victor at least not the ones we've met, but they would rather easily trounce machines like that. Don't you think? Valla looked up at him, catching his eye, and Victor shrugged.

I think so. I mean, I doubt the couple I've fought were the strongest in the Empire. Borrius thinks there are dozens of them, too, so yeah, better not to pick fights with those pendejos. You folks aren't ready yet. Victor stretched his neck from side to side, wringing a series of pops out of it. You know, it sucks, but the System didn't think I deserved any Energy for killing those tanks. I was kind of hoping I'd make some progress toward leveling.

Uh . . . Alec didn't seem to have an appropriate response.

Do you cultivate for Energy and levels, Victor? Issa asked as they stepped out of the tunnel into the sunlight. Victor turned to look at the wall, noting a lot of commotion off to his right. There, he saw the damage he'd done: Large spiderwebs of cracks ran through the stone of the massive wall, and the big, cleverly designed elevator was hanging at an angle, the metal tracks it ran on having separated from the stone near the top.

Shit, he said, putting Issa's question to the side. You're sure no one got hurt?

We're sure. Everyone is fine. Issa smiled at him, maybe glad to see he was concerned and chagrined.

They started walking again, and Victor saw the throng waiting by the next gateway. He felt a little excited at the idea of fielding questions to an enthusiastic crowd; it ought to be a lot different from the town hall, especially now that these folks had an idea of what he was capable of. Um, he said, turning back to Issa, I mostly level from killing my enemies. Luckily that's usually a monster or an undead asshole. I can cultivate, but I'm really undisciplined. He grinned at Valla, reaching to grasp her hand in his. Isn't that right?

He's very disciplined about some things, but I will agree that his cultivation habits could stand some improving; he's found a workaround for leveling his Core, so he doesn't have quite the incentive that we mere mortals do.

Workaround? Issa raised an eyebrow.

Mortal? Is . . . Alec visibly gulped, Are you not a mortal?

Victor laughed and slapped the much smaller man on the shoulder. She's being cute, Alec. Relax. As for my workaround, Lady Issa, that's a trade secret. He squeezed Valla's hand to indicate he wasn't joking around. He might like these two people, and he didn't mind sharing some knowledge, but he'd seen the lengths one asshole would go to try to steal his ability to gain power from eating the hearts

of his foes. Who could say what a diabolical human mind might come up with if they knew such a thing was possible?

When they approached the crowd of citizens, Victor could see the guards or police or peacekeepers she had no idea what they called their uniformed officers had managed to get them all to stand behind ropes tied to stanchions on either side of the road, leaving the area directly before the inner gate clear for Victor and his escort to stand. Still, hundreds or maybe thousands of people lined the road, and an equally large crowd had gathered atop the inner wall. He could see Borrius, Darro, and Nia standing close to the gate on this side of the ropes and was a little relieved to see his traveling companions were still being treated well despite the destruction he'd wrought out on the field.

The crowd's excitement was palpable; many of them shouted his name or greetings, and quite a few burst into applause at their approach. Victor loved an adoring crowd, so he raised his arms and hammed it up while Issa moved forward a few steps, clearly waiting for the people to grow quiet before speaking. With a crowd like that, though, it was hard to get everyone's attention, and she didn't try for perfection, beginning to shout as soon as she thought she could make her voice clear over the noise. Citizens of First Landing! I hope many of you could witness Victor Sandoval's demonstration on the parade grounds. He's graciously agreed to pause here today to answer a few of your questions!

Victor grinned as more applause burst out, his glory-attuned Energy seeping into his pathways. He had half a mind to summon Guapo and put on a real show but decided to try to play it a little cool. He held up a hand, staring around at the thronging people, making eye contact with many. The noise began to die down, and when it was almost quiet, he said, in a loud, commanding voice, Raise your hands. If I point at you, ask your question. Immediately, a hundred hands shot into the air, and Victor laughed, looking the people over. When his eyes fell on a young man who reminded him of himself before he'd gained a thousand pounds of muscle, he pointed at him.

The fellow cleared his throat, then, in a high voice with a slight Spanish accent, asked, Why aren't you gigantic all the time? Is it just a spell?

Victor decided a little hyperbole was in order. Other way around, cabrn! I use a spell to make myself small. You ever tried sitting in a chair when you weigh ten thousand pounds?

Book 7: Chapter 12: A Surprising Proposal

Victor sat in the formal dining room of Issa's home in the metallic tower on the edge of First Landing. She'd invited him and the others for dinner as a send-off and thank-you for their efforts. Only Alec, Issa, a man named Boris Saltzki, and a woman named Diane Royce were there to represent the growing colony, and Victor was fine with that. Still, it didn't stop Issa from feeling self-conscious about the little group. I hope you don't mind that I kept things small, she said, leaning to her right, close to Victor and, beside him, Valla. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of people clamoring to join us, and I couldn't think of a fair way to pair things down. Instead, I insisted that you'd want some calm after your heroics on the field and the frenzy of the crowd afterward.

You used me as an excuse? Victor grinned as Valla elbowed him in the ribs.

As he hammed it up, wincing and rubbing at his side, she said, You dont know his humor. Hes teasing. This is perfect.

Well, I have some ulterior motives for keeping it small. I wanted to be sure that Boris and Diane had a chance to speak with you. Issa gestured to her left, where her two other guests occupied the spots across from Victor and Valla. Further down the table were Alec, Borrius, Darro, and Nia. As Victor scanned the table, he started to laugh.

Hey, Borrius. I just realized you and Boris have almost the same name.

How astute, Victor. Borrius sighed at the interruption, then turned back to Alec and continued his description of an inn hed been impressed by in Tharcray. Leave it to the old commander to try to teach Alec about the hotel business.

Ive cooked something simple, but I hope it will remind you of home, Victor; its one of the first dishes from Earth that I tasted when I came to First Landing. My friend, Maria, taught me how to make it. Victor saw her focus, and she spoke very carefully, trying to properly enunciate the vowels and syllables as she said, Enchiladas.

En serio? Victors eyes opened wide with excitement.

Yes! Seriously. I hope I did them justice, but Im not too worried. Im good with recipes, and Maria has tasted my efforts. Im fairly sure shed tell the truth if they werent good.

Awesome! Thank you, Issa. Suddenly, Victors entire outlook had changed. Hed been sort of dreading sitting around talking over another fancy meal. Now, he had enchiladas to look forward to.

Its my pleasure. Issa looked tickled by Victors genuine enthusiasm. Excuse me while I check on my children and then the food. Ill be back shortly. Diane, now would be a good time to speak to our guests about your research. She stood and walked away while Diane cleared her throat and looked at Victor and Valla. She was clearly nervous, struggling to maintain eye contact with either of them.

She has kids? Victor asked, saving the woman from having to speak first.

Oh, you didnt know? Boris chuckled. Two little ones and a few older ones shes kind of adopted. Youd never know it, considering how hard she works, but yeah, shes one of the most generous, big-hearted people Ive ever met.

Sheesh, Victor sighed, leaning back. Now I feel lazy.

Ah! Diane finally found her voice. Thats an excellent segue, Mr. Sandoval. I wouldnt call what you did on the field today lazyin fact, it was the most eye-opening demonstration of personal power Ive ever seen, and Ive seen Morgan Hall in action! She smiled again, looking nervous as everyone turned to her. She was a small, jittery woman with light brown hair, cut short above the ears and tapered at the necknot too different from Victors usual haircut. She had rosy cheeks and brown eyes, and when she blushed nervously, she reminded Victor of a school kid who knew the answer but was scared to say it in front of the class. Ive been, um, researching the spirit Cores among the Urghat, Grugell, and Krystree peoples.

Victor frowned and glanced at Valla. Ive heard of the Urghat but not the others.

They're all considered low-affinity by the System, and so they aren't given access to the boons it grants—levels, skills, even the language integration skill. When we began integrating them into our society, I was on the team to help document their languages and cultural practices. That's when I made the connection about the low-affinity species having a higher incidence of spirit Cores than among other peoples. She gestured around the table. In fact, Victor, you're the first human I've heard of who has one.

Yeah, I heard something similar during that town hall. Victor shrugged. He could tell she wasn't trying to be insulting, so he waited to hear her out.

I've learned that those with spirit Cores are revered among the low-affinity folks; they're seen as leaders and as a living connection to their ancestors. I believe such Cores used to be more common among other peoples, too—the Shadeni, Ardeni, and Ghelli in particular. Have you run across others with such an affinity in your travels?

Not many, but yeah. It was a Shadeni Old Motherkind of a wise woman who taught me most of what I've learned. Well, and a spirit fragment I found in an artifact deep under the earth. Victor glanced at Valla, scratched his jaw in contemplation, then added, It shouldn't be a secret that spirit Core affinities are tied to a person's character traits and emotions. They're the essence of who we are. Old Mother used to tell me that civilized folk here worked hard to weed emotions out of their magic. That prejudice made it kind of rare for people to form a spirit Core, even if it might have been possible for them. There are tons of Ardeni and Shadeni with simple pearl Cores. They use basic, unattuned Energy, and I bet many of them might have formed spirit Cores but were steered away from them by a mentor.

But why? It's clear that your magic isn't weak. Why would the magical schools and mentors, as you call them, try to weed spirit Cores out?

Valla answered for him, her voice soft but thick with emotion as she remembered something disturbing. Because they're dangerous. She glanced at Victor almost apologetically.

It's all right. Tell her.

People have dark sides to their spirits, and often they're the stronger affinities. You saw Victor unleash his rage on the field outside the wall, but what you don't know is that he had to work very hard to gain that kind of control. Once upon a time, anyone around him, even us up on the wall, would have been at risk. I . . . I doubt Victor wants to speak about it, but there are other affinities that are even more dangerous, more frightening.

Ah! Victor had heard the idiom about a lightbulb going off in someone's head, but he'd never seen it so well represented as at that moment in Diane's expression. That explains everything—the stigma, the prejudice, the lack of such Cores among the city-dwelling folk. I can imagine how affinities based on negative traits or emotions could cause problems among people whose ties weren't as close-knit as a clan or tribal structure. Imagine someone with an affinity for paranoia running amok in New York City! She turned to Boris as she spoke, and he nodded along with her.

It's not just negative affinities that can be a problem, Victor added. When they looked at him with questioning expressions, he said, Think of the damage someone with an affinity for love could do with the wrong intentions.

You mean . . . Boris's words trailed off as his mind traced dark paths.

Yeah. Victor shrugged. I could be a real asshole with some of my affinities, especially as my Core continues to grow in power. The conversation was put on hold as Issa returned carrying a big, steaming casserole dish. Victor's mouth began to water as the unmistakable, smoky scents of baked chili peppers, onions, and corn tickled his nose, waking up memories he'd left buried for far too long. He saw his abuelas smiling face as she lifted a pot from the oven. He saw his cousins laughing around the big table in her kitchen. He felt a loss so keen that his eyes began to tear up, and he had to look down and squeeze them shut for a moment.

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The dinner was delicious, and Victor had a lot of fun describing some of the dishes he missed from home. Issa's enchiladas were great, the best thing he'd eaten in months, but they weren't exactly like his abuelas. It made sense every family did something a little different. They weren't very spicy, and there was more cheese and greens than he was used to, but Victor couldn't imagine complaining; the meal was terrific.

As they ate, they spoke about Cores, about cultivating, and about how important it was to find natural treasures that would allow them to craft more powerful items and to improve their bodies. As Dennis Whitehorse had learned the hard way, a person's strength, or any other attribute, could reach heights that the people in the human colony hadn't entirely realized. Overall, it was a pleasant meal with good food and company, and Victor felt much better about the human settlement than he had going into it.

They wrapped things up early. Issa insisted she had to spend some time with her children, and Victor and the others hoped to sleep in their own beds that night. With that in mind, Alec guided them back through town in the early evening to the portal hall. The people they passed on the way were pleasant, and several clapped and called out Victor's name. He felt almost like they'd ask for an autograph if times were a little different. They were even stopped by a few parliament members who offered their thanks.

Unsurprisingly, they saw nothing of Whitehorse or his faction. As they approached the portal hall, Alec chuckled as Victor mentioned the contentious man's absence. Oh, he's off with his aides trying to salvage something from his defense budget. He's going to get massacred in the assembly on Monday.

Speaking of budgets, Borrius said, clearing his throat obnoxiously.

Ah, don't you worry, good sir! I have your payment right here. Alec slapped a pouch that hung from his belt. A lot of beads, but I think it's worth it, considering you probably saved us from just as much trouble. P&D will have to curtail their warmongering for the foreseeable future. He unfastened the pouch and handed it to Victor. When Victor trickled a bit of Energy into it, he was pleased to find the full sum of promised Energy beads within the dimensional container.

You guys can make these? Victor held up the bag.

Beads? Or dimensional containers? Well, yes to both. That many beads would take us a long time to craft, but we earn a lot through our trade partners. We've apparently thought of some clever uses for Energy that hadn't yet occurred to the people in this world. The telephones, for instance Tarns Crossing paid us a tidy sum for a similar system. Boris is in talks with Persi Gables now that we have a portal connecting us. I think we're going to see some big paydays soon.

You're coming back with us, yes? Valla asked, stepping closer to Alec.

Oh, I'll come through in the morning if that's all right. I'd like to spend a little time with the hotel staff tonight. There are a few adjustments I want to make to the schedule.

Of course, that's fine. Valla smiled, reaching out to clasp Alec's hand. Thank you so much for this opportunity. Lam will be thrilled that we have the funding for the stone's advancement. We're all very worried about our friend and want to start taking action to help her.

Will you leave right away?

Victor nodded, gesturing toward Nia, Darro, and Borrius. Probably, yeah. We'll drop these folks off, and then I'm going to go down to the stone to see how much I can unlock with these. He jostled the sack of beads, though they didn't click together, and the bag felt empty—they were all in the dimensional space. He shook Alec's hand when Valla released him, and then the five of them waited while Alec activated the teleportation stone. The crackling blue portal appeared, bright enough to make Victor squint in the dim light of the hall, and, with a wave, he stepped through.

He emerged into the dark, silent, cold air of the Travel Pavilion back in the Free Marches. It was well past midnight there, and the colony was fast asleep. With crackling bursts of light, his companions came through behind him, and then the portal shimmered and popped out of existence. I almost expected some treachery, Borrius announced, looking around.

Nia nodded, hand on the hilt of her belt knife. Me as well, Lord Borrius.

Why didn't you say something? Valla asked.

The scarred, angry-looking woman formed a rare smile, showing her surprisingly white, straight teeth. I didn't want to insult our host and trusted Lord Victor would see us through any deceit.

All right, well, things went fine. I'm heading to the colony stone. Victor turned to look Valla in the eyes. I have a meeting with that steward tomorrow, the one who used to work for Polo. If I can get him to agree to work for me, I'll be ready to leave. Will you find Lam and Lesh and fill them in?

I was thinking I'd find her, aye. She'll want to hear the good news. She stepped forward, offered him a quick kiss, and then started toward the door. Victor had just turned to pass some final instructions to Nia when the portal burst to life again with crackling blue Energy. He stepped back, snatched Lifedrinker out of her harness, and severed the Energy feeding his Alter Self spell, surging to his full, natural height. He heard Valla's wings crack open and Midnight sing as she drew the blade. Nia, grimacing with determination, drew her long, curved knife and hurried to stand beside him. A second later, a man stepped through the portal.

Oh, God, don't hit me! Darren Whitehorse wailed, holding his hands up, illustrating his lack of weaponry. I come in peace!

Victor growled and lowered his axe. What the fuck, Darren? You're supposed to schedule activation of this portal using the Farscribe Book.

In a stunning display of obsequious groveling, the man fell to his knees before Victor, ducking his head so his long, dark ponytail flopped over his shoulder. I . . . I'm not authorized to use the portal. I've come to join you, to follow you, Victor. It's the only way I'll ever save any face. I have to learn what I've failed to grasp. My political ambitions are over—I've left my resignation from parliament with a friend. Please! I have to learn!

Nah, that's not happening. I'm not babysitting you. There's just as much chance you'd die as learn something. Everyone's eyes were on him now, and Victor waved Nia, Darro, and Borrius off. You guys can go. Nia, come see me in the morning, please.

As you say, Lord. Nia slammed her knife back into its sheath, a look of something like disappointment in her eyes. She left, and Darro followed, but Borrius lingered.

The old commander cleared his throat. Victor, you could do much for your people, I mean your kin from your homeworld, if you were to help this man. Assuming his intentions are true.

They are! They are! Truly, Victor—you've opened my eyes! I know you can swat me like a gnat. I know I'm nothing to you. Let me learn! I've failed so many people and wasted so much time, Energy, and wealth! Please! I've left my aide; I've left most of my belongings—just me, and I swear I'll be no burden. I've brought enough money to fund my passage. Let me see what's beyond this world. Let me learn the truth about this new System-controlled universe. Let me bring something valuable home to our people. Let me spread true knowledge, not the nonsense I'd allowed to cloud my mind! The man's pleas were desperate in their apparent sincerity, tears pooling in his eyes as he begged. Victor had never seen anything like it.

Victor looked at Borrius, then down at Darren, and his scowl sent a shudder through the man. To his credit, Whitehorse didn't look away. First of all, those aren't my people. I like some of them, and I suppose I'm related to one of 'em, but these, Victor gestured around, indicating Rellias' burgeoning capital, are my people. He looked over his shoulder at Valla, but she simply shrugged. He supposed she'd have advice for him later when the others weren't listening. Borrius, will you show him where the inn is? I'll talk to him in the morning. Scowling, furious annoyance threatening to push regretful words through his lips, Victor turned and stalked into the night.

He'd only managed a dozen paces into the garden outside the Travel Pavilion when Valla caught up to him. He was still full-sized, his long strides forcing her to jog as she said, Calm down, Victor. Talk to me.

He slowed and glared down at her; for a moment, his anger was directed toward her, and she flinched. That expression finally got through to him, and the scope of his overreaction dawned on him. Jesus, what's wrong with me?

I was going to ask that! So what if he came here begging to join you? Just say no. Why are you upset?

I . . . Victor closed his eyes and thought about it. When it clicked, he chuckled. I'd convinced myself that man was my enemy. Some part of me is pissed that he's here. Some part of me wants to rip him to pieces. Dammit, Valla, I have to get a grip on this Quinametzin anger. Pride? It's all a blurry, hot

mess in my head. I think I wanted him to suffer through his humiliation back home. Im irritated that he slipped away and did the only really smart thing he could do ask us for help.

And part of you knows its the right thing to do. If he was the primary obstacle to your cousins politics, wouldnt it help her if we can educate the man? Wouldnt it promise a more hopeful future for your species here on Fanwath if he were to return and help her and Issa rather than rallying people against them?

Yeah. Victor sighed, then turned back toward the center of the colony. Ill go feed the stone. Lets talk about this later. Just because we help him doesnt mean he has to tag along. We could leave him with Borrius. Victor barked a short laugh. Imagine that! Borrius would lecture him night and day! Valla wasnt quite as amused as he was, but she hugged him briefly, and then Victor walked alone to the colony stone. As he went, his mind ran through the situation, and he knew he was full of shit; hed probably bring Darren with him, if for no other reason than to watch his face when he realized how wrong hed been. Whats one more guy following me around? Ill put Lesh in charge of him, chica. Victor laughed at the idea. I gotta admit, though, the guy surprised me. I think Olivia will thank me if I keep him. Better hes here, learning a lesson than stirring up more trouble for her.

Book 7: Chapter 13: World Travel

Victor handed the pouch to Gorro apDommic, nodding as though the act sealed the deal theyd made. On a hillside with a view of the sea. It contained the hermitage blueprints and all of the exotic building supplies it would require to build.

Of course, Lord Victor. Ill hire a proper surveyor to select the most idyllic location for your home. In the meantime, Ill run things from my travel tent its quite luxurious, and the command table I liberated from the Legion when I retired will aid greatly in the logistics of mapping and plotting your lands as the surveyors complete their work. With the funds youve given me, Ill be able to hire your personal staff and begin forming the militia. You wont recognize the place when you return! Ive got big plans for your town layout, beginning with the central fountain square . . .

Right, right. Victor held up his hand. No need to rehash it all; Im sure its going to be great. The truth was the guy liked to talk, and Victor could swear theyd been over his plans for the town square three times in the last couple of hours. He didnt know why he had to establish a town, but Gorro seemed to think there would be homesteaders flocking to his lands, seeking property in the form of leases and grants, depending on what they had to offer. Gorro said his massive holdings would fund everything he needed if appropriately managed, and that all started with getting some tenants. If he were honest, Victor was kind of annoyed that he had to leave; it sounded like a lot of fun and a nice break from constantly fighting.

Oh, yes, Im sorry. I know youre in a hurry to get things ready for your journey. Gorro nodded to Nia, standing near the doorway leading out of Victors library. Do I understand correctly that Nia will be working for your household guard, not the militia?

Thats right. I also want you to give special consideration to any other veterans from the conquest who want a position with either my household or the standing militia.

I was under the impression that the bulk of the legion soldiers were receiving their land grants from Lady apYensha.

Thats right, but, like I said, if any of them want to settle on my lands, work with them.

Understood.

All right. Lets head out cause I need to pack up my house. Victor started for the doorway, nodding to the dark-haired, scar-faced woman standing there. Nia had been following him even more closely than before the trip to First Landing, and Victor wondered what she would do with herself when he and Valla left. As he passed, he said, Nia, lets head out. I have to pack the house. Governor apDommic is counting on you to help secure my new homestead and build up my household guard. Youre up to it?

Yes, Lord Victor.

I know you have some friends from Dark Ember, and you can hire any who want to come to work for me, but make sure you never turn away anyone from the ninth. God, I wish Sarl was here. Victor saw Nia look down at the mention of the dead captain. Victor shook his head and forced himself to acknowledge that Sarl had been a lot more than a captain to him. Not because you arent doing good work, Nia, but because he was a friend, and I wish he could see what weve won.

I understand, Nias voice was soft, and, glancing down at her, Victor saw her eyes were distant. She understood loss.

Outside the house, in the corner of the garden he and Valla had claimed, he found her squatting beside Uvu, scratching the big cats ears and cooing soft praises. Hell be all right. Victor walked over to her, Gorro and Nia in tow.

Yes, he will. Its a paradise here for himhes getting fat. Im wondering if hell find a mate, but so far, there dont seem to be any predators around, not even boyii hounds. I think the undead left quite a void.

Nia cleared her throat. Lady Valla, Im sure theyll start to creep back in now that the threats gone and that miasma has dispersed. Your big cat might find a friend.

Oh, he will, but sooner than you think. Nia, this is Uvu. Uvu, Nia. Valla grinned and stood up. Give him a scratch, will you? I want him to follow you down south to Victors holdings. If hes going to hunt and range about, I want him to do it from our home.

Oh, Lady, I couldnt . . . Nia shrank back, her pale face going paler.

Victor chuckled, but Valla reached out and snatched Nias hand, tugging her closer to Uvu. Nonsense. He already told me he likes you.

Truly? Nias eyes were wide, and she licked her lips nervously.

Oh, very truly. He can sense a persons intentions, and he thinks yours are good. Do you like to hunt, Nia?

I do, though the sheriff only allowed it if something threatened the lords game.

Valla smiled and pulled the womans hand a little closer to the cat. Well, youre not on Dark Ember anymore. Uvu will hunt with you, and I think youll become fast friends. Does that sound all right?

Nia gingerly reached out to scratch the cats enormous head between his ears, and Uvu chuffed, arching his neck and pressing against her hand. He . . . He likes it!

Have you ever had a pet? Victor asked.

No, we werent allowed such. The vampyrs would know. I tried to keep a fox cub once, but my mother, in a frenzy of terror, swatted my butt and took the animal out to the woods.

Valla rested her hand on Nias shoulder and gently squeezed it. Well, Uvus not a pet, but hell be a companion. You see, I dont want him to get lonely while were gone.

I will do my best to be a boon companion to him! Nias joy was palpable, and Victor felt good watching her. It reminded him that, despite his blunder that had cost so many soldiers their lives, hed managed to do some good in the campaign. He caught himself thinking about how hed been fooled into entrapping himself in the caldera, and, as Khul Bach had counseled him, he turned his ire toward Victoria, or, more accurately, Catalina. He was just minutes away from finally starting on the road to catch up with her, to bring her justice. The Energies in his Core swirled at the idea, eager to be let out, eager for him to do some bloody work. At least, that was his interpretation of his eagernessit might have been the Quinametzin in him coloring his perspective.

Ready? Valla asked.

Yeah. Let me get the house. Victor heard Gorro asking Valla questions about Uvu as he turned back to the travel home, but their conversation faded to the background, and he began to wonder what was in store for them. If they found someone who could trace Edeyas spirit tether, someone powerful enough to reach out and open a gateway to Dark Ember, what would it cost them? He assumed they wouldnt find Dark Ember as a destination when they reached the hub world. With countless worlds in a universe impossibly vast, the odds seemed slim.

When Victor had unlocked world travel on their stone, only five destinations had been offered. He had no idea how it worked, exactly, but it seemed theyd have to advance the stone a lot more to open up a broader list. Were the five worlds chosen by the System for them? Were they the closest? Were they of similar level? As he touched his house and gave it the command to shrink, Victor, again, lamented his lack of knowledge. Luckily, Lesh seemed to know quite a bit more than he or any of the FanwathiansVictor wasnt sure he liked the term, but he figured it might be technically correct.

Lesh had looked at the list of worlds, pointed to the third one, Sojourn, and said it was likely a world hub. When Rellia had asked how he knew, hed shrugged and said that worlds that worked hard to open all the travel options often prided themselves for it, seeking to name themselves in such a manner. Hed seen world hubs called Portalus, Veridian Gateway, Waypoint Crossroads, and Odessey. Knowing that, Victor had to agree that Sojourn was a good fit. The other travel options were Zikza, Ves, Monota, and Robaleach one an order of magnitude cheaper to travel to than Sojourn.

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Victor stooped to pick up his house, clipping it to his belt. When he turned back to the others, they looked at him expectantly. Well, this is it, I guess. Gorro, I cant thank you enough; it makes it easier to leave knowing my lands will be in good hands. Nia, Im counting on you to ensure the Naghelli and Shadeni are treated well. Make sure you both keep in touch through the Farscribe book. Depending on how far away we get, there will be some delay, but Ill respond as soon as I see any messages.

As you say, Lord Victor. Gorro bowed and stepped back, eyes on Nia.

Thank you, Lord Victor and Lady Valla. I feel like I have a home again, and Ill be sure to keep your lands clear of threats. The first thing Ill do with the budget you and Gorro approved is hire a few rangers.

Youre welcome, Nia. Uvu will help you range, too. Valla took Victors hand and tugged him toward the path. Come. Lesh and the others will be waiting.

Right. Victor waved again, smiling as Nia saluted and Gorro bowed. Then, he and Valla hurried through the garden toward Rellias central keep on the hill, where the System stone nestled in its bailey. The keep was still under construction, but the wall was in place and formidable. It wasnt as high as the one in First Landing that hed nearly wrecked, but he knew it was enchanted with earth-attuned magics, and there was little chance he could collapse it. It gave him comfort knowing that Rellia and the people here in the Free Marches werent quite as clueless as they might be if the Ridonne had their way.

The gates to the keep were wide open, and some soldiers Victor recognized were on guard dutymany of them had signed up for new commissions with Rellia, Borrius, and Lam. He was sure Gorro and Nia would end up hiring quite a few veterans for his household as well. Inside the courtyard, things were quiet. It was still early enough that only the cooks and the kennel master were up and about. The workers hadnt yet arrived to continue building up the keep, but Victor could see the scaffolding and the framework in place. It was going to be an impressive structure when finished.

As theyd leveled the stone, the System had built, for lack of a better word, infrastructure around it. It still jutted up from the cobbled courtyard, but a low marble wall surrounded it, and a recessed stair led down, under the ground, to the lower levelthe stone had expanded into the earth as theyd purchased more and more upgrades. It was in that underground level that the teleportation platform awaited. Despite the low traffic and protective wall, Rellia had guards on duty, watching anyone who approached the stone. They waved Victor and Valla through, though, without a second of hesitation.

The filigreed, shiny silver gates at the base of the stairs were open, and Victor could hear the weird echo of a conversation taking place withinweird because the hollow stone chamber caused the voices to reverberate oddly, the sounds mixing and muffling. Ah, I hear large feet clomping. Is that you, Victor? Rellias voice rang out sharply, and Valla looked at Victor with a knowing smile. Shed teased him the other day, referring to Rellia as their mother, and hed almost had a fit.

Its us, Victor said, walking around the stone partition that separated the stairs from the chamber beyond. Warm yellow light suffused the space as if shed by the very stone. Broad stone hallways led away from the central chamber where the dark, rune-covered System stone stretched from ceiling to floor. There was another level below them that had yet to populate with any functionality,

but he knew it was only a matter of time before the people of the Free Marches expanded the stone further.

Rellia stood there with Lesh, Lam, Edeya, and, irritatingly, Darren Whitehorse. Victor paused to take in the sight of them. Lesh was dressed, as always, sparingly, preferring, it seemed, to let his scales be his garb. Still, he wore black leather pants, boots, and a thick leather baldric from which his absurdly heavy, jagged bludgeon hung. He was resting a massive hand on Darrens shoulder, and Victor could see theyd been talking. Darren wore gray suit pants, shiny leather shoes, and a tailored burgundy dress shirt. Over his shoulder, hed slung a hand-tooled leather satchel, and Victor knew it was a dimensional container crafted by one of the Artificers back in First Landing.

Lam was dressed sharply in her military-style pants and jacket. Shed stolen the design of the Ridonne Legion officer uniforms but changed the colors pale, creamy trousers, shiny brown boots, and a soft leather coat with shiny polished horn buttons over a gauzy mauve blouse. Her hammer hung at her waist, and her wings dripped golden motes onto the polished marble floor. Edeya, sadly, looked wan and limp, her wings sagging and her eyes staring blankly over dark circles. Lam had dressed her in silky blue robes, which looked comfortable, but he doubted Edeya would have liked them if she were cognizant.

You two look ready for war. Rellia hurried over and grabbed Valla in a hug.

Victor shrugged. They were wearing their wyrm-scale armor Valla had found an Artificer capable of altering it to allow for her wings. Her armor had tones of blue, while his had shades of red, but they were clearly crafted by the same person. It wasnt exactly a uniform, but anyone who saw them would know they were together. Other than that, Victor had Lifedrinker slung over his shoulder as always, and Valla wore Midnight at her waist. It wasnt like they had helmets and gauntlets on. Should we not wear armor?

No, no. Im teasing. This armor is so fine that youre sure to make a good impression. Rellia had to look up as she examined her adoptive daughter. Victor watched her and saw the pride in her eyes but also the angst and worry. Shed always meant for Valla to help her build this new nation, and now she was leaving.

Almost reflexively, he said, Well be back.

Rellia jerked her gaze away from Valla to look at him, and he saw her narrowed eyes soften. Then, she opened her arms wide and hugged him, too. I know you will. Youve been so good for Valla, Victor. Im not upset that youre leaving, especially because young Edeya here needs your help! She and I fought back to back more than once during this campaign, and Ill not see her fade and die with her spirit held captive on some distant world. You need to make her whole, and you need to find that traitorous bitch who did this. Dont let her get away!

That was the most clearly anyone had spelled out his mandate, and Victor felt a spur of eagerness in his chest at the command. His voice was a growl, deep in his gut, and he saw Darren flinch back behind Lesh when he spoke, Justice will have his due. The words werent as impactful on Lesh and Darren as they were on the others theyd seen Victor wearing the Inevitable Huntsmans guise, and their faces said they almost pitied Catalina when Victor caught up to her. He looked away from Rellia to the others and asked, Everyone has their fare?

The System was charging them each a hundred thousand Energy beads, or, in Leshs case, the equivalent of Energy-rich metal coins. He hefted a dimensional pouch and rumbled, Aye, but Ill need to make some money in the next world if we have to pay the System for travel again.

I think thats true for most of us, Lam said. Im rich on paper, but it wasnt easy scrounging up the beads.

If theres an emergency, and you must return in haste, Valla has funds she can lend.

Valla nodded, and Victor said, So do I. Provided we dont spend it all getting help for Edeya.

We shouldnt be paying the System, Lesh grumbled. I had to find Fanwath, but there are those with the power to open gateways. They rarely charge as much as the System stones.

Right. Well, with any luck, well find someone like that on Sojourn.

Rellia jostled Vallas shoulder, still clinging to her with one hand. Write to me immediately! Ill want to know what that world is like and that youre all right. Keep us informed on the details of your quest.

We will, Mother.

Um, Ill be happy to help in that endeavor, Whitehorse said, stepping out from behind Lesh to look up at Rellia. He held out his hand, and a neatly bound book appeared. I brought several of these Farscribe books, and I have no one to report to. Most in First Landing arent interested in my correspondence at the moment, but hopefully, Ill gain some favor with a detailed record of our journey and all that I can learn. I do have a couple of friends back home keeping our leadership appraised of my efforts.

Thank you. Rellia took the book, offering the man a smile that, if Victor could believe it, made him look away like a blushing schoolboy.

Right. Enough stalling. Lets get going. Victor stepped forward to the stone and rested his hand upon it, navigating the menu with his mind until he saw the selection for world travel. He scanned the offered worlds again, saw nothing had changed, and selected Sojourn.

*****Travel to the world of Sojourn? The cost of travel from this stone is 100,000 unattuned Energy beads.*****

Victor looked around the room, and when his eyes locked with Rellias, he asked, Any final objections? Last chance.

No objections, but a request: Please be careful and keep Valla safe.

Mother . . .

Ill try. Victor nodded, then answered the stone in the affirmative. Suddenly, the world spun away with a weird rippling shift, like he was sliding backward through a person-sized kaleidoscope. Just as the dizziness became overwhelming and he thought he was going to pass out or vomit, it faded, and the world snapped into focus. Victor found himself standing on a big metal circle made of bronze or some similar alloy. The circle was inlaid in a marble floor that stretched for hundreds of yards in every direction toward mountainous walls that rose to a cavernous ceiling suspended by magnificent, filigreed metal arches.

Eight enormous circular windows of stained glass lined the ceiling, each depicting a different stylistic scene, from a shepherd by a stream to an unmistakable fire-breathing dragon. The hall itself was jaw-dropping in its gargantuan proportions and splendor, but the thing that had Victor dazed and, quite frankly, speechless was the thronging crowd. Thousands of people of all sorts milled about, walking to and fro, materializing out of thin air or disappearing just the same. People with suitcases, people in armor, people in fancy clothing, and people wearing nothing but tattoos.

And what people! If Fanwath's species were diverse, here there was an extraordinary spectrum of existence. Giants and fairies, lanky skeletal creatures and squat teddy bear men, people that looked almost human, and others that reminded him of elves from video games. Victor was gaping like a fool, turning in a slow circle as his companions materialized around him. Perhaps because he was the most alone among them, Darren said what they all were thinking, It doesn't seem like anyone noticed our arrival.

Book 7: Chapter 14: Sojourn

Darren was disturbed to find his mouth hanging ajar again. He closed it with an audible clack of his teeth, his head swiveling left and right, his mind unable to choose something to focus on. Victor grunted, jerking his big thumb left and right as he spoke to the giant dragon-man. Are we good to just wander into the city? There's no check-in or something?

The giant, black-scaled fellow rumbled in reply, I don't think so. I've never been to Sojourn, but the other hub worlds I passed through didn't require such.

The tall, blonde Ghelli leading the other one, the frail, mentally vacant one, spoke up, We should secure lodging and try to find our bearings from there. I'd feel better if we could speak and . . . think away from this crowd.

Darren saw his chance to demonstrate his worldliness. Yes, it's not unlike Times Square or Heathrow Station back home. This hubbub is quite a shock after the quiet of Fanwath! He found himself raising his voice to be heard over the constant background noise of the crowd. Victor scowled at him for his efforts, but Valla smiled, humoring his comment with a slight nod, though she clearly had no idea what he meant.

Suddenly, a great insect-man, something like a bipedal cricket, boomed at them in a basso voice, Clear the arrival pad, please. Information services are there, he pointed to a tremendous arched opening on the distant side of the building, easily a kilometer away, at the north exit. Victor took up the catatonic young woman's left hand while Lam took her right, and they hurried off the metallic disc. Everyone, including Darren, followed closely. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from the group, not in this place. The cricket man spoke again, Use the lanes and avoid walking on the bronze pads. The System won't allow arrivals or departures if non-travelers are standing on them.

Thank you, soldier, Lesh said, for some reason assuming the cricket was such. The label didn't seem to offend, though; he nodded his thick, chitinous neck, then turned and marched away.

Darren, Victor said, turning to face him. Can you make yourself useful and hold Edeyas' hand? I don't want anyone to jostle her, and it's hard for Lam to manage alone. He held the girl's limp arm toward him, and Darren hurried to comply. It might not be much, but Victor's simple acknowledgment that he could be of use was enough to put some spring in his step. He took the

young woman's hand in his, noting that it was paper-dry and barely warm. How long could she exist in such a state? Thanks, Victor grunted, then, in an uncanny show of power, he grew in size, easily matching Lesh's towering height. I want to be able to see a little better.

Ancestors! Do you feel the auras around us? Valla asked, her wings ruffling in a shiver, or was it excitement?

Only a little, and that says a lot considering their strength. Victor glared around at the party, even at Lesh. Don't insult anyone. Some of these people remind me of the volcano. With that ominous warning, he turned and began leading the way to the distant archway. Darren waited for Lam to follow, pulling Edeya along behind the others while Darren matched her pace, doing his best to keep close to the frail, sickly girl's side. As Victor had requested, he was determined to ensure that no one jostled her. As he stumbled after the party, he tried to understand what they'd meant by the auras around them.

Ever since arriving on Sojourn, stepping into this massive, busy hall, he'd felt a weight on his mind, a kind of invisible pressure. Was that what they meant? Were the auras the overbearing sense of heaviness in the air? He'd assumed the sensation had something to do with the atmosphere or climate of the new world. They couldn't all be perfect for humanity, right? Some worlds must have too much gravity or air difficult to breathe. Still, maybe that wasn't it. Perhaps that constant shifting pressure was due to the power of the individuals walking about. He supposed it was similar to the weight he'd felt when Victor had destroyed his future back in First Landing.

No, Darren said softly, shaking his head. He'd made an agreement with himself; he wouldn't blame Victor, and he wouldn't count himself out yet. He'd asked the giant man to do what he did. He'd even goaded him with haughty pride. Darren snorted in derision, glad that the hall was so noisy lest the expression be taken the wrong way by one of his companions. He was derisive, yes, but it was aimed at himself. He'd been so sure the tanks could crush any person. He'd honestly been feeling guilty about forcing people to watch what had been, in his mind, tantamount to an ancient gladiatorial display: the barbarian versus the lions. How wrong he'd been!

Still, that aside, he supposed the shifting psychic pressure could be the auras the others spoke of. How did they know they were powerful? They felt the same to him. Perhaps that was it; everyone felt powerful to Darren with this pathetic status, which made it impossible for him to appreciate the difference. What had Victor said? He barely felt them, and that somehow indicated their power. Was it a matter of control? Darren lost his train of thought and almost dropped Edeya's hand when a creature that looked very much like a mauve elephant lifted off the ground ahead of them, buoyed by a bladder of sparkling, rainbow gas that expanded from its back. It warbled a strange tune from its tusked mouth as it floated away toward a distant corner of the hall.

With his eyes following the floating creature, person? Darren was made aware of the many other flight-gifted people traversing the heights of the hall. People with wings, people who simply seemed to float, and people on magical conveyances from rugs to chairs to wing-like capes. It was chaotic and dizzying, and Darren had to look down, focusing on Victor's back, to ground himself. For the first time, he was thankful for Victor and Lesh and their bulk; they cleared a path through the crowd that was easy to follow, keeping him, Edeya, and Lam from being overwhelmed. Even Valla hung back a bit, though, with her height and stunning appearance, Darren had little doubt she could traverse the scene.

Ever since Victor had humiliated him, Darren had been taking hard looks inward to where he'd learned the seed of his Core dwelled. Back on Earth, he'd been a decently fit man, a good-looking fellow with an Apache grandfather, a Norwegian mother, and a penchant for organization. He'd been hired because of his contacts in the upper management of the Ark Program and, ostensibly, for his experience in project management, but when they'd arrived on Fanwath, things had rapidly fallen out of his control. The System and that damned colony stone had erased many of his presumed duties. He'd found himself listless and had taken up politics to fill that void.

Oof, he said, realizing he'd fallen behind and Lam was pulling Edeya away from him. He hurried his step to catch up and tried to refocus his musing. Where had he been? Oh, the Core! He'd never bothered forming one and was still, as his detractors mockingly pointed out, without any levels. Still, with some tutelage from Dr. Kerns in the early days, he'd learned to look inward and see the nascent swirl of Energy where he was supposed to form one. He'd grown busy, though, focusing on more mundane, Earth-based defenses, and as the months slipped by, he'd eventually grown too prideful to ask for further help.

However, that pride was a thing of the past, thanks to the titanic man before him. No, Darren would ask for help. He'd figure something out on this trip that would help him regain some standing back home. Either that, or he'd find a reason to stop caring what they thought of him. So far, he wasn't regretful; this space alone was enough to grant him a new perspective. He was surrounded by beings resembling demigods, mythical heroes, and creatures. What was more, as they drew near the massive archway leading out of the north end of the structure, he began to see what waited outside, and, again, his steps faltered, and he almost lost hold of Edeya's hand.

Darren, keep up! Lam snapped, looking over her right wing, scowling down at him. Why was everyone so damn tall? Even the frail, sick one was nearing six feet.

He hurried his steps and nodded toward the archway. Sorry, I just saw those crystal buildings and almost fainted. What was the point of pride among people such as these?

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Almost fainted? Lam followed his gaze, and her scowl melted. Roots! Darren grinned at her outburst. At least he wasn't the only one amazed to see iridescent, shimmering, crystalline skyscrapers outside. He and Lam weren't alone in their stupefaction; Victor and the others, too, were staring at the view beyond the archway. More than the crystal towers, the very sky was a marvel of shimmering stars, seemingly too close to be real, rainbow archways upon which fantastical beings and vehicles traversed the heights, and glass-paved roads that wended in sweeping curves between the structures.

Look at the train! Victor said, and they all followed his pointing finger toward a sleek, silver passenger train that traversed an elevated rail held aloft by glowing, floating platforms. It moved quickly and silently past the busy square outside and had to be five kilometers long from the first car to the last.

Train? Valla asked.

Darren quickly stepped in, That's an antiquated term for a conveyance like that from our home world. It consists of many cars pulled or pushed by an engine car along a set track or railway. He

stepped forward and pointed. Do you see the gaps between the segments? Those segments are individually called train cars, and they're usually joined to each other via some sort of coupling.

Thank you, Darren, Valla said, smiling at him. Darren almost melted on the spot, but he looked down quickly, nodding, his voice fading to a mutter as her attention stole his ability to think clearly.

There! Lesh said, pointing to a booth set into the wall of the grand arrival hall, as Darren had come to think of the place, near the exit. The party moved toward it, and Darren began to breathe again. He watched Victor drape a massive arm over Valla's shoulders, and his heart began to bleed with envy. It wasn't so much that he was envious of Victor's relationship with Valla, but more of him in general. What must it be like to wield such power, to have such ease around people who would have been heralded as deities back home?

As they approached the window and Victor stepped forward to speak with the humanoid, porcelain-skinned woman behind the glass, Darren had to give her a double-take; she didn't simply have pale skin; her flesh was, literally, porcelain. Welcome. May I aid you with information, traveler? Her voice was high-pitched, musical, and carried a weird edge like a tuning fork being pulled over smooth glass.

Um, yes, thanks, Victor said, and if Darren hadn't been in awe of the man, he might have slapped his forehead at the giant's poor diction. We're new here from a much, um, smaller . . .

Lower-affinity, Valla interjected.

Yeah, lower-affinity world. We've never been to Sojourn. Are there rules or something we should know about?

Again, my heartfelt welcome, travelers. The woman's strange, sky-blue eyes peered around Victor to take in the rest of them, and her glass-like red lips tilted up in a smile. How could it look like pottery and yet move like flesh? Darren fought to keep his mouth closed. You should know that Sojourn is a world for all. We value every individual, and there will be no tolerance of violence or crime in our streets. She gestured to the massive archway leading out of the building. We are a city-world, much smaller than normal worlds, but very populous and with doorways to many realms. Here, you can find a million billion items for sale, a million different species, and tens of millions of Classers. If you seek knowledge or merchandise, you've come to the right place. If you seek travel elsewhere, you are similarly well positioned. If you seek entertainment or to provide it, this is the world for you. If your power be minuscule or great, you'll find ways to advance.

She paused, and Victor cleared his throat, perhaps thinking she had finished, but the porcelain woman began to speak again. I see you are all within the iron ranks, and thus, you should avoid attempting to traverse the high roads. There are those who will not tolerate the presence of others so low and, though we have laws against violent behavior, their might is beyond our ability to reproach.

Iron ranks? Valla asked.

Victor spoke simultaneously, High roads?

Ah, I see you are, indeed, untraveled. Allow me to expound: The System levels one through one hundred are often referred to as the iron ranks because they're seen as the forging process in which the raw ore of your bodies, spirits, and Cores are refined into something more precious. The high roads are the crystalline pathways in the sky where those who have passed through to steel and

beyond traverse Sojourn. While you may mingle with such folks in private domains and some public facilities, we find its best for the iron rankers to avoid them in the streets.

Valla stepped a little closer, inserting herself into the womans attention. Are those terms common in the universe, or are they specific to Sojourn?

They are common in our region of the universe. The classifications originated from Sojourn, but as millennia passed and we spread our influence to other worlds, many hundreds have taken up the terminology.

Are you familiar with Fanwath? Victor asked, surprising Darren yet again with his quick wit.

Fanwath? The porcelain woman closed her pale blue eyes with a snick, then opened them and nodded. Yes, Fanwath connected with Sojourn three hundred and twelve years ago.

Those fucking Ridonne, Victor growled, and Darren felt enough heat from his simmering rage to necessitate taking a step back.

Please remain calm, sir. As I alluded to earlier, there are few laws in Sojourn, but we have a simple mandate to keep violence out of the streets and to respect each individual.

He wont be violent, maam, Valla said, grasping Victors arm at the elbow. Almost like a switch being thrown, the hot waves of palpable anger faded away.

No, I wont, but that doesnt mean I cant think violent thoughts, right? Victor chuckled to lighten his words, and the porcelain lady simply nodded, her weird, shiny red lips curving up in a demure smile. Victor cleared his throat, shook his head, and then asked, Can you direct us to lodging fit for those of our level? Victor glanced over his shoulder, and his dark brows narrowed when his golden-brown eyes settled on Darren. Someplace where people respect individual rights; we have some . . . delicate members in our party.

Of course. She pointed to a sigil of inlaid bronze beside her window. It seemed to shift as Darren stared at it until he realized it was a stylized SJ. Had it been so before, or had it shifted until his mind could understand it? What a wonder! This is the official seal of Sojourn, and if you find an establishment bearing such a mark, you can rest assured that theyve passed monthly audits to ensure that they uphold the high standards of Sojourn's business practices. I would highly recommend you avoid establishments without our sigil.

Should we just go out and wander, or is there a map? Lam asked, perhaps tired of waiting for Victor or Valla to get to the point. Speaking of silent people . . . Darren looked at Lesh to find the big man looking outside through the massive archway, his eyes glazed as he stared into space. He wondered what the dragon man was thinking about. Darren turned back to the window to see the woman handing Victor a sigil-covered document.

. . . for only one hundred System beads. Victor plopped a heavy sack of beads onto the counter, and the woman touched it with a black rod. Darren had seen similar; it would take the correct amount from the sack without anyone having to count them out. Victor stowed the pouch away, then nodded, muttering his thanks as he stepped back from the window. He started to move off with Valla and everyone else in tow.

Darren took a step, following, still grasping the now-warm hand of the catatonic girl, but the porcelain woman spoke, nearly stopping his heart with her words, Darren Whitehorse. Its not often that people without a formed Core find their way to Sojourn. Please take great care, for there are forces in this city that could snuff out your life with careless ease. I advise you to ask your master to escort you to one of the Genesis Centers so that you may develop some small level of resilience.

Darren, startled beyond words for a moment, turned to formulate a reply, only to find the woman looking down, reading a document. He was tugged along by Edeya, who was, in turn, pulled by Lam. He looked around the party, wondering what they thought of the womans words, but none seemed to have heard her. Had he imagined it? Had she somehow mentally spoken to him? As Victor guided them on the glass-like sidewalk along the similarly crystalline cobbles, through thick crowds, and under the fantastic expanse of stars and crystal structures, Darren struggled to wrap his head around everything hed heard.

Victor was an iron ranker. The idea that this man, this titan of unimaginable strength and destructive power, was too weak to travel upon the high roads in this city was almost more than he could grasp. The woman had hinted at the upper power structure. What had she said? Passed through to steel and beyond? If steel was after iron, what was next? Silver? Gold? Were there even greater heights? How could such power even be measured? God, I was a fool, he said, and in a quirk of luckwhether good or bad, he didnt knowthey happened to be standing on a relatively quiet corner while Victor studied the map, and everyone heard him.

Victor looked at him and raised an eyebrow, Humbling, isnt it? I felt this way in Coloss, too, but, shit, that place is a backwater compared to this.

Darren nodded, irrationally pleased by Victors attempt to relate with him. Um, Victor, is there any place on that map called a, uh, Genesis Center?

Book 7: Chapter 15: A Suitable Space

Victor felt himself starting to relax a little as they moved away from the crystalline towers of the city center and into more normal-looking buildings with brick and stone facades. Something about being on those glassy streets under the high, shimmering roads, beneath people with godlike power traversing the soaring heights, had made him uncomfortable. Hed felt a kind of primal tension in his chest, a tightening of his muscles, and a fraying of his nerves. He wondered if that was how rabbits felt while a wolf stalked through the meadow. The analogy rankledhe was Quinametzin, and comparing himself to a prey animal was galling, but he couldnt help how hed felt.

Looking back at the tall gleaming towers as they reflected the sun in rainbow shimmers, he could imagine it was a city of the gods, a place mortals werent meant to tread, and something in him believed it. That, more than anything else, illustrated to him that, though he was a big fish in a little pond back on Fanwath, here he was swimming in a vast, dangerous ocean. He let his eyes drift from the glassy towers to the stars visible through the thin atmosphere and shook his head in bewilderment. How is gravity the same? How can we breathe so well? Why arent, I dunno, pinch meteorites or something smashing into this little planet?

I, too, wondered at the physics of it all, Darren said, mouth agape, eyes following the direction of Victor's bewildered gaze. Victor nodded, frankly impressed with the guy's ability to keep his cool. If Victor felt like prey among those powerful forces, how must that dude feel?

Energy, Lam said, stepping closer to the building so a large, antlered man and the petite woman he escorted could pass by. It's so thick in the air. Can't you feel it? This world must be in the center of a river or ocean of it. I don't know how it works, but I've heard some worlds are richer with Energy than others. That's right, isn't it? She looked at Lesh with her question.

Aye, he rumbled. It's denser here than I've ever felt. I suppose, when Energy is involved, some of the rules of the universe become more like suggestions.

Victor held up the magical glass map he'd purchased from the information kiosk. It functioned a lot like a very simple tablet back on Earth. He touched things with his fingers to center the view and could zoom in and out by tapping. The map it displayed was in color and even had a slightly three-dimensional aspect, making it clear how much bigger some buildings were than others. It also had a simple menu, and one of the headings indicated a lot more to the device. This map has a guidebook section. I haven't opened it yet, but when we get to a hotel or inn or whatever, we can probably get a lot of our questions answered by looking through it.

Are we close?

Yeah, Victor held the map lower so Valla could see, pointing with his index finger at a section circled in bright pink and labeled, Abundant Lodging. The information clerk had done that for him, showing him how to make annotations to the map with one's finger. It really felt like a high-quality tablet, something the rich kids up in the foothills back home might have in their classrooms.

And the blue dot is us?

Well, the tablet. I guess it's connected to some kind of magical network. Victor shrugged.

Valla wrinkled her nose. Network? Like the, what was it, telephones in First Landing?

I think that's probably right, Darren said, nodding. It would seem the people of Sojourn have, once again, illustrated my provincial ignorance. To think I thought we could recapture our dominance away from Earth with a few tanks and bombs. Just standing here, in the shadow of those great towers, I feel the power steeped in them. Can you imagine if someone tried to let off a mundane bomb in there? Those beings could wave a hand and send the explosion away!

Try to stop that, Darren, Valla said, smiling down at the man. Looking at him, watching him frown in confusion, Victor wondered how old he was. Thirties, probably. He looked like he'd experienced some living, but he definitely wasn't middle-aged. Victor might think Energy was making him look younger, but he knew the guy hadn't even formed a Core yet, let alone advanced his race somehow.

Stop what, um, Lady Valla? He looked down, as usual, completely unable to lock eyes with Valla for more than a second. Victor wanted to laugh and tease him a little, but he held his tongue, also wondering about Valla's point.

Thinking of how you'd attack every new place you come across. Isn't that what got you into trouble back in First Landing? Wasn't a tenet of your political party about dominion? Your people are new to the System and the part of the universe it rules. Domination shouldn't be your primary reason for exploration.

Of course, I suppose, well, yes. You're right. Darren nodded and closed his mouth, and, once again, Victor had to give him props; it was clear he wanted to explain himself, wanted to make excuses for his outlook, but he was choosing to let it go.

Right. Come on, then. He started across the street, walking on one of the ubiquitous arched pedestrian crossways in the city. There weren't traffic lights, but the roads were orderly and safe. The magical and mundane conveyances, from glowing bullet-shaped carriages propelled by Energy to mythical mounts with horns and wings, traversed the city on one-way streets. At the same time, the pedestrians walked on wide, smooth sidewalks and crossed streets overtop the traffic. Most of the intersections were circular, and it seemed there was some unposted law about taking them slowly because he never saw anyone who appeared to be in a hurry. Glancing up at the flying vehicles and winged people and animals, he supposed rushing was left to those with the gift of flight.

Darren seemed to be following his gaze with his own. He spoke up, looking at Lam with his question, Does it make you want to fly?

Hmm? Lam looked at him past Edeya, whose hands they both held.

The people soaring about up there. Wouldn't you rather join them than walk on the ground with us landlubbers?

Landlubber? Lam snorted at the strange word. Is that . . .

A silly word from home, aye. Darren looked at Victor, perhaps hoping for some backup, but Victor just looked at his map, ignoring the conversation. He was warming up to the guy, not exactly despising him anymore, but he didn't want to act like his buddy.

I presume it means someone who can't fly? Lam prodded.

Oh, actually, it's meant to be disparaging toward people who don't like to sail the seas. It was a stupid word choice.

Well, back to your question, Lam said, taking pity on the poor man, I wouldn't mind flying a bit, but I can't soar the way Valla and those folks up there can. For now, I'm only able to manage short flights. Someday, maybe. She looked up at the sky longingly, and Victor saw something in her eyes that made him give her a double-take. In his mind, Lam had always been Captain Lam, the heroic, powerful, wealthy woman who'd bucked the social hierarchies and given Victor a chance to escape injustice. He admired and looked up to her, but here, she had wide, hopeful eyes and seemed younger than he'd ever seen her. For some reason, he felt like he had to protect her, and the idea was freaking him out.

They walked for a few minutes, everyone lost in their thoughts or speechless in the wonder of the strange city of Sojourn. Lesh was always quiet, but Victor could see he was also lost in thought, pondering the implications of the place and its people. As they rounded the corner and meandered down a gently sloping sidewalk cobbled with smooth red stones, their destination finally came into view. It was a big park square surrounded by tall, many-storied brick buildings. They were charming in their uniqueness, each building a different shade with slightly different architecture, but they were clearly all hotels.

Welcoming awnings and stylish wooden or metal placards announced them each. He saw names ranging from the Astral Loom Suites to the Prism of Dreams to the Whispering Wyrld Inn and a

dozen others, besides. The park wasn't massive, probably only a few acres of grass and thin, willowy trees surrounding a big, white stone fountain with a dozen matching benches at the center. From their vantage on the elevated, approaching street, they could see most of the buildings, the entirety of the park, and the crowds of people meandering about.

Where do the vehicles go? I only see pedestrians, Darren asked.

Looks like there's another road around the back of the square. Lesh pointed to the left down the street. Victor could see he was right; the wagons, carriages, and magical vehicles were all being diverted down a side street, and it was easy to guess that it would turn to parallel the now pedestrian-only roadway approaching the park.

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Any of those inns catch anyone's eye? Victor asked, giving Valla a nudge. She'd been quiet, but she was always like that, especially when she wasn't alone with him.

I'm partial to the one with the red gables. She pointed, and Victor squinted, trying to read the sign.

Wayward Wanderer Inn?

I think it fits us better than some of those more fanciful names.

Agreed, Lesh said with a note of finality.

Victor shrugged and started forward. I'm not gonna argue. I don't care as long as it has big beds and bathtubs.

Yes! With boiling water! Lesh rumbled enthusiastically. Victor laughed, imagining the big guy reclining in a bath of water that would boil the flesh off a human.

I know you've been busy with that map, Victor, but now that we've arrived, would you mind if I search for that place the guide suggested to me? Darren asked, stepping quickly to keep up with everyone else's long strides. Victor looked at him and at Edeya, listlessly walking between him and Lam, and he slowed down.

He turned to Lam. Sorry if I'm going too fast. Is this all right for Edeya?

It's probably good for her. I doubt sitting around is healthy for her body.

Okay, good. Uh, yeah, Darren, you can check the map, but wait til we get to the inn. I don't want you to try to walk and read it at the same time. What if you bump into the wrong guy, and he flattens you? Victor was half-joking, but he was also quite serious. He could only imagine how dangerous it would be for Darren if the wrong person decided he'd done something insulting. Also, I told you Lesh is your buddy while we're here, so if you want to check the place out, you'll have to work with him.

Of course! Thank you, Victor.

Victor paused and turned to look down at Darren, glowering a little. He appreciated his attitude change and his attempt to be respectful but didn't want a companion acting obsequious all the time. Darren, chill out with that stuff, will you? I'm not going to beat you up or anything. Just be yourself; you don't have to kiss my ass.

Darrens eyes widened with dismay, clearly fearing that hed angered Victor despite his words. I didnt mean anything . . .

He knows, Lam said, narrowing her eyes at Victor. Valla tugged at his arm, so Victor turned and continued walking. What was it with everyone? They acted like he was going to kill the guy. As far as he was concerned, after they got to the hotel, Darren was Leshs problem. Hed already told the big dragonkin as much, and Lesh had agreed with such solemn acceptance that Victor had almost taken back the request. It was like hed given out some kind of noble quest, and Lesh was determined to succeed beyond his expectations. Did he feel chaperoning the one-time politician would earn him some points with Victor? How would he feel if he learned Victor didnt really care what happened to the guy? That thought gave him pause. Was it true? Had he grown so heartless?

Victor found himself scowling, feeling kind of irritated with himself as they walked through the hotel's big glass and brass doors. He barely heard the hirsute doorman as he bowed and greeted them, pulling the massive door wide. He slowed his steps, enjoying the dcor of the expansive lobby, and allowed Valla to take the lead, approaching the reception desk. Victor had never been to a fancy hotel on Earth, but he imagined it would look something like this. Marble floors, covered with lush blue carpets intricately patterned in a green floral print, ran through the expansive space to meet walls decked in lavish artworkportraits, display cases filled with crystal and fine plate wear, and hanging tapestries that complemented the carpets.

Plants hung from the heights, along with the bright, sunny lighting that emanated from high crystal chandeliers, gave warmth and vibrancy to the space. Victor took a deep, cleansing breath and tried to push his stress aside. They had things to accomplish in this placeEdeyas catatonic face was a constant reminder of thatbut that didnt mean they couldnt enjoy themselves while they were at it. A tiny voice in a deep corner of his mind, one hed been repeatedly shoving down since the battle at the volcano, whispered, Should you really enjoy yourself after getting hundreds of people killed?

#

Darren hung back with Lam and Edeya while the others spoke to the hotel clerk. He watched Victor staring into space, glowering, while Valla made arrangements for their rooms. He was happy to let them handle things; hed spent most of the fortune hed been hoarding back in First Landing to pay for his travel through the System stone, and though he hadnt said anything, he desperately hoped theyd find alternative means of further travel. Otherwise, hed have to throw himself on Victor and Vallas mercy again.

He wondered what Victor was so tense about. Hed seemed rather surly since Darren had arrived unexpectedly in the Free Marches. Darren had expected him to be annoyed and hadnt been surprised when hed been reticent to allow him to travel with them, but it wasnt just Darren Victor had been short with. Hed seen the faces Lam and Valla made. Lesh, eager to please Victor, wasnt so easy to read. Besides, he scowled almost as much as Victor. No, he wasnt a good indicator of Victors mood.

Darren wondered if it was simply the stress of being responsible for all of them. He had a vague idea that Lam, Valla, and Lesh were far from helpless, but hed seen how they all looked up to Victor back on Fanwath. Was Victor perhaps feeling out of his depth, worried that hed led them all into waters too choppy to swim through? Darren wanted to help but felt like an infant trying to advise nuclear scientists. No, he figured the best thing he could do was get himself out of Victors hair and work on making himself less of a burden.

Lesh stepped away from the counter, holding a shiny brass key. He looked at Darren and said, Come, fosterling, you will stay with me.

I, uh, oh. Very well, thank you, Lesh. The dragon-man narrowed his gold-banded green eyes and grunted, turning back to Victor.

Lord Victor, Ill be ready for your call. Please keep me apprised of the situation. He nodded to Edeya meaningfully and then gestured for Darren to follow him, stepping briskly toward an ornate, wrought-iron and marble stairway.

Darren started to hurry after him, but Victor held up a hand. Wait. Lesh froze, and Darren turned to Victor, unconsciously shrinking inward, flinching as though the giant might smack him. He was relieved to see Victor's face in a neutral expression as he held out the glass, notebook-sized map. Use this for now, but dont take it from your room. Im going to want to look through it later. As Darren accepted the magical device, Victor looked at Lesh. If you go anywhere, leave a notice with the desk here. Well do the same.

Lesh nodded, then turned, beckoning for Darren to hurry. Darren clutched the tablet to his chest and hustled after the big warrior, jogging to keep up. When they approached the stairway, Lesh looked at Darren and asked, Have you used a travel stair before?

A, uh, what?

This is a travel stair. It will aid your movement with dimensional magic. You must keep your destination in mind as you step, or youll get lost.

Lost on a stairway?

Exactly. We are on floor seventeen. Think of that number as you climb. With that, the giant turned, lifted his foot to the fourth step, and started up. To Darrens dismay, he vanished from sight after only one more giant step. Darren hurriedly started climbing the steps, picturing a big floating seventeen in his mind, and after three steps, he stumbled onto a landing.

How the hell? He looked around, surprised to find himself facing into a hallway with Lesh striding away from him. He hurried after him, and when they approached a door labeled 1755, Lesh stopped and pushed his key into the lock. The door opened with a click, and they stepped into their suite. Lesh put his fists on his hips and looked around, breathing deeply. He bared his many pointy teeth in a smile. This is a suitable space.

Their hotel room must have been constructed with heavy use of dimensional magic. The ceiling soared some thirty meters overhead, and windows the size of tennis courts lined the far wall, providing an expansive view of the hotel square and park. Half a dozen couches were arrayed before the windows and the big, free-standing circular fireplace. A large kitchen lined one side of the room, and doorways to the bedroom suites were on the other. All in all, it was decorated much like the lobby, with deep shades of blue and dark, polished wood. It was luxurious on a level Darren had seldom seen, and on a scale hed never encountered. Amazing, he breathed, stepping into the massive space, savoring the thick carpeting as his feet sank into it.

Elder, Lesh said, catching him by surprise.

Im sorry?

You need not apologize. Now you know; do not fail to use the honorific in the future when we are in mixed company. Lesh brushed past him toward the windows, and Darren stared at him, confused for several seconds before it clicked; back in the lobby, he'd scowled when Darren called him Lesh. He expected him to call him Elder?

Um, do you mean I should always call you Elder, or do I say Elder Lesh?

Either will do, fosterling.

You, uh, Elder Lesh, you know I'm an adult human, right?

Regardless. You are as helpless as a hatchling, and I've taken you into my protection. You are my fosterling, and you will address me with the proper show of respect. Something in Darren wanted to balk at the idea, wanted to argue, but another part of him felt admiration and gratitude for the giant, black-scaled man. Calling Darren a fosterling was going a lot further than Victor had demanded. If Victor were the most powerful person in their party, Lesh would probably be second, though Darren wasn't sure of that; Valla was also an unknown entity. The point was that Lesh was a powerhouse, and if he was willing to foster Darren, that was a win in his eyes.

Thank you, Elder. At his words, Lesh folded his arms over his chest and nodded solemnly, still staring out the window.

Good. Now, fosterling, you will contact the man at the front desk and ask that the furniture in this suite be stored away. We have no use for it. A bath and a dry floor are all men such as we require.

Oh, Darren looked around the room at the comfortable, luxurious furniture. He supposed sleeping on the floor wouldn't be so awful; at least they were well-carpeted. I'll do that right away, Elder.

Yes, Lesh nodded, his black, reptilian lips curving into a slow smile. A large cave with a good view will benefit our outlook. Look out there, fosterling. Look at those people, at those buildings, at the stars beyond. See what there is within your grasp and be filled with inspiration. Think of the man who changed your life and took you in, assigning you to me. Think of how you will work to impress him and make him glad that you exist. That is our mission here, in this great city to grow stronger so that we might aid Victor in his quests. Through his victories, we will have our own.

Book 7: Chapter 16: Progress

Victor sat on the supple leather couch, looking through the enormous windows at the park and the city beyond it. Rather than a medieval magical world, he felt like he was looking out at a futuristic New York or Paris. He really had no clue, having never been to a big city on Earth. It was hard not to feel relaxed with that view in the comfort of his hotel room, but he managed. He was tense and annoyed and feeling like everything was too damn complicated.

When he'd gone from Fanwath to the city of Coloss, he'd been irritated to find that people there were generally a lot more powerful than those on Fanwath. He'd been expecting something similar when they traveled to Sojourn, but not on this scale. There were times he'd been talking to people on Fanwath—Borrius, Rellia, even the folks at First Landing—and while he spoke about being prepared and growing in power, he'd often wondered, quietly, why someone truly mighty, someone like Tes but opposite in temperament, wouldn't come to Fanwath and take the place over. Being here, walking around in the thick Energy, slinking through the shadows cast by the god-like powers up above, he realized that Fanwath wasn't worth noticing for these people.

Do you want to talk about it?

Victor looked up to see Valla stepping out of the bedroom. She'd been hanging some clothes in the wardrobe, something he didn't understand. He was fine keeping his things in his storage ring, but he supposed Valla liked to visualize her outfits. Hmm?

Are you ready to talk about your mood? You've been . . . short with people. She walked closer to the couch, pausing to look out the window while he considered his answer.

I just hate feeling so small, I guess.

She looked at him and frowned, making an expression that was half irritated and half sympathetic. Firstly, love, if that's truly bothering you, then you need to take a step back and put yourself in everyone else's shoes. Secondly, that's not it. You've been distant since we beat the invasion, distant with me, and short with everyone else. You have bouts of good humor, but there's more bothering you, and it's only going to fester until you confront it.

I don't know what you want to hear. I'm worried about Edeya. I'm stressed having so many dangerous . . . beings, I guess, around us.

Valla shook her head, sighing, then walked around behind the couch. He could hear her steps as she continued toward the door. I'm going to get that guidebook thing from Darren. We need to figure out where to ask for help with Edeya.

Want me to come with you?

No. Be back soon. With that, she stepped through the door, and he heard it click shut. Victor felt his irritation start to steep into something more like anger and clenched his fists, sitting there alone, feeling stupid and childish. Something in him wouldn't allow him to take all the blame, though. Was it his fault he felt stressed? He hadn't exactly been mean to anyone, had he? Hadn't he even told Darren to relax and stop sucking up? What was he supposed to do, kiss everyone's ass? Was Valla right about him being distant since the volcano? Again, what was he supposed to do about that? Forget about all the good people who'd died? Forget about Sarl?

Victor found he was clenching his teeth, his jaw bulging from the pressure, and forced himself to physically relax by taking a deep, slow breath through his nose. He stood and paced before the window. Even at his full, natural size, it took him five steps to traverse its length, and a part of him was impressed with the weird spatial magic that allowed the massive windows on the interior of the building while making them a tenth the size on the exterior. The thought didn't last long, though, in the storm of emotions raging in his mind. Looking deep, where he hated to gaze, he knew it was more than stress, anger, sadness, or disappointment that was messing with his mind; it was shame.

He'd put on a brave face and accepted everyone's insistence that it wasn't his fault that so many had died when Hector had sprung his trap, but what it boiled down to was that he didn't believe the platitudes. He didn't believe that Kethelket wasn't upset with him, not after losing nearly a third of all his people. When he'd joined the campaign, he'd brought more than three hundred Naghelli. Now, he was settling the lands they'd earned with something like a hundred and eighty. Even if Victor put that aside, how could he ever be okay knowing that more than seven hundred members of the ninth and the reserve cohort had died in that attack?

People said things like, If not for you, more would have died during the campaign, but the words didnt help. To him, Edeya had become the symbol of his failures. She was a constant reminder of what had gone wrong that night, and the sadness lurking in Lams eyes only compounded that feeling. Lam put on a brave face and tried to keep hopeful about a solution, but Victor wasnt so sure. Catalina was cruel, sadistic even, and he didnt doubt that the part of Edeya shed taken wasnt being treated well. He wasnt sure what a Death Caster would do with someones spirit, but he knew it wouldnt be pretty. Even if they made her whole again, would she ever be the same?

His stewing was interrupted when the door opened, and Valla walked in carrying the glass tablet. She held it aloft and said, A different person was working at the desk, a strange metallic being with four arms. I couldnt tell if it was a man or a woman or something else. Anyway, they were very kind, and when they heard me speaking to Lesh and Darren, they offered to send a runner back to the World Hall, as they called the place where we arrived, and fetch us another one of these. Lesh paid for it and said hed wait for the replacement.

Thats cool. Victor sighed, shaking his head. Listen, I know Im not a great communicator. I dont know how to voice all the shit going on in my head, but I want you to know Im sorry if Im making you miserable.

Valla, too, sighed, and she walked toward him, pulling her wings close with an almost metallic rustle. Come here. She opened her arms, but Victor didnt move. He wasnt feeling right, and receiving more comfort or kindness from someone wasnt what he was looking for; it wasnt what he deserved. That didnt deter Valla, though, and she continued toward him. When she stepped around the couch into the bright sun shining through the window, the light in her eyes was mesmerizing, and Victor almost didnt realize it when she took his hands in hers, looking up at him. I noticed youre not reducing your size here.

I . . .

You want to put more distance between yourself and us. She didnt ask; it was clear she thought she was right, and she might be. It was easier to stand high above Lam and Edeya. It was easier to avoid looking into peoples eyes. I know the source of your pain, and I know people have tried words to make you feel differently. Maybe you should try some words. Put to voice whats haunting you.

Whats haunting me? A thousand ghosts! Victor snapped, jerking free of her grasp and turning back to the window. A thousand people who died because I was a prideful idiot. Because I let that . . . He trailed off, not wanting to start throwing out curses and invectives he might come to regret.

You let her play upon your pride? You took some bait and, with every good intention, attempted something perilous? How many others could say the same? How many of us wouldnt put ourselves at risk if we thought it would save the lives of others? You made a bad decision, but you made it for the right reasons.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Valla! The Naghelli are practically gone!

Would it be better if youd never killed Belikot? Would they be better off?

Victor turned to the glass, refusing to meet her gaze, and pressed his forehead against the cool surface. So, if I do something good, it excuses hundreds of deaths?

Get over yourself, Victor! Valla snapped, apparently tired of coddling him. When he turned, eyes wide, surprised at the outburst, she continued, How are you so certain no one would have died if you'd been there? Most of the deaths occurred when Hector descended with that bone dragon! What if you'd run off like me and Kethelket, pursuing and slaughtering the ghouls? He still would have landed on that wall. He still would have run amok among the troops while you fought your way to him. Should Kethelket and I carry the burden of those deaths because we didn't stand back with the soldiers? Now, tell me, if you'd pursued him up that mountain but hadn't had the breakthrough you were forced

to make while trapped, do you think you would have beaten him so cleanly up in that volcano? Keep in mind that his veil star would have still been there. Keep in mind that the volcano wouldn't have awakened. Stop moping and grouching about what *could* have been when you've got so much to be thankful for! We won! We destroyed a vast army of undead and drove the invaders from Fanwath, and that was largely due to your heroics!

I . . . Victor stopped, mouth hanging open, unable to formulate a coherent string of words. He'd rarely heard Valla speak so much at once and never with such ferocity. She glared at him for a handful of seconds, then turned and walked to the couch. She sat and began tapping her fingers on the tablet, scowling. Victor turned back to the window, staring out at the crystal city center in the distance, and, for the first time, he appreciated the beauty of it. For the first time, he didn't think about the beings walking the heights, wondering about their intentions. It's beautiful, he said, voicing his thoughts.

Valla didn't reply, so he turned to her and watched her eyes scanning the tablet. Her eyebrows were drawn down in a scowl, and he wondered what it must have taken for her to yell at him like that. Had he really been so wrong? He moved over to the couch, casting Alter Self, reducing his size to something more on her level. When he sat, he was sure to leave some space between them. He watched her scanning through the guidebook information, pointedly ignoring him, and after a few minutes, he said, You're right. Her finger paused for a moment, then went back to scrolling through the information. You know, you're a lot older than I am. It's not really my fault that I don't see things as clearly as you do . . .

What? She whirled on him, dropping the tablet to the carpet. Did you just say I'm old?

Victor grinned, leaning back as though taunting her, daring her to do something. I mean, I'm just stating the facts . . . She leaped on him, hands going for his throat, her wings spreading wide. Victor laughed and fell back, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her close. Her feigned chokes became caresses, became kisses, and then it was only a matter of time before they were pulling each

others clothes off and, in the shadow of the glittering, rainbow-lit city, they made love, or, more aptly, had sexwild, pent-up sex that left them both sweaty and drained and, at least in Victor's case, much clearer of mind.

Later that afternoon, after they'd cleaned up, Lam came to their suite with Edeya in tow. While she and Valla sat talking, Victor perused the guidebook. It didn't take long to find a listing of Sojourn-sanctioned businesses, and among them, subheadings for practitioners of spirit and portal magic, among other promising categories. When he saw that, he looked up, tuning in for the first time to the conversation taking place.

. . . think it's kind of endearing. He could have become bitter or vengeful, but he's accepted his failure and chosen to better himself. In fact, I was the one who convinced Victor to bring him.

That's all well and good, but are we sure Lesh is the right one to mentor him? What do we even know about that man's culture?

Uh, sorry to interrupt, ladies, but I think I have a lead here. This guidebook has listings for different kinds of businesses and dozens of spirit and portal experts. I figure if someone can't help Edeya here, maybe someone can help us find a way to get to Dark Ember. Or at least to send me. If I can get my hands on that bi . . .

Woah, Lam said, laughing. The genuine humor in the sound and the light in her eyes reminded Victor of what an idiot he'd been earlier. She might be upset about Edeya, but there was great hope there, enough to let her enjoy the moment. And why shouldn't she be hopeful? While Edeya had life, there was a chance she'd recover. There was so much in this universe he didn't understand, so much power he couldn't fathom. Who was he to decide something was hopeless? Those beings who'd inspired dread in him as he walked beneath those crystal towers were just as worthy of inspiring hope.

Right. One step at a time. Do you guys want to go see one before it gets dark?

Valla smiled. This is a city, Victor. Darkness doesn't mean businesses close . . .

Right, well, dark was the wrong word. I meant late. Businesses do close, you know.

I'm up for it, Lam said, illustrating her words by standing.

When Valla nodded, Victor said, Let's pick a place first. I say we should visit a spirit practitioner first. It would be good to have another opinion about what's going on with Edeya, and I wouldn't mind asking about, shit, I don't know, an instructor? What do you call it when you want to learn more about your magic?

A teacher, or master, or mentor, or . . . Lam looked like she meant to continue listing synonyms, so Victor held up his hand for mercy, laughing.

Right, right, you know what I mean. Here are some of the names. He read from the list: Vyrt's Wonders of the Soul, The Love Loom, Empathy Echoes, Hope's Horizon, Chamber of Remorse, Harmonies Haven, Ether Echoes, Celestine's Crystal Gaze . . . Victor trailed off, frowning.

Is that all of them? Lam prodded.

No, theres about forty more, but I was just thinking that these names dont say a lot. We might as well just pick one, and if they cant help us, we can ask whoever runs that shop for advice on where to go next.

Well, Im partial to the, uh, hope one, Valla said, gesturing to her sword, Midnight Hope, leaning in her scabbard against the wall beside Lifedrinker.

Right. Victor grinned. Hopes Horizon, it is. He and Valla gathered up their weapons, and then, with Lam holding Edeyas hand, they walked through the long hallway to the magical stairway. When they approached it, a thought occurred to Victor, Hey, how does Edeya use the stairs? Dont you have to think of your destination?

Lam shrugged. I just hold her hand, and she moves with me.

Well, thats good. I guess if nothing else worked, I could carry her . . .

Not necessary, Lam laughed.

The map made it easy to navigate the city; it was like having GPS on your phone back on Earth. Victor led the way, but the sidewalks were wide, the denizens of the city were pleasant, and they didnt encounter any trouble as they made the short walk to the address in the guidebook. Their route took them back toward the citys center, but they stopped well short of the first crystal tower, finding Hopes Horizon to be a small shopfront on the side of a large building occupied mainly by a huge bookstore.

Oh! Valla said, grabbing Victors wrist. Can we go into the bookstore when were done in there?

Yeah, for sure. Victor glanced at Lam, That all right with you?

She nodded, smiling at Vallas excitement. I love books.

Never saw you reading back in the mine . . .

Spent a lot of time watching me in my private quarters, did you? Lam gave his shoulder a bit of a shove.

See? Thats what happens when I walk around all tiny like this; people think they can shove me around.

Tiny? Lam scoffed. None of us are tiny. It was true; even if he reduced his height to be similar to Valla's, the three of them were all seven feet tall or more. Victor shrugged, then approached the business door. The bright yellow sun was dipping toward the horizon, providing a breathtaking sunset that filled the western sky with deep shades of red, magenta, and purple while darkening the rest of the atmosphere, allowing the already visible stars to shine more brightly in the blackness. Hed nearly walked into traffic twice, trying to stare up into that expanse as they traversed the city. With that in mind, he worried they were too late as he pulled on the door handle. It opened easily, putting his fears to rest, and they stepped inside.

Victor found himself in a small, comfortable-looking shop with couches on the right-hand side, a counter on the left, and rows of trinkets and potion bottles on shelves behind it. A man with long, wavy pink hair, massive, pointy gray ears, and golden eyes that reminded Victor of a cat looked up from the counter. His eyes narrowed with interest. Welcome in. Hurry now, dont let all the warm air

out. Ah, ah, I see a bright spirit Core among you, and . . . whats this? This poor girls spirit is fragmented. Come, come, sit down. Let me have a better look.

Book 7: Chapter 17: Prying Eyes

The door to the suite clicked open, and Leshs voice boomed out, Fosterling!

Darren jumped, startled more by the volume than the sudden return of the giant, reptilian man. Was that right? Were dragonkin reptiles? Were dragons? Darren decided it would be best to guard his words and thoughts about the subject on the off chance that labeling them such would be considered an insult. He clambered to his feet and cleared his throat, Here, Elder. Hed been lounging in front of the windows, lying on the carpet the hospitality staff had come in with dimensional containers and removed all the furnishings. Lesh had been pleased by the wide-open feeling of the room, but Darren found it strange; it felt hollow, and sounds seemed to echo and bounce off the naked walls.

I have regained the information device. No, better; I have acquired a new one. We no longer have to worry about returning this to Lord Victor.

Oh? Thats excellent news! May I see . . .

You will take this and find the location of the Genesis Building. Is that not the name of the place the steward of the portals whispered in your ear?

Um, right, Elder. Genesis Center, actually. Darren hurried over to Lesh, as always daunted by the fact that his head only reached the enormous warriors waist. Holding the device between a clawed thumb and finger, Lesh handed it down to him. I cannot make myself small as Victor does to use this comfortably. I may require you to navigate here and there, depending on how long we stay in this city.

Darren took the tablet, nodding, as he tapped the screen. When it didnt light up like the first one, he said, Elder, I think you need to activate it. Lesh grumbled a sound, half sigh and half tsk, as he reached out with one of his three, clawed fingers, each as wide around as Darrens wrist, and pressed it into the glass. A half second later, it flared with amber light, and the map of the city appeared. Thank you, sir, um, Elder.

Good. As your education advances, I will teach you a proper honorific in the tongue of the dragons. For now, Elder will continue to suffice. Will it take you long to find the center? Ive half a mind to bask in the afternoon sun. Lesh eyed the bright, sunny section of blue carpeting in front of the windows.

Only a moment, but we can wait to go if . . .

No. We will go now. I cannot condone your Coreless existence for a moment longer than necessary. If this grove or nursery cannot help you, I will guide you through the process, painful as it may be. First, however, we will give the teachers of children a try.

Im not so sure its a place for children . . . While he muttered his half-hearted objection, Darren scanned through the listing of businesses and public buildings. Somehow, it was organized alphabetically in words that looked just like English to him, and for the millionth time since waking up on Fanwath, he wondered how the System could do that. It had to be a complex spell or something that existed in their minds. Is that what skills granted by the System were? Could it take

them away as easily as grant them? He tapped the name of the business and selected the map option, and then he saw, just like his GPS back on Earth, a faint golden line leading away from the hotel on the map toward the destination. It didnt look far. I have it, Elder.

Good! You see, fosterling? Your mind is quick; there may be a useful Class for you.

As Lesh turned toward the door, Darren fell into his shadow, following behind. Um, thank you. When they reached the sidewalk outside the hotel, Lesh paused and turned to look down his short, tooth-filled snout at him, narrowing his mossy green eyes in the dark hollow beneath his prominent, scaled brow.

You will lead us. Fear not I will be close behind.

Darren nodded and continued down the cobbled walkway past the park. Just as before, he was nearly dumbstruck by the sights, sounds, and smells of the magical city. The smell was a big one; it was clear from what they could see through their hotel window that the city was massive. It sprawled to the horizon, and its downtown, with the giant crystal towers, was easily the size of skyscraper zones in the big cities of Earth. That said, it didnt smell like New York. Darren had been there a few times for seminars, and the thing he always noticed, provided the weather was warm enough, was the ever-present underlying stench of urine. The air is fresh, Elder, he said over his shoulder.

Should it not be?

Well, I dont know why, but Id often find cities smelled of garbage and waste on my homeworld. Darren shrugged; he really didnt know why. He supposed that when lots of people gathered, you got all kinds, and some of those would rather pee on the side of a building than find a restroom.

Shameful. One who cannot dispose of their own waste should be banished. Lesh rumbled his proclamation offhandedly, and when Darren looked back at him, he saw that his big mentor was busily staring at a procession of veiled, feminine figures. They were larger than humans, had four arms with blue and purple skin, and beneath their veils, bright lights shone from where their eyes should be. Darren tried not to stare as the twelve figures sauntered by, studiously staring at his map while he hurried.

What interesting ladies, Lesh said after theyd rounded the corner. Something about a hidden face makes me want to see it more. Do you feel the same, fosterling?

I suppose. The allure of the unknown or the mystery of what we cannot see . . . Darren trailed off as he rounded the last corner and saw his destination ahead. It was a domed, crystalline building occupying something like four city blocks. The afternoon sun shimmered on the structure, making it appear bright white, painful to the eyes, near the top, and gradually darkening to a glimmering orange-red near the street level. Beautiful, he breathed, beginning to walk again.

Indeed. Thats an edifice worthy of a visit, even if the services within are meant for the youth of this world. Leshs cocksure certainty that the place was for children was almost amusing to Darren. He couldnt argue, though; he figured most adults whod been born in a System world would have developed their Core and whatever other services the Genesis Center provided. It didnt help matters when, as they approached, a group of childrenpointy-eared, colorful folk who reminded Darren of fairy storiesurged out of the central doors, corralled by a floating, cloud-like being as they laughed and jumped, running with the exuberance of youth, toward the sidewalk.

Darren didnt wait around for Lesh to comment, hurrying up the steps to the enormous glass, or maybe crystal, doors. When he approached, they swung open quickly and noiselessly, and Darren stepped into an oval reception area constructed of the same crystal substance as the buildings exterior. It was domed and almost cave-like, with a dozen oval passages leading away in every direction. The lighting came from the crystal walls, ceiling, and floor a soft blue-white glow that permeated everything. The air was remarkably crisp and fresh, and Darren folded his arms, gripping his shoulders as he registered the temperature, bordering on cold.

He was about to turn to Lesh to ask him for advice on where to begin when a cloud of misty light coalesced in front of him. It pulsed with a soft glow as a pleasant, masculine voice asked, Darren Whitehorse, welcome to the Genesis Center. Are you here to begin your journey toward Energy cultivation? Before he could answer, the misty ball of light floated over to Lesh and said, Leshrozellan, welcome to the Genesis Center. Is Darren Whitehorse your charge?

He is my fosterling.

The misty light bobbed up and down, then moved back to Darren. In his peripheral vision, Darren could see other such lights, speaking to other people in the hall. Darren? Will you learn with us today?

Am, Darren licked his lips, unsure what he wanted to ask. Am I allowed?

Of course! The Genesis Center is funded and maintained by the generosity of charitable citizens of Sojourn. All of our instruction and counseling services are free to the public.

You will learn here today, fosterling, Lesh rumbled, making his decision for him.

If youre sure. Darren glanced up at the giant man. Elder.

Your elder is wise to give you time to study here, Darren. Theres much that we can teach you. Leshrozellan, please retrieve your charge here tomorrow at noon; hell be ready for rest and recovery by then.

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

Good. When Lesh turned, Darren thought he would leave, but he stopped halfway, facing him. He took Darrens shoulder in one of his enormous clawed hands, turning him so they were face to face. Look in my eyes, fosterling. Darren looked up. He hadnt even realized he was looking down. What was it about people like Victor and Lesh that made them hard to lock eyes with? No, it was more than those two; Darren felt the same about Valla. Hed thought it was her beauty, but could it be more? Could it be their raw power? Darren forced himself to keep his eyes open, staring into the mossy green, yellow-banded eyes, feeling the weight of the consciousness behind them. Here, in this public place, I have declared that you are my fosterling. You are a member of my household. You will bring pride to my name. He didnt say it like he was asking or telling Darren to make him proud, but rather as a statement of fact. Darren felt his chest swelling as he stood up straighter. Had he ever had a boss or mentor put such faith in him?

Thank you, Elder.

Lesh nodded and turned to leave without a backward glance. The floating ball of mist and light moved between Darrens eyes and his view of Leshs diminishing form stalking down the steps outside the glass doors. Darren, please follow me to your genesis pod. It moved slowly, as though to

ensure Darren was following, then it gradually increased its speed until he had to step with brisk, long strides to keep up. It led him into one of the round crystal-lined passages, which meandered in a winding, unpredictable pattern as it slowly climbed into the enormous edifice. When they stepped into a small, perfectly circular room, Darren had no idea how far theyd come or in what part of the building he might be.

This is your genesis pod, Darren. You will learn and practice here for your first day at the center. If your elder brings you again, you may return to a room like this or work with other students, depending on your progress today.

Will, um, will I have a teacher?

I will be your instructor and guide today. You may call me Y-seven.

Y-seven? Darren had turned to address the light and was faintly disturbed to see the doorway was gone; he was in a round ball of faintly cloudy, luminous crystal. Forgive my ignorance, Y-seven, but are you a lifeform or a construct of some kind?

There is no need to forgive a lack of knowledge so long as the desire exists to learn. I am a member of the Orushra species, and yes, I am alive, though my body functions differently than yours. Speaking of body functions, Darren, will you require nourishment or a place to void biological waste?

I, um, not right now, thank you.

Very good. Please move your body into its most comfortable position while still remaining alert. Many bipedal beings prefer to sit on the floor, for example. Youll find the crystal will accommodate your form.

Part of Darren wanted to ask for a chair, but when hed fled First Landing and thrown himself on Victors mercy, hed made the conscious decision to be open-minded and agreeable. I will sit, he said, kneeling and then sitting on his butt, trying to fold his legs before himself. His knees were a bit stiff, so he kept them up, wrapping his arms around them for comfort. The being hadnt lied; the crystal seemed to shift under his weight, and rather than a hard, unyielding glass-like crystal, he felt as though he was sitting on a warm, soft cushion.

Are you comfortable? Y-seven asked, and Darren nodded. Good. I can see much about you thanks to the divination glyphs woven into this structure. Still, it would be good if we had a conversation. Will that be all right? Again, Darren nodded. As I ask you questions and you answer them, feel free to ask me questions of your own.

Thank you, I will.

Darren, are you a child of your species?

No, Im considered an adult man. Most people consider humans to be adults around the age of twenty years. Im thirty-four.

And yet, youve not formed a Core. Are you a member of a caste that isnt allowed the use of Energy on your homeworld?

Not exactly. You see, my people come from a world where Energy doesn't exist. I've heard stories from, well, from two sources, now, that say Energy used to be rich on my homeworld but that, for some reason, it stopped flowing there.

And, with no Energy, the System is not present, either?

That's right.

Y-seven pulsed and throbbed with light for several seconds, and then it said, I will guide you, Darren. You are lucky to have been brought here. Truly, considering your lack of Energy, it's quite fortunate that you were taken in by such a formidable and kind master. There are many worse places you might have found yourself than here on Sojourn. Now, tell me, what do you know of Energy Cores?

#

The strange-looking man hurried out from behind his counter and ushered their party over to his couches. Lam and Edeya sat in one, while Victor and Valla took the other. The couches were accommodating but still a bit small for comfort. Victor wanted to reduce his size further but knew it would probably irritate Valla, so he sat there, knees as high as his chest, and watched as the long-eared, cat-eyed man alternated staring at him and Edeya. Quite a surprising visit! Sir, have you embarked upon your test of steel?

My, uh? Victor frowned, looking at his companions, wondering if he'd missed something.

Your test of steel. Are you yet in the iron ranks?

He is. Valla smiled at Victor, sighing almost wistfully as though longing for a day when someone wouldn't be impressed by him.

Very good! The man smiled, exposing too-large teeth, and wiped at his brow. I was afraid I'd have to mind my manners to an absurd degree, but we iron-rankers can speak frankly, no? My name is Erd Van.

That we can, Lam said, leaning forward. I am Lam, there are Valla and Victor, and this is Edeya. She's in a bad way, Erd Van. Can you help her?

This poor soul? He stepped close to Edeya, peering into her listless eyes. A moment! he bustled around the counter, the tails of his patchwork coat flapping with his rapid movement. Victor heard bottles clinking and drawers opening and slamming shut, and then the man reappeared, hurrying forward with a disc-shaped, blue lens. He stood before Edeya, peering at her through the lens. Victor felt a small surge of Energy, and then the lens began to sparkle with silvery light, throwing off rainbow sparks as he moved it around, peering at Edeya from every angle. After a while, he put the lens into his breast pocket and stood there, scratching the very short, very pink hairs on his chin.

Well? Lam prodded.

Well, I'm sure you're aware that she's being made to appear far better than the reality of the situation. That circlet around her brow is giving her body some appearance of vibrancy, but were it taken away, I fear she'd wither and die.

Thats right. Victor leaned forward and gestured to Edeya. Can you tell us anything we dont know? Can you help her? He didnt mean to sound short with the guy, but something about his smug assessment rubbed him the wrong way.

Only a fragment of her spirit is there! What happened? Was she attacked on the Spirit Plane? Was she attempting a breakthrough with a Khalnav infusion? Did she do battle with . . .

A Death Caster, Lam said, frustration and hopelessness creeping into her voice. She was attacked by a traitorous Death Caster who fled our world when confronted.

Ah! That makes much more sense. Someone was trying to take her spirit, then, and was interrupted?

Yes. Lams eyes filled with tears, and Victor knew she was reliving her encounter with Catalina. He wanted to sit beside her and offer her some comfort, but there wasnt room on the little couch.

Do not despair! Erd Van said, moving close to Lam and resting one of his small, wiry hands on her shoulder. The thing about spirits is that they yearn to be whole. The greater part will constantly tug at the lesser fragments. This one would have fled this vessel if not for your stalwart vigil! You being here, he gestured to them all, your spirits, along with the pull of her body, a familiar vessel, are providing a counterbalance. With a strong enough influence, you might be able to use the innate tether all soul fragments have with each other to snatch the rest of her from the clutches of that Death Caster!

Really? Lams eyes sprang tears at his words, but they seemed to be tears of relief or joy. Victor felt his eyes watering up in sympathy. Can you do that?

Me? Erd Van held a hand to his chest and chuckled. Oh, no, dear. Im afraid not. Even your friend here with the mighty furnace of rage and fear in his Core wouldnt be able to, even if he had the know-how. No, I fear youll need to find a patron whos completed their Test of Steel and moved into their Lustrous Veil. Someone of that level of power could probably overcome the enormous imbalance between your friends larger spirit and this fragment. They may be able to exert the force required to help her spirit break free and find its way home to her. Of course, there are risks, but there is hope. Sojourn is just the place to find the right patron!

While Lam and the others absorbed his words, he turned to Victor and narrowed his eyes, staring at him for a long minute. Do you not have a powerful patron already, sir?

Not exactly. Victor shrugged, not sure what he was getting at. Could he sense Khul Bach? Was there something about his Core? It rankled Victor that the guy could apparently see his Core. How was he doing that? Was it just that he was very sensitive to spirit Energies? Maybe it was a skill or ability with his Class . . .

I only ask because I can see wispy remnantstendrils of left-behind powerof spirits that have touched yours. Their connections to you seem tenuous, but it seems they are still there, as though great beings are connected to you through the Spirit Plane. I wonder if . . .

Something came over Victor at that moment, and he felt his rage begin to seep into his pathways. He surged to his feet and glowered down at the man. When he spoke, it was him, his voice, his mind, but he felt the firm comforting influence of his ancestors guiding his tongue. You may cease your ogling of my spirit! I am Quinametzin, and my ancestors walk with me. Be wary of insulting them with your prying eyes. Instinctively, he reached out with his will, grabbed ahold of his aura

that had been dutifully squeezing into submission, and pulled it closer still, drawing a curtain of the furious, potent stuff around his Core.

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Aura Veil Basic.*****

*****Aura Veil - Basic: Using your will, you have learned to obscure your Core and affinities from the prying eyes of others. Your veil is only as strong as your aura, and those whose will is greater than your own can pierce your concealment.*****

My apologies, sir! Erd Van fell to his knees, pressing his forehead to the carpet.

Victor might once have felt embarrassed at the obsequious display, but in his current state, bolstered by the haughty presence of his ancestors, it felt just right. He nodded to the man, ignoring the looks Lam and Valla were giving him, and said, Your insult was innocent. You may relax. Tell us, Erd Van, can you direct us to someone who might be able to pull Edeyas spirit home?

Book 7: Chapter 18: Favors

Victor, please. Valla gently tugged on his wrist, urging him to sit back down. Give the man a moment to gather himself.

Victor glowered, and when Vallas eyebrows drew together, mimicking his expression of irritation, it felt like someone had splashed cold water on him. He looked inward, at his roiling rage Core, at the heat in his pathways, and he sighed, succumbing to her pull and sitting back down. Not trusting himself to speak, he folded his arms and made a point of not staring at Erd Van, who still knelt before the couch.

Maybe to change the subject or ease the tension, Lam spoke up, Erd, or is it always Erd Van?

The man sat up straight, smoothing his long, pink hair back. You may call me Erd at your pleasure, Lady.

Lam smiled and leaned against the couch arm, shifting to cross her legs more easily. Can you tell me what you mean by test of steel? Ive never traveled to Sojourn before.

Ah. Erd lithely stood, glancing at Victor as he did so, then almost eagerly looking back toward Lam. The term originated here on Sojourn. Our founders had a flowery way of speaking and a poetic way of looking at things. When Lams face didnt betray any understanding, and Victor and Valla remained silent, he continued, Its all based around the idea that were forging our Class during the iron ranks. You know, until the synthesis at level one hundred.

Lam frowned, looking over at Victor and Valla with an arched eyebrow. Forgive me, Valla said, stealing Erds attention. The people in my world rarely ascend beyond level fifty. Those who do are secretive. Would you mind explaining this synthesis? It wasnt lost on Victor that both women had phrased their questions saying I rather than we. Were they worried his Quinametzin pride was still bristling?

Oh, of course, of course! On System-controlled worlds, just as most races receive a Class refinement every ten levels, at level one hundred, the System will guide you through a process in which you build a Class based on the aspects of your previous Classes that youve most fully mastered.

Well create our own Class?

Yes, which leads to the test of steel, thanks to our founders' creative sensibilities. You see, most people, when they first build their Class, end up with something at the base level. In the ranks that follow, a person must sharpen and hone their steel until it reaches a level of ascendancy, whereupon they can move into their lustrous veil, something I'm far less knowledgeable about. You see, for every one hundred iron rankers, there's likely to be only a single person working on their test of steel, and for every thousand of those, there might be one person in their lustrous veil. At least that's the old adage here on Sojourn. I'm sure the numbers differ from world to world. For instance, according to you, there may not be many outside the iron ranks in your homeworld.

Or Zaafor, Victor said, looking at Valla.

She nodded. Perhaps only the Warlord and his closest supporters.

Lam cleared her throat. So, do I have it right in my understanding that the test of steel is not the same for everyone?

Yes! Erd nodded enthusiastically. Some people begin their test by creating a more advanced Class, so their journey is shorter. Some jump multiple tiers at their first refinement, while others struggle to move out of the base tier. Everyone's journey is different.

So you can't just grind it out? Victor asked, and when Erd's frown signaled puzzlement, he elaborated. I mean, you can't just keep gaining levels, eventually moving into the next stage?

Ah, correct, sir. There are many in the test of steel who have reached a level beyond which they struggle to grow, and their Class is still in the lower tiers. They are collectively known as steelbound.

Still more powerful than anyone we likely know, Lam said, shaking her head, grinning at the absurdity of it all.

Oh, there are steelbound who can shift the tides of culture, who rule planets and systems, who . . . he trailed off, glancing nervously at Victor. Perhaps I could acquaint you with my mentor? He has passed through his test of steel, and though he disappears for decades at a time working toward his mysterious goals, he's currently in the city; he also spends years and decades in recreation, you see. It may be that your timing is just right, for I've scheduled a consultation with him next week. For a small fee, I'd be willing to spend part of my precious, allocated time with my mentor, asking about your friend's situation. He's the only person I know who can guide me as I approach my seventh Class refinement, and I'm sure he'd have some insights. He nodded at Edeya.

Couldn't we make an appointment of our own? Lam asked, uncannily guessing the exact question Victor was about to voice.

Yes, absolutely. You'll find his waiting list for consultations is something like three years out.

Victor groaned. Seriously? Do you think he'll even help?

I think he'll be intrigued. I think he may . . . want to meet you, sir. He paused while he spoke as though weighing his choice of words.

Why? Victor had to fight hard to suppress the urge to snarl the word.

Your spirit Core, sir, is uncannily potent for an iron ranker, let alone one closer to the middle than the top. His eyes widened with horror at his words, and he hastily scrambled to add, Forgive me! I saw much before you veiled off your Core! I dont mean to. You see, um, seeing into people is second nature to me. I have a legendary Class called Soul Diviner, which grew out of my original Scryer Class. When I look at an unshielded person, its actually quite difficult for me not to see things like that.

Forget it, Victor waved his hand. He was smart enough to notice how hed felt almost appeased by the idea that this guys master might find his Core interesting. Impressing people was what his Quinametzin alter-ego lived for.

Even if hes interested in Victor, how does that help us? You said his next appointment is in three years, Lam asked, lifting Edeyas hand, their fingers interlocked. Shes not going to make it three years.

No, no, Erd waved placatingly, thats how long it would take to schedule an appointment with him without a sponsor to make him aware of you. You see, he doesnt make many appointments. If he finds something interesting, believe me, hell make time for it.

All right. Do it. What kind of fee are we talking about? Victor looked into his storage ring, the one where he kept most of his easily traded wealthgems, precious metals, Energy beads, and the like.

Well, youll find that, in Sojourn, favors are usually paid for with favors.

Victor felt his Core begin to bleed rage into his pathways, and he fought against it, buckling down with his will, forcing it back, concentrating on maintaining a neutral expression. He wasnt a bully, and he wouldnt let his bloodline make one of him, not without a fight. Im listening. He didnt look at Valla, but Lams expression was surprised enough for both of them. She arched both her eyebrows and shook her head slightly, grinning crookedly.

Well, sir, as you can no doubt discern by the deference I give you, not all iron rankers are built the same. Im skilled with auguries, counseling, and guidance. I make good money helping people to overcome mental trauma, and, in so doing, I continue to improve those aspects of myself that make such things come easily. As you might guess, such a peaceful existence, while pleasant and comfortable, especially here in Sojourn, doesnt afford me many opportunities for the true breakthroughs that will eventually allow me to surpass these iron ranks and then find success in my test of steel.

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And we can help you somehow?

Just so! I require an artifact, something that will allow me to impress my mentor significantly. If I can do that, hell aid me with my particular affinity. However, the item I see is well out of my reach at the moment.

But not out of ours? Lam narrowed her eyes quizzically.

I would think not. I have the location of the world on which this artifact is purported to . . .

What a fucking minute. Victor held up a hand. You want us to travel to another world?

Oh, well, yes. I'd not need your aid if it were an item available on Sojourn. I will pay your fare and, if things go well, you shouldn't be gone more than a few days . . .

Sir, would you mind if we stepped outside to discuss your proposal? Valla asked.

Lets hear the whole thing first, Lam said. What will it take to get this artifact of yours?

What I require lies at the bottom of an insect hive. The insects are called ivid. Are you familiar?

Ivid? No. Victor shook his head.

They're large person-sized, though more like me than you, sir. They aren't intelligent, per se, not individually, but, as a hive, they function with a single mind, one that is formidable.

Victor groaned. Do they fly? Do they sting? Like, what are we talking about here, man? Ants, bees?

I will provide you with a dossier on the creatures. I believe they all have six legs, though there are different castes some are simple workers, others are tasked with warfare. As I said, they aren't intelligent enough for Classes or sophisticated Energy manipulation, but they have instinctual abilities that can prove quite dangerous. What I require will be in the lair of the hive matriarch.

The queen? Victor shook his head, liking this idea less and less.

They reproduce by laying eggs, you see, and every so often, one of their eggs will not hatch. Rather, it will enter a kind of permanent gestation. The unborn ivid in the egg becomes a being of nearly pure spirit, growing connections through the Spirit Plane to other realms of existence. I must acquire one of those spirit eggs in order to present it to my mentor. With it, he can enter into a ritual communion with the spirit egg and, over the course of years or decades, learn from it.

How big is it? Victor couldn't imagine they'd be able to put the thing into a dimensional container.

At the same time, Valla asked, Surely you could hire someone better at thievery than we three? Someone who can hide and even teleport?

Ah! Astute questions! The egg won't be large, perhaps about like so. He held his hands apart from each other, miming an object about the size of a football. As for more qualified adventurers, I'm afraid you'd be quite mistaken. Remember, together, the ivid hive creates a formidable mind a mind which actively defends their realm from invasion portal or teleportation magic will not work to pierce their strange, dimensional space.

The hive is a dimensional container?

Of a sort, aye. It's almost like a natural dungeon, not unlike the System-controlled ones. I won't lie to you; I've needed a relic like this spirit egg for a long time and sent quite a few intrepid iron rankers after it, never to be seen again. In the years since the last excursion, I've had a rather talented alchemist develop a concoction that may help. It's a perfume of sorts that you can spray to mask your presence in the hive. I sponsored a test by the alchemist in question, and he returned with promising results.

Victor's frown deepened. How promising?

Well, it seems to do a good job of preventing a hive-wide alarm due to an invader's presence, but some of the more alert ivid will still attack if they encounter the invader, um, you.

Victor abruptly stood. Well discuss this outside.

No need; I dont mind stepping away. I hate for you to have to stand around on the street . . .

Its fine. Edeya could use the air. Lam, too, stood, pulling Edeya toward the door. That only left Valla, and she was quick to follow Lam out.

Before he pulled the door closed, Victor briefly locked eyes with Erd. Well be back in soon.

Well? Lam asked as he turned toward her. It wasnt chilly, exactly, but it wasnt warm now that the sun had slipped below the horizon. Victor never really felt cold anymore, but he worried about Edeya, so he stepped closer to her, putting one of his warm arms over her shoulders and pulling her against his side.

Well, I think weve got a decision to make. Go on this guys quest, which sounds nuts, by the way, in the hope that his master might want to meet with us about Edeyas problem. Or . . .

Valla interrupted, smiling as she tried to guess what hed say, Or we can waste time trying to find another demigod to listen to our tale?

Demigod? Lam frowned.

Victor calls those up there, Valla pointed to the glimmering rainbow lights of the city heights, such. He says its like a person whos part god.

Lam nodded. Whatever it means, its an apt term if what that man said is true. One in a hundred iron rankers reach their test of steel, and only one in a thousand of those makes it to the next stage? How many might be experts on the spirit like this mans master?

Victor thought about the math, his enhanced intelligence making it a lot easier than he would have found it in the old days. He probably could have used a proper equation, but he just brute forced the division and multiplication a couple of times and said, I guess if there are, I dunno, ten million people in Sojourn, that means theres only something like a hundred whove gotten out of their test of steel. If this guy has an in with one of them, maybe we should consider his offer. He pulled Edeyas frail, still form closer to his side and added, I mean, I should. We wont all go.

Now, Victor . . . Lam started to say.

Im going with you! Valla growled, grabbing the strap for Lifedrinkers harness that crossed his chest, pulling him close. You will not leave me here!

Okay. She glared at him, and he said, more forcefully, Fine! I was thinking Id go with Lesh, but he could stay here with Darren and Lam.

And Edeya. Lam nodded. I wasnt going to argue that I should go along; I wont leave her. I just didnt want you to go alone. You should take Lesh, too. I can keep track of Darren.

Victor shrugged. He wouldnt mind taking Lesh, that was for sure, and he supposed Lam was right; Darren would be all right without Lesh to hold his hand for a few days. Right. Lets give Erd the good news and get the details.

#

Y-seven bobbed and floated around Darren, the wisps of his strange, incorporeal form brushing his shoulders occasionally. The tendrils felt chilly and tickled the hairs at the nape of his neck, almost like someone was gently blowing on them. Describe what you see when you look inward, Darren. Theyd been practicing something Darren had already sort of learned from friends back in First Landing. Hed contemplated trying to build a Core, trying to do the little quests and introductions to Energy the System had offered them all, but something had rankled in him, some stubborn desire to show the new world that they had what it took to succeed and flourish without the tricks. Looking back, he could see how shrill and tiresome his objections had become, and he felt ashamed.

I see a black space, but not like a void. I feel like the black is bordered by something, like . . . it has structure. Its sort of warm. Even though I cant feel it, thats the impression I get. I can see a soft golden misty ball at the center of the space, though its borders are undefined; its not a perfect sphere.

Very good, Darren! Your inward eye is seeing clearly. You should be pleased; on occasion, Ive spent days trying to guide novices through this process. Y-seven moved away from him, lowering toward the floor so he floated at Darrens eye level. That was wonderfully quick and leaves us time to study your affinities. Would you like to learn what types of Energies you have a proclivity for? Knowing that will help us determine what sort of Core you should attempt to form.

Yes! I would appreciate that, Y-seven.

Very good. There are many methods to achieve what I just described, but I have a means that always seems to work well with candidates who can clearly see their nascent Core. Thats the ball of misty golden energy you can see with your inner eye.

Darren nodded. Ive had colleagues tell me as much back home.

Excellent. My method is simple for you. You must keep your inner eye open, staring at that Core and telling me what you see. I will be conjuring different types of Energy into this space; your nascent Core will react to some of them, most strongly with those you have an affinity for. Does that make sense?

Yes. What sorts of things will I see?

Mostly colors or movement. Just describe any change you see; Ill do the interpreting. Are you ready, Darren? Close your eyes and tell me when you have a clear view of your Core space.

Darren did as he askedhed taken to thinking of Y-seven as he simply because of his voiceclosing his eyes, peering into the blackness of his eyelids, and then shifting his view to that place that didnt used to exist when hed lived back on Earth. Suddenly, he was looking in at that soft, glowing ball of formless Energy, feeling very much like he was there with it in a dark, warm chamber. I see it.

Good. I will begin in a few moments but wont speak again until were done. Do not stop viewing your Core space until I say weve finished. Understood?

Understood. True to his word, Y-seven didnt speak, and the silence became heavy. Darren allowed his bodiless consciousness to drift around in the space where he could see his nascent Core, watching the very gently pulsing golden cloud, waiting for something to happen. After a while,

when he began to fear he wouldn't see anything, some wisps of that cloudy, golden stuff began to flicker and lift upward like a draft was passing over them. Their golden tendrils darkened to red-gold, then to bright crimson, dancing atop the cloud like flickering flames. Ah! he gasped, excited. My Energy looks like red flames! Part of it, anyway!

Y-seven didn't respond, but the red tendrils began to fade, shifting back to gold and falling back into the cloud. Darren continued to watch until another change occurred. The whole cloud of Energy just turned green! Again, Y-seven didn't respond, but the change reverted, and soon, Darren was looking at the formless golden cloud again. After a while, that cloud began to shimmer and shift, remaining golden but moving almost like a whirlpool. He described the change, then the next, and the next, and soon he realized he might be there a while; apparently, Y-Seven was going to be quite exhaustive in his search for Darren's affinities.

He settled in, suddenly feeling impossibly fortunate. How big a boon was it to have an expert helping him with this process? How much could the people of First Landing benefit from something like this? A slow smile spread on Darren's face as he continued to watch his Core. He aimed to learn and intuit as much as he could. If nothing else, he'd have this to bring home. It might not elevate him to greatness among his people, but it was a hell of a lot better legacy than being the laughingstock who'd tried to fight a titan with some steel tanks.

Book 7: Chapter 19: Minor and Major

Darren, you may stop concentrating on your Core space. We've finished the affinity assessment. Y-sevens voice cut through Darren's concentration, snapping him out of his semi-meditative state. He wasn't sure how long they'd been at it, but it felt like hours. He'd stared at his nascent Core that entire time. Mostly, it had sat there, unmoving, but quite a few times, it had reacted, changing colors, shapes, and movement patterns. Sometimes, the changes were singular, and sometimes, they were manifold. He wondered if the more significant reactions meant a higher affinity or if there was some other way to interpret them.

Blinking his eyes blearily in the soft, white light of his crystal, cell-like genesis pod, he looked up at Y-seven, still floating before him, seemingly in the exact same spot he'd occupied prior to the assessment. Will it take long to learn the results?

Not at all. I've already compiled a list of your affinities, minor and major.

Oh? It's that easy?

For me, yes. Bear in mind that I've been at this for a long time. Would you like to take a break before we go over your lists? Do you require sustenance? Have you any biological needs requiring attention?

Darren shifted slightly, realizing his knees and back had grown quite stiff. I wouldn't mind a stretch and some water. Heck, I could eat.

I don't have much data on your species, Darren. What sort of sustenance would suit you best? Do you consume the meat of prey animals? Can you eat the fruit of trees?

Yes to both, assuming they're carbon-based, I guess. Um, I'd prefer it if the meat wasn't raw . . .

Very good. You'll find a newly-opened passageway behind you. It will lead you to a private area where you might see to your biological needs. When you return, I'll have some food and drink for you.

Darren looked over his shoulder; sure enough, a round passageway in the crystal led downward. He stood and, after stretching for a moment, bending his waist and flexing his knees, he followed the passage. It meandered downward in a winding pattern for what felt like quite a distance without passing any other openings until he stepped into a round room, much like the one where he'd been with Y-seven. This room had some fixtures, though a device clearly meant to function as a toilet and a free-standing sink beside it. The toilet had an appropriately sized seat over a bowl containing a stream of continuously flowing water, and the sink, too, didn't have valves but functioned more like a small fountain, water dribbling into a half-full basin. Both fixtures were seemingly grown from the surrounding crystal, smooth, opaque, and faintly luminescent.

He looked around, a little uncomfortable with the open doorway, but figured the only other person with access to the corridor he'd traversed was Y-seven, and he was waiting back in the genesis pod. Shrugging, Darren stood over the toilet and relieved his very full bladder, sighing with relief. He rinsed his hands in the sink, looking around for a towel, only to hear a woosh as warm air blew from a spout he hadn't noticed in the crystal wall near the sink. He held his hands in the air, enjoying the warmth while he rubbed his palms together, and then walked back the way he'd come.

When he returned to his genesis pod, he found a low table dressed in a white tablecloth and occupied by a tall glass of water, a bowl of cut fruit, and a tray of sliced, cured meats. Y-seven floated nearby, his lights softly pulsing as his pleasant, rich voice greeted Darren, Welcome back. I hope these refreshments will be satisfactory.

That looks perfect, thank you. Darren sat before the little table and began to sample the fruits and meat. They tasted much like something he'd get back on Earth—melons, berries, and salty meats that reminded him of various types of pork. The water was cool and refreshing, and Y-seven waited several minutes, allowing Darren to eat in silence before he spoke again.

Shall I list your affinities? We will start with the minor ones.

Darren swallowed his current bite, then asked, Why spend time with minor affinities? Wouldn't it be wise to focus on the, um, major ones?

Not exactly. We have yet to form your Core, and certain affinities complement certain Core types. You might find that one of your major affinities will go hand-in-hand with one of your minor ones, both taking shape within your newly formed Core. It's important to note that while I can see if you are strongly attracted to certain affinities or only mildly so, I don't know the exact levels. Some of your minor affinities may be nearly as strong as your major ones.

Ah. Darren nodded. Thank you for explaining.

My pleasure. Now, for minor affinities, allow me to list them, and then we can discuss the implications.

All right. Darren sat back from his meal, giving Y-seven his full attention.

Mind, fire, pride, dream, glass, magnetism, and bone.

Darren sat there, dumbfounded, for several moments while Y-seven allowed him to process the information. He could figure out what most of those meant, but he'd never heard of them in the context of Energy affinities. That wasn't entirely true; there were quite a few people with fire affinities back in First Landing. The others seemed so esoteric, though, and he wondered if it was simply because Y-seven was better at rooting out affinities than the tutorial the System had put the humans through when they'd arrived on Fanwath. I think I understand the fire, but can you explain the others?

Certainly. While, in your case, it's only minor, a mind affinity can be quite powerful and also quite dangerous. In many civilizations, such an affinity is frowned upon. Simply put, a strong Mind Caster can influence the thoughts and actions of others. Y-seven paused, perhaps waiting for questions, then continued, Pride is a spirit affinity, and, should you choose to formulate a Core to take advantage of it, you'd find yourself limited when utilizing other types of Energies. After we discuss your stronger affinities, we can decide if that's a wise path for you. A dream affinity can be potent in its broad range of applications: divination, prophecy, dreamwalking, and illusion.

But I only have a minor affinity? Darren liked the sound of a dream affinity. The mind affinity sounded great, too, but something about it made him uneasy. He could feel the politician in him getting excited by it, and that frightened him. He'd worked hard the last few days to turn a new leaf, and the way his heartbeat had begun to race when Y-seven explained that mind affinity made his palms sweat with stress and excitement. He felt like a kid who'd opened a shoebox in his dad's closet and found a loaded gun.

That's correct, Darren. We'll discuss your major affinities momentarily. Shall I continue elaborating about your minor ones?

Darren nodded. Yes, please.

Magnetism is an interesting affinity in that it is a blend of earth and air and allows the cultivator to interact with certain types of metal quite profoundly. Darren nodded; magnetism wasn't so hard for him to understand. It brought to mind certain old comics and superhero stories he'd enjoyed as a kid. He doubted it was the same, but Y-seven's description made it seem similar. Glass is a particular type of earth affinity, again, blended with the electrical aspect of an air affinity. Finally, there's your bone affinity: a specialized form of blood affinity. Many things are possible with bone-attuned Energy, from healing to mutation to golemancy.

Golemancy?

The art of crafting and animating golems. I'm sure you can guess what material a bone caster would use to craft their golems.

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Darren frowned. He had an idea of what Y-seven meant by golems, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure. Still, he didn't like the idea of spending his days manipulating bones, so he decided to let it go. I get it, I think. Did I have as many major affinities?

Not quite. Allow me to list them: fear, chaos, lightning, and paranoia.

What? Holy shit . . . Darren trailed off, disturbed by the sound of his major affinities. What did it say about him that his strongest affinities included things like fear and paranoia? Was chaos any better? The only one that didnt give him an uneasy feeling was lightning. I dont like the sound of those, Y-seven, he sighed.

I can understand that those affinities convey certain negative connotations, especially to one whose knowledge of such things is limited. Its good that you are cautious, and I will strongly counsel you against pursuing some of these affinities, but at least one here bears serious consideration. May I expound on the subject?

Um, sure.

Firstly, fear and paranoia are both spirit affinities. If you chose to create a spirit Core, you could probably split it into three component parts, cultivating Energy attuned to fear, paranoia, and also pride. Having three differently-attuned Energies to work with would open a wide array of skills and spells. However, we must consider that building a spirit Core and focusing on cultivating those Energies will affect you on a fundamental level. Its called a spirit Core for a reason these affinities are tied to your most true, inner self. Your particular spirit affinities are all known to impact a cultivators personality in a less-than-ideal manner, especially without other, more positive, affinities to counterbalance them. Think of your Core like a power source can you see how having a potent Core of fear and pride at the center of your being might negatively impact you?

Yeah. It doesnt sound ideal. Darren frowned, then asked, Can you explain the difference between an affinity and an attunement?

Of course. An affinity is like a proclivity, a talent, with a certain type of attunement. You have an affinity for fear-attuned Energy. Does that make sense?

Yeah. Darren frowned, unhappy to hear that his spirit affinities were so negative. Since seeing Victor in action, hed liked the idea of building a spirit Core. Hed wondered how the larger-than-life man would react if Darren showed up with a spirit Core. Would he respect him more? Would he be more willing to help him, more patient with his lack of power? I must say, Im not too excited about those affinities.

In that case, let us talk about chaos and lightning, two rather rare affinities.

Rare?

Indeed. People associate negative connotations with chaos, and usually for good reason, but thats generally because we think of chaos in terms of conscious beings and the madness we are capable of. Chaos itself is a fundamental pillar of the universe. Some argue that without chaos, there would be no order. Just as there could be no light without darkness. An affinity for chaos means that you can grasp hold of that illusive yet dreadfully powerful Energy and use your influence to alter reality itself. This is a dangerous but extremely potent affinity, Darren Whitehorse, and if you choose to pursue it, Ill need to insist on further evaluation and education here at the Genesis Center.

I . . . see. Darren nodded, his mind suddenly awash with imagined possibilities, his disappointment in his spirit affinities forgotten.

As for lightning, its quite rare a specialized air affinity. As you may know, air affinities have some broad utility with lightning, though far less potent than what a true lightning affinity can accomplish. For example, while a Wind Caster might call down a bolt of lightning or even conjure a

lightning-filled storm, a true Lightning Caster might travel upon a bolt of electrical Energy. The difference may not seem profound, but it's akin to the disparate nature of a handful of sand and a vase of blown glass.

Truly? So, almost like teleportation?

Yes! That is but one application of such an affinity, but not one you will learn quickly; such powers are reserved for those well into their iron ranks.

Darren sat quietly for a moment, contemplating the ideas of chaos and lightning. He kept thinking about the mind affinity, though, wondering how it might have changed things if hed had it while pursuing a political career. He thought about his other minor affinities, wondering about dreamwhat if he could combine mind with dream? What if he could master more than one?

Y-seven spoke again, interrupting his meandering fantasy. Almost as though he were reading Darrens thoughts, he said, There are Cores capable of harnessing more than one affinity. My reference manual indicates that lightning is technically an elemental affinity, and chaos has been known to function well when combined with elemental Energies.

You . . . Darren squinted up at the being of misty light. Youre reading a manual?

Yes. I have an extensive database in a special dimensional space, one that I can mentally access. Its an ability related to my specialized Class.

I see. Darren didnt see but didnt want to belabor the subject. He licked his lips and shook his head, banishing thoughts of trying to learn to influence peoples minds and dreams. Hadnt he learned his lesson already? If he could do something like that, if hed managed to gain control of First Landing through such desperate, nefarious means, all hed have done was make them too weak to fend for themselves. If Victor could demolish their war machines, what damage could be wrought by one of the more powerful beings hed glimpsed in Sojourn? Do you think that would be a wise decision? To try to capitalize on my two strong, rare affinities?

I do, Darren Whitehorse. For me to guide you in the formation of such a potent Core, however, youll have to be evaluated by others in my order. Such knowledge is guarded, you see. Youll have to prove your character.

My character? What if I refused?

Then you may leave and seek knowledge elsewhere. This is not a prison, Darren.

Darren nodded. Something about that statement felt right. He was trying to change, was he not? Turning a new leaf was an understatement; he was rebuilding himself. It only made sense that something worth having wouldnt come easily. I will take your tests.

#

Hes where? Victor frowned at Lesh, trying to make sense of what hed said.

Hes in this city's nursery, a place for novices to learn about Energy and Cores.

Until tomorrow? Valla, too, was trying to wrap her head around the idea.

Yes. Lesh nodded, and his tone indicated he considered the matter settled. I will retrieve him tomorrow at noon.

Victor shook his head. Lam might have to do that for you. Is it far?

Not at all. A short walk. I am Darrens mentor, however, and feel it is my duty to . . .

We have a job, Lesh. To help Edeya, Victor nodded to Lam and Edeya, who were sitting on the nearby couch.

Ah! I see. If Im being called to duty, my fosterling will have to survive without me for the time being. Lesh turned to Lam and raised his voice. Lam, will you please take responsibility for my fosterling until our return? When she nodded, smiling, Lesh turned back to Victor. What is our task?

Victor grinned, trying to think of the best way to summarize Erd Van's request. He took a deep breath and rattled off, We have to take a portal to another world, infiltrate some kind of monstrous insect hive, reach the deepest part where the queen lives, collect a magical egg, and get it back here.

Blech! Insects? I deplore the things.

Yeah. Victor shrugged, nodding. Yeah, me too. Apparently, theyre big, too, like, the size of a person, but, you know, with six legs, exoskeletons, magical abilities, and, yeah, I guess some of them are venomous.

Lesh growled deep in his belly, but the sound faded quickly, and he shrugged. Belagog will enjoy crushing their hard shells. What of the portal fees? My Energy-rich treasures grow thin.

Victor clapped him on the shoulder. Our travel is paid for, hombre.

If you have shopping to do, nows the time, Valla said, moving toward the door. Im going to buy healing and curative droughts. Victor is going to have that malevolent crown examined. Do you want to come with me?

Lesh let his eyes drift to the dark stone crown hanging from Victors belt. It will be good to know what spirit that artifact contains. He nodded and stepped toward Valla. I will accompany you, Lady Valla.

Victor watched them go, returning Vallas wave as she paused by the door. When they were gone, he walked closer to Lam and squatted to better look at Edeya. She seems the same to me. I wish I knew what to do with her spirit. I wish I had more to go on than that guys word. What if its not as hard as he said? What if we dont need someone as powerful as his master?

Lam frowned, creasing her brow, gently rubbing her thumb on the back of Edeyas hand as she held it. If we werent worried, if we werent hurrying to save Edeya, we could spend more time asking around. I think you should do this job, get that egg, and while youre gone, Ill do more research and talk to more spirit specialists. If you return with the egg and we find we dont need Erd Vans master, well make him pay for it.

All right, then. Victor nodded and stood up, but Lam wasnt done. She reached out and grabbed his wrist.

Just dont get killed. If the hive seems impossible, then leave. Edeya would hate for you or the others to get hurt trying to help her. Id hate to lose you all and have to try to help her on my own. Her voice sounded strained, and Victor could tell she was feeling the stress of the situation, pulled thin to the point of breaking.

I know. I know youre going to be worried while were gone; youll hate being alone in this strange city.

I wont be alone . . . Lam smirked, and Victor knew what was coming, so he finished her thought for her.

Oh yeah! You have Darren! Nothing to worry about. He and Lam laughed for a minute, and then he started for the door. Ill be back soon, I hope. Just gonna find out what this creepy crowns all about. With that, he left, making his way out of the hotel and into the strange, wondrous city of Sojourn.

Book 7: Chapter 20: Ivid

Victor, Valla, and Lesh stood on one of the copper discs inside the World Hall, each holding a token of travel theyd purchased from a counter near the entrance. More accurately, Erd Van had purchased them, along with some tokens of recall. Victor had been a little surprised at the ease with which theyd claimed the tokens; either the travel attendant was very trusting, or shed had some way to determine they were who they claimed to be. Whatever the case, they had their tokens, they stood on one of the portal platforms, and now they simply had to activate them. Were ready? he asked, looking from Valla to Lesh.

Valla shrugged. As ready as I can be. We have thirty different types of poison remedies, a dozen powerful healing draughts, besides whatever we each already had in our possession, and weve got the perfume Erd says will keep the bugs from noticing us.

Can we really call them bugs? I mean, bugs are . . . small. Victor grinned, chuckling at his stupid attempt at humor.

I will smash them just like bugs, should they come near. Lesh lifted Belagog to his shoulder in illustration. Victor had to admit he was glad to have the big guy along.

All right. Lets get this over with. He concentrated on the chalky blue ball in his hand. As he sent some of his inspiration-attuned Energy into it, it crumbled away, swirling on an invisible current of air, spreading into a cloud that shimmered with Energy and flickered like a billion tiny lights. The effect obscured his vision, and when it cleared, he almost fell overhe was in a different world.

The sky was tinted yellow, the air hurt his throat to breathe, and twin suns hung high overheadone blue and brilliant, one red and glowering. He stood atop a hill, and in every direction, all he could see was short, dry, yellow grass. Suddenly, a sparkle of blue lights erupted beside him, and when they faded, Valla stood there. As he reached out to steady her, he heard the crackling pops of Leshs arrival behind him. Great dead gods! the giant dragonkin grumbled as he coughed, slowly turning, taking in the sights.

The airs terrible! Valla said, choking out a sympathetic cough.

Victor nodded. Yeah, its not great. Honestly smells like cat piss. I can feel it sort of making my throat raw.

It does! Valla replied. Ive smelled that lingering stench after seeing Uvu relieve himself!

Its the hive, Lesh said.

Where? Victor turned in a slow circle again, but when he faced Lesh, the dragonkin was grinning a toothy smile at him. Are your eyes that good? I cant see anything all the way to the horizon.

Look closer, titan.

At his words, Victor looked down at the dry yellow grass under his feet, noting the fine white sand among its roots rather than dirt. This hill?

Aye. I have a sense for this sort of thing, and I can tell you this mound is largely hollow. I can feel it in my bones. Theres an entrance just below the surface this way. He started walking down the slope, and when Victor looked at Valla, she just shrugged again and began following the big warrior.

You have a sense for these things? Victor hurried his steps to catch up.

Yes. Perhaps one of my ancestors dwelled beneath the soil for too long, but I have an uncanny knack for finding caves and navigating beneath the surface.

Still trying to acclimate to the harsh air, Valla coughed and spat, then, wiping her mouth, smiled at the two men. Looks like we picked the right companion to explore a giant insect hive.

I led an army against the Kothids on my homeworld, so, aye, you did.

Valla shot Victor a glance, eyebrow raised, and he shrugged. He really hadnt had the chance to get to know the guy. Most of the time theyd spent together had been sparring, and Lesh wasnt exactly talkative. Taking Vallas cue, though, he said, Lesh, man, I know you feel like youre doing the right thing following me around, but are you sure you shouldve left all that behind? Dont get me wrong . . .

I might have doubted myself once, but when you climbed the volcano, awash with the power of a mountain, my conviction grew resolute. Theres much I can learn from you, and much we will uncover together. Already, we seek an artifact that may grant us an audience with a being more powerful than any to walk the craggy slopes of Ashenshoal.

In a blatant attempt to steer the conversation away from boosting Victors ego, Valla asked, Tell us about the Kothids.

Kothids. Lesh spat in the grass, and it sizzled and smoked. Serpentine insects. Some were the size of my arm, others the size of twenty dragonkin laid out end to end. They crawl through tunnels on hundreds of legs, bear an acidic bite, and have shells as hard as stone. Belagog and I earned the title Kothid Bane during the war. My breath Core awoke during those long years fighting through their tunnels, pushing them back to their warrens beyond the Rukspagh Mountains.

Valla sniffed, rubbing at her watering eyes, clearly still struggling with the vapors in the air. Sounds awful.

Awful and glorious. I gained nine levels in that war and earned a fruit of evolution. Not as potent as a heart, but good. I gained many scales. He stopped, looking around and sniffing. They were about two-thirds of the way down the slope, and Victor couldnt tell anything different about dead grass and sand under their feet. Here. Its not deep. He lifted Belagog off his shoulder and up over his head.

Victor frowned, watching him, and, before he could stop himself, asked, Is Belagog a he or a she?

Belagog? He doesnt speak much, but hes no lady. With that, he brought the massive, jagged, pole-like cudgel down onto the sandy hillside. It impacted the

ground with a dull thud that rippled through the sand and dry grass, even five feet up the hill where Victor stood, making him take a step to keep his balance. Lesh didn't strike again but took a few more steps down the hill and stared at the spot he'd struck. Valla moved next to him, also watching.

Victor frowned, wondering if he'd missed something. What are we watching for?

If this was a Kothid nest, one of them would investigate . . . Lesh stopped speaking as something began to happen. The sandy depression where the cudgel had struck seemed to be growing deeper. It reminded Victor of sand draining out of an hourglass. Seeping down through some kind of opening, the depression growing ever larger.

Did you break through? he asked, stepping further back, wondering how big the hole would become. It was already several feet across and probably three feet deep at the center.

Perhaps . . . This time, when he stopped speaking, it was because he jumped back, lifting his cudgel high. Victor could see why long, dark brown, chitinous, prodding limbs had pushed through the sand at the center of the hole he'd made.

Ware! Valla cried, snapping her wings wide and jerking Midnight from her scabbard. Victor didn't need the heads up; he'd already pulled Lifedrinker from her harness and was channeling rage into his pathways, getting ready to cast Iron Berserk. The ived, if that's what the thing was, didn't plan to wait around for them to react. In a shower of stinging, flying sand and yellow, burning gas, it erupted from the hole, launching itself at Lesh. Victor stumbled back, blinded by the shower of sand and gas, but he didn't wait for his vision to clear. He cast Iron Berserk and released his aura, letting it fall around him as he summoned his Banner of the Champion. He wasn't going to take half-measures until he had an idea what they were up against.

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Victor had only seen a glimpse of the carapace-covered monstrosity, but one thing was sure: Either Erd Van was a liar, or he'd been woefully misinformed. The thing was closer to the size of an SUV than a person. Suddenly, a gust of hot wind blew the stinging gas and sand away, and Victor could feel something of Valla in that wind; she'd summoned it. Lesh was struggling with the ived. Belagog was caught between a pair of massive pincers, and he was fending off another set of pincers with his free hand. Meanwhile, the giant insect pushed him down the hill, driving with its four other legs. Victor stomped forward, skirting the much larger hole, and, without further ado, hacked Lifedrinker through one of those legs.

Hot, yellow fluid geysered from the hewn appendage, and where it hit Victor, it sizzled and burned, almost like acid. His Iron Berserk and titanic constitution handled the burn, making it only a painful annoyance, but he shuddered to imagine Valla getting doused with the stuff. His attack had sent the insect into a frenzy, and it whirled, letting go of Lesh to see what had harmed it. One of its shovel-sized, pincer-like claws snapped out at him, but Victor was fast when he was Berserk, too fast for that claw. He dodged aside, hacking Lifedrinker down, splitting the claws' chitin and producing another spray of caustic yellow blood.

His distraction was just what Lesh needed—he lifted his enormous cudgel and brought it down with a terrible crack on the ivid's bulbous abdomen, splitting the hard shell and sending fragments to fall to the sandy ground amid a shower of hot, acidic guts and blood. The insect went wild, mortally wounded but not nearly ready to quit. It leaped at Victor, but Lifedrinker was ready, and he was too damn big to be pushed around by a bug, even one that size. He snatched its pincer-bearing arm with his left hand and brought Lifedrinker down with the force of a falling anvil, right at the center of its head, between half a dozen eyestalks. She cracked the shell and buried herself to the haft, and Victor felt her throbbing and vibrating, digging for the veins of Energy within the creature.

The ivid's legs writhed, spreading and contracting as it died, but Victor held it still, one hand gripping the intact pincer, the other still holding Lifedrinker's haft. Lesh, ensuring the thing would truly die, pounded it three more times, nearly deshellng the monstrous insect as he broke its carapace apart. While it died and Lifedrinker took her due, Valla landed with a gentle flutter of her wings.

I was going to call lightning down, but you two had it in hand. This thing is much larger than Erd Van indicated.

Quiet! Lesh growled, and Victor felt his prideful anger bristle. He almost told the guy off, but when he turned to him, scowling, he saw Lesh leaning down, one ear cocked at the ground. Something comes. Troll shit! Many things come! We must fly! With that, he turned and began charging down the hill. Victor yanked Lifedrinker from the insect's head, flinging the corpse aside. Then he looked at the hole and contemplated fighting; he was Quinametzin, and the thought of fleeing from bugs rankled.

He felt wind against his neck and turned to see Valla taking flight. Summon Guapo! she cried, then flapped her wings and dove toward Lesh, following him away from the hill. Victor growled, watching the two of them grow distant.

Just you and me, beautiful? Now, he could feel the shaking of the earth, and he began to wonder if he was being stupid. Well, maybe I should follow them, you know, just to be sure they get away okay. I mean, if I get busy killing a swarm, what if they get caught up in it? Lifedrinker hummed lazily; she was content with her meal. All right. Victor concentrated and, using glory-attuned Energy, summoned a titan-sized Guapo from a pool of sparkling golden light. He'd just swung onto his back when something burst out of the sandy tunnel opening. Guapo began running, leaping down the hill in a single bound, and Victor looked over his shoulder to see not one, not ten, but dozens and dozens of the massive, clawed, ivid bursting out of the tunnel in a stream of black, hissing and clicking chitin.

Guapo devoured the distance between himself and Lesh, and when they drew near, Victor leaned over to take the dragonkin's arm, pulling him up behind him on the giant Mustang's back. Lesh was a big, heavy man, but in his Berserk state, Victor pulled him up like he was a child. Watch them! he yelled over his shoulder.

They yet pursue us! A dark swarm that streams forth from the tunnel. Hundreds. After a few more seconds of running, Lesh amended, Thousands!

Get that pinch spray! Victor urged Guapo to stop; they were a few miles ahead of the swarm by then. Valla! he yelled. Come here!

I have it! Lesh said, holding up one of the containers of liquid Erd Van had given them. It was in a quart-sized bottle with a bulbous pump spray attached, and Lesh began dousing himself and Victor with it. He pumped out a dozen spurts, basically clouding Guapo and his passengers in the thick, oily substance. It smelled terriblepungent and eye-watering. It reminded Victor of urine and mothballs, and he wanted to gag but stoically refused. With a woosh and a gust of refreshing air, Valla landed, and Lesh turned the nozzle of the spray bottle on her.

Victor watched the dark line of insects approaching. They were fast but not alarmingly so; he could easily leave them behind on Guapo. They were still coming out of the mound, and he figured there had to be thousands of them out on the sandy, grass-covered plains, as Lesh had speculated. I think theyre slowing.

Lesh looked up, having finished dousing Valla in the awful stuff. Aye, they slow. Victor turned Guapo so he could watch the insects more comfortably.

This stuff is terrible, Valla said, and Victor could see she was fighting back a gag.

Dont spit, Lesh said. They may smell it.

Valla groaned, swallowing noisily and coughing into her elbow. From there?

Aye. Theyve slowed because they lost our scent thanks to this concoction. He held the jar aloft. Something gives them an uncanny ability to smell intruders. Likely a natural ability boosted by the Energy they harvest.

You think they cultivate Energy?

Lesh shook his head, grimacing as he swallowed, clearly as disgusted by the oily spray as Victor and Valla. No. Theyre more like animals, passively gathering it, evolving and advancing. Did the man who hired you say how long it had been since his last attempt at this artifact?

Valla shook her head. No.

Perhaps theyve advanced as a species. Hives are . . . amazing and terrible in an Energy-rich world. If their queen has made a breakthrough, her children will reflect it. Lesh pointed with Belagog. Look, they turn back.

Victor nodded, watching the ivid slowly file back into the wide tunnel from which theyd emerged. How much of that stuff do you have left?

I used a third to douse us. Lesh looked from Valla to Victor. You each have a bottle, yes?

Right, Valla said. So, we must stay covered in it, or well be in trouble.

Victor nodded. Yeah, but Erd said some of the insects will be hostile if they even see us. Do you think those were their warriors? Or do you think worse things are waiting for us in there?

Those were warriors. Lesh nodded. There will be worse things, however. If they're anything like the Kothids, they'll have more dangerous castes deeper in the hive.

Well, if we meet em, we'll have to kill them quickly. I think as long as we stay covered in this shit, we shouldn't get swarmed. He frowned, thinking, then said, You know, if things get really bad, I can probably get out alive. I have some cards I can play, but it wouldn't exactly be safe for you guys to be around. Victor was thinking of his new Volcanic Fury and Wake the Earth abilities. Maybe you should, like, keep watch out here?

No. Valla laughed, shaking her head. If things get that bad, I won't argue if you want to distract the creatures long enough for Lesh and me to use our recall tokens, but we should go in with you. It's better if we try to succeed without you trying to take on an entire hive with thousands . . .

Lesh shook his head and interjected, Millions.

Valla's eyes widened. Millions! No, Victor! We must do this without you trying to do battle with the entire hive! Her voice was strained and almost pleading, and Victor had to take a second, trying to understand why she thought he'd be so hard to convince. He wasn't an idiot; he knew he could kill a thousand or more of those things, but there was no way his Energy would last long enough to take on even ten times that many, let alone millions of them.

Yeah. All right. Only a last resort, then, to buy you guys time to use those tokens. The tokens Erd had purchased for them were single-use and would transport them back to Sojourn's World Hall. According to him, they cost nearly twice as much as their travel tokens, which Victor could only assume was at least as much as what the System had charged them to travel from Fanwath. Let's hope Erd was right, and these tokens will work in the hive.

Valla looked at him and frowned. He said the magic keeping people from teleporting into the hive only guarded against entry . . .

Yeah, but how much does that dude even know? He said these damn bugs were only your size. Victor looked at Lesh. Hop down, hermano. I'm going to cancel my rage, and Guapos going to shrink. Might as well try to sneak in there at first. Victor looked back at the retreating horde of insects as Lesh dismounted. This job wouldn't be easy, but hopefully, it would be worth it. Hopefully, they'd earn some levels . . . Hey, why didn't we get Energy for that big damn bug?

Lesh followed Victor's gaze and said, Perhaps the System is waiting for those hostile combatants to leave the field. It can be cruel, but it usually won't interfere with the affairs of the people and creatures it governs. It might consider sending Energy streaming toward us, exposing us to that horde, as interference.

I hope that's true, Valla said, moving to a patch of short yellow grass and sitting down. Those things are returning more slowly than they emerged.

Victor canceled his spells, and as Guapo shrank, he hopped down. Yep. Let's chill here for a little while, then we'll try a sneaky, stinky approach.