

Victor BK7: Ch21

Book 7: Chapter 21: Limits

When the last of the ivid had disappeared into the vast, gaping hole in the side of the hill, Lesh said, We should wait. If theyre anything like the Kothids, the warriors will take time to settle and move back to their nooks and crannies. When Victor nodded, Lesh produced a leather-topped camp stool and sat down. Victor and Valla had their own camp furniture, hers an upholstered, fancy chair, his a sturdy wooden one. Soon, they were all three seated, sipping at canteens, looking through Farscribe books, or, in Victors case, just staring at the weird yellow sky and the scattered, wispy clouds.

Valla, Lesh rumbled, breaking the quiet. Tell me about your new Class.

Valla looked up from her book, smiling. I chose one that improves my mental attributes in hopes of offsetting my focus on martial ones for most of my life. The System said it was a Class derived from the memories of my progenitors, whatever that means.

It means youve awakened enough of your bloodline for the System to delve into hidden memories, finding the secrets of their ancient bond with Energy. Lesh always sounded a little pissed off when he mentioned the System, and Victor knew why. The big, scaly man felt hed gotten a raw deal with the Systems quest to hunt Victor down, but more, he felt like his people had been borderline persecuted by the System and the favoritism it showed other species of dragonkin, which seemed to be a pretty broad category of peoples. What is it called, if I may ask?

Victor almost answered for her, but Leshs wording stopped him; he supposed it was possible that Valla didnt want everyone to know. His caution was needless she replied almost immediately, Storm Dancer.

Lesh made an approving sound deep in his chest that sounded almost like a purr. Legendary?

Epic.

I believe that was wise of you. Your sword skill is already quite masterful, and improving your casting ability will prove invaluable. I chose a different route; toughness and brute power have been the focus of my Classes for many tiers, though I begin to wonder if I will ever see a proper pathway to the glory of my dragon ancestors.

Thinking of Tes, Victor said, Im not sure dragons ever submitted to the System. Arent they still kind of doing things their own way? He didnt want to mention that hed tasted, even used, the elder magic of a dragon.

Indeed, so the legends say. Ashenshoal saw its last true dragon four thousand years before I was born.

Victor made a vague gesture, trying to indicate the world or greater universe. And youve never met one from another world?

Lesh chuckled. Nay, battle-brother. If one visited my world, I wasnt told. If one traversed the worlds I passed through, I was not made aware. No, when I saw that Death Casters skeletal mount, it was the first time I laid eyes upon one of my ancestors, well, her bones at least.

It was a female? Valla asked, raising an eyebrow.

Certainly. Her hipbones and delicate crown of horns gave her away.

Delicate? Victor snorted. Leshs reptilian eyes narrowed, and Victor held up his hand in surrender. Ill take your word for it. He tried to move the subject back to elder magic because he selfishly wondered what Lesh knew. If dragons dont use the System, do you worry about using System Classes and System skills and spells? Do you think it will make it hard to evolve your species?

No. It will not stop me. If I can evolve my bloodline sufficiently and find the Systems rules and guideposts are hindering me, I will learn what I must to break free.

I guess a dragon, one who uses elder magic, might help you at that point, yeah?

Lesh shrugged. I have no idea. Our histories indicate that dragons are as varied as any other peoplesome might help me, while others may be just as happy to slay me.

Victor desperately wanted to mention Tes, explain what she was, and describe how helpful she was. He wanted to give Lesh some hope, but he also wanted to keep Tess trust. He held his tongue. Instead, he asked, Ever met any other elder race? Ever met anyone using elder magic? His question got him a look from Valla; she knew about his run-in with the System when hed used Elder magic to modify his spirit totem spell.

There are those on Ashenshoal who dabble with the old texts, attempting to develop their abilities outside the System. They are stunted and weak. What we know is too little. Perhaps if I ever meet a true practitioner, I can learn to throw off the Systems shackles.

You think the System limits us? Victor found himself nodding. Before Lesh could answer, he elaborated, I think the System gains something from us as we grow in power. So, I think it helps us gain strength, but I also think it likes to do it systematically. He emphasized systematically, grinning. I think it wants us to grow stronger so we gather more Energy, but I think it also wants to control us and keep us on a certain path, or, maybe more accurately, away from certain paths. He could still hear and feel the anger in the Systems messages when hed built his Wild Totem spell, coloring outside the lines with Elder magic.

Aye. I think youre getting to the truth of the matter. True dragons and others outside the System give it nothing. Hence, they are isolated, removed from the Systems portal network . . .

They dont care, though, Victor laughed, interrupting him. They can open their own gateways, and I think they even have a presence on System worlds, sometimes. I heard things when I was on Zaafor, stories from a powerful friend. Victor looked at Valla, wondering if he should just talk openly about Tes. Hed promised her to keep quiet about true nature, but Lesh only wanted to befriend dragons, to become one, even. Surely, he wasnt a threat. Victor shook his head. A promise was a promise.

Good! Perhaps when we return to Sojourn, I can do some looking around. Id hoped to have more time in that city.

Valla stood up, brushing her hands together. Speaking of returning to Sojourn, lets start walking. By the time we get to the tunnel, Im sure theyll be settled, dont you think?

Lesh stood also, nodding. Yes. If we take our time.

All right. No Guapo, then. Lets just walk. He stood, sending his chair into storage, and led the way. As Valla hurried to walk beside him, he turned to Lesh and asked another question hed been wondering about. Do you want to trade secrets about breath Cores? Maybe we could give each other some pointers about cultivating and, well, breathing.

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I will share what I know, Victor. I would not pledge to follow you and then withhold knowledge that may aid you. His words made Victor feel all the more guilty for not telling him about Tes and what he knew of dragons, but no matter the loyalty he owed Lesh, he also owed Tes. Hed have to find another way to broach the subject, teach him what he knew of elder magic, and see if the two of them could expand Victors current understanding. He might not need it now, might not even need it for another hundred levels or more, but someday, if he genuinely wanted to grasp the greatness of his ancestors, if he wanted to be his own man and a true power in the universe, hed need to learn to go outside the Systems guide rails.

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Darren Whitehorse, I am pleased that youve decided to undergo evaluation by the Genesis Order. I am K-eight, and I will be responsible for determining if you are a suitable candidate for the knowledge you seek.

Thank you, K-eight. Darren smiled at the floating light. It looked identical to Y-seven, but this one had a voice that sounded more like it was coming from a flute than a human throat, and certainly neither male nor female. Y-seven had left him shortly after divining his affinities, saying that he wasnt of appropriate status to evaluate Darrens character. Hed only waited an hour or so, but it had been long enough for Darren to wonder if hed made a mistake. He was interested in the most powerful Core he could develop, certainly, but who were these lights with their rules and standards? Who were they to judge his character?

Darren Whitehorse . . .

Just Darren is fine.

Ah, yes. Thank you, Darren. I have the ability to see into your memories and to listen to your current, active thoughts. I would never do so without permission, and though youve asked to be evaluated by my order, I have yet to begin. I wanted to ensure that such an invasive inspection would not offend you.

Darrens palms had grown clammy at the mention of mind reading, and he felt himself bristling. I, um, I dont think that sounds very good. Is there any way to evaluate me without you seeing all of my private memories? He scrambled for some sort of justification for balking. You see, in my culture, individual freedom is valued very highly, and having someone see our private thoughts and cherished personal experiences feels very invasive, very oppressive.

I see. The Genesis Center is provided freely to the citizens of Sojourn. My order is funded by wealthy donors, and we provide basic knowledge to anyone without question of loyalty or morality. Some of our knowledge, however, is recognized as dangerous, and our services come with the responsibility of guarding it from those whose morality is antithetical to our order. I must, therefore,

inform you that I am not at liberty to waive these restrictions. If you do not pass a thorough assessment, I am limited in what I can teach you.

If you deem me unfit, what will happen?

If such should happen, then Y-seven will return and offer you what services we can approve. If you are unhappy with those offerings, you are free to leave and seek knowledge elsewhere.

Well. All right, then. I suppose I've nothing to lose . . . Darren's voice trailed off as K-eight began to glow with a soft yellow luminescence, and he felt a weird, tingling sensation all over his scalp. Rainbow lights danced in his eyes, and unbidden, all sorts of memories came to mind. He watched himself showing his secondary-school grade report to his father, watched his father have a meltdown, and later, bribe Professor Renfield to allow Darren to submit corrections on his term paper. He watched himself having a screaming match with his first wife and, later, log into her socials to post humiliating photos. Shame flared, hot and uncomfortable, and he said, pitifully, We married young, and I was stupid . . .

Another string of memories came into focus: memories of his time working at Charter Logistics, snippets of all the times he'd pretended to befriend colleagues only to undermine them later with management. The flood of memories was so dense that Darren felt himself reeling, dazed by the avalanche of backstabbing. Was he truly so bad? Before he could object or try to defend his actions, more memories streamed through his mind, horrible, uncomfortable recollections, and almost all of them had to do with being dishonest or disloyal. He was constantly looking to advance, and he'd never considered the fallout his words and actions might have on the people who trusted him.

When the memories became more current and relevant, these many political interactions in First Landing things didn't improve. Looking in on those memories did nothing but deepen Darren's shame and self-loathing. When K-eight finished with him, he was on his knees, head drooping, hot shame flushing the back of his neck as his hands and armpits produced an uncomfortable sheen of cold sweat. Darren Whitehorse, I apologize for the discomfort you've been through. Such memories can be painful when witnessed all together. At this time, I'm afraid the knowledge we are willing to impart will be limited. Please be patient, and Y-seven will be with you again soon.

Darren blinked slowly, trying to breathe deeply, trying to banish all of those shameful memories. He felt defeated, ruined. He hated himself; it was the feeling after Victor's demonstration all over again, only this time, he had nowhere to run. He was alone in the crystal pod-like room with no doors. His voice thick with emotion and the constriction of his throat, he spoke into the silence. I am ready to leave. Please open the door or whatever. He wanted out. He wanted to flee. He wanted to forget what he'd been forced to remember. Darren stood, walked up to the smooth crystal wall, and began to pound on it. Open up, please! I want to leave!

Y-seven's voice sounded behind him, and he whirled to face the floating, glowing, misty orb. Darren, you have my sympathies. I am unable to teach you that which you requested, but there are other options . . .

No. If I'm not good enough for your order, I'd like to leave. Darren's indignation slid on like a comfortable old glove, filling the void left by his demolished pride.

Its not a matter of whether you are good enough, Darren. Rather, we want to ensure we dont give harmful knowledge to someone with the wrong temperament. This is not a permanent decision. If you can live your life well and build your character, we will re-evaluate you as many times as youd like to try. Darren, K-eight informed me that you are relatively young. You have many years ahead of you in which to improve yourself. If you returned in ten years, after having . . .

Ten years? Darrens question was more of an exclamation. Please show me out, Y-seven.

Would you not like help forming a Core? You have several affinities that K-eight deemed safe . . .

No. If you wont help me, Ill find the answer elsewhere.

As you wish, Darren. Please be cautious. Y-seven didnt elaborate on the kind of caution he should have, but Darren could guess there were probably several meanings behind the words. Y-sevens glowing, misty form drifted past him into a tunnel that hadnt been there a moment before, and Darren sullenly followed him out. When they reached the vaulted crystal cavern that made up the entrance hall, Y-seven paused and spoke again. Please return if you change your mind, Darren. If you allow us to help you form a Core, it will be for your growth, and it will be something we can build upon when youve proven yourself worthy.

Darren didnt reply. He was too angry at himself and at Y-seven and K-eight and the stupid system theyd set up that would judge a person based on the hardships theyd faced in life. Who was K-eight to decide Darrens actions were immoral or showed poor character? He hadnt been in Darrens shoes. He hadnt had to deal with the demands of an overbearing father, of a society that expected so much! Was it Darrens fault hed had the odds stacked against him most of his life? It wasnt easy getting where he was! It hadnt been easy gaining the support of nearly half the colony on Fanwath! Was it his fault he hadnt known the absurd truth of Energy, levels, and wild, mythical races?

Bah! Darren growled as he shoved the door open and stepped outside. His thoughts and his guilty feelings were bouncing all over the place, and he tried to calm them by focusing on the gorgeous early-morning view of the city of Sojourn. He could see pale blues, yellows, and oranges to the east and knew the sun would be up soon. The crystal towers at the city center, not too far from where he stood, shimmered with the predawn light, and everything felt a little surreal and dreamlike. So, if they wont help me, then Ill help myself. Darren nodded, balling his fists up. As usual.

He inhaled deeply through his nose and then turned, looking around for something hed seen when he and Lesh had first arrived. Just as hed remembered, a kiosk stood at the end of the sidewalk right before the steps leading up to the Genesis Center. He walked down the steps. Only a few people were out and about near the building, and he supposed that made sense; who would come for training before the sun was even up? He honestly had a hard time believing he'd been there all evening; to him, it only felt like four or five hours had passed.

The kiosk was prominently labeled Visitor Information and, despite the early hour, was staffed by one of the now-familiar glowing beings of mist and light. Hello, he said, stepping up to the window.

Welcome, Darren Whitehorse. How may I help you?

I was hoping you had one of those interactive city maps for sale. Im not sure how to get where I need to go.

Of course. Please take this with Y-sevens compliments. One of the crystal tablet-like devices materialized on the counter.

Y-seven? He told you to give me this?

Y-seven communicated the intention when you asked me for the map, yes.

How much are they normally? Darren produced a handful of Energy beads from his dimensional pouch.

Twenty-five standard beads. The light pulsed, unfazed by his refusal to take the tablet gratis. Still, Darren counted out the beads and set them on the counter, taking the tablet with a frown.

Im not good enough for what you all have to offer. As he turned to walk away, Darren knew he was being petty, but it felt good, anyway. Who needed some charity organization to grow a Core? In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he was glad theyd refused to teach him a Core to utilize the chaos and lightning affinities. Maybe those werent his best choices. Hadnt it felt like Y-seven was steering him toward those? Hadnt it felt like he hadnt wanted Darren to think about that mind affinity?

No, Darren muttered, flipping through the map to a list of businesses in the city. I think I need a second opinion, and if that doesnt work, maybe I need a third. Im going to make the Core I want, and if no one will teach me, then Ill find a book and teach myself.

Book 7: Chapter 22: In the Hive

The ivid tunnels didnt provide convenient hiding places. The best the three adventurers could hope for was to duck out of sight around the many corners and bends whenever they saw one of the giant insects coming their way. The magical perfumeVictor wondered if it was somehow mimicking pheromonesseemed to work very well, however, and as long as they didnt stand directly in the path of one of the lumbering worker ivid, they didnt get attacked or, worse, swarmed.

After they snuck into the opening, he, Valla, and Lesh had hidden behind some of the fallen dirt as a dozen workers arrived and began sealing the opening the warrior ivid had made as theyd streamed forth to defend the nest. The workers looked much like the warriors but were smaller, closer to orange than dark brown, and had long, multi-jointed digits on their front legs rather than pincers. The trio had slipped away wholly unnoticed, and since then, something like an hour had passed, and theyd traversed endlessly descending tunnels with no sign that they were anywhere close to their goal.

Victor pulled his tiny Globe of Insight close, cupping his hands over the dim light and motioning for the others to come close. I think I should send my coyotes out exploring, he whisperedthey were afraid speaking aloud would alert the warriors who seemed to be lurking in omnipresent dugouts lining the tunnels every dozen feet or so. They were clearly in some kind of stasis with their eyes closed and completely motionless, but Lesh was sure the wrong smell or sound would have them up and swarming in a matter of seconds. Victor, obviously, wanted to avoid that.

Can we mask their scent? Do they have a scent? Lesh frowned, the expression very pronounced on his reptilian face, exposing half a dozen sharp teeth.

I dont know, Victor sighed.

I think we should avoid the risk while we can, Valla hissed. The tunnels were wide, easily ten yards across, and the soil they passed through was somehow hardened with a clear, resin-like glaze. Valla had been leaning against the far wall, keeping to the shadow as much as she could, but now she leaned close, speaking quickly and softly. While we can find a way down, we should be content. If we come to a blockage or some obstacle we cant find a way around, then we should consider other measures.

All right. Victor nodded; she made sense. They knew they had to get to the bottom, and so far, they hadnt had trouble finding a downward-sloping tunnel. He started forward again, and when he came to one of the alcoves cut out for a sleeping warrior, he veritably tiptoed past the opening. A layer of transparent resin sealed off some of the warrior alcoves, but others, like this one, were partially open, as though the warrior had been out of his pod recently and hadnt been sealed in yet. Who closed them in? The workers? It made sense; the workers were currently closing up the exit tunnel the three of them had come through. Would they seal the repacked dirt with this resin? Was it some kind of excretion, or was it made from a natural use of Energy? Victor was strangely intrigued by the insects and their weird lives.

I wonder if any of them think for themselves, he hissed to Valla, who was silently shadowing him.

I hope not. She didnt elaborate, but Victor could catch the further meaning of her words. So far, theyd remained undetected thanks to the workers lack of critical thinking. They might be in trouble if they came upon a different caste that operated on something other than instinct or hidden impulses from the queen.

Something comes, Lesh hissed, and, as theyd done ten or more times already, they hurried back, ahead of the incoming ivid, until they reached a junction theyd recently passed. They ducked down one of the narrower side tunnels and waited, watching the intersection. Half a minute later, with a sweat-inducing clatter of claws on the hard tunnel surface, ten workers scurried through.

Valla let out a breath shed been holding. Were lucky they never seem to turn down these side tunnels.

I believe these shafts lead to worker cells. There may be other tunnels accessible to other castes.

Victor thought about it, trying to imagine the layout of the enormous hive. If thats true, if they dont use that big tunnel up there for anything other than, I dont know, like a highway, then maybe it doesnt access the heart of the hive. Maybe we need to check out one of the, uh, cells where the workers live to see if there are other tunnels.

Lesh nodded. We havent seen any downward-traveling workers. Where are those that hunt and gather? Surely, they must bring some sort of harvest into the hive . . .

Well, lets be honest: We dont know shit about these guys. Maybe they have openings to their hive a thousand miles from here. Maybe they grow their food underground. Lets check down this side tunnel, though, just to see if we get any ideas. When Valla silently nodded, Victor turned and walked further into the side tunnel, away from the junction. This tunnel was smaller but still plenty large enough for Lesh and Victor. The workers, while smaller than the soldiers, were the size of small automobiles, and the tunnel was wide enough to accommodate one traveling in any

orientation. Victor shuddered, imagining a horde of the things swarming through the tunnel, some on the walls, some on the ceiling.

Theyd only traversed a hundred yards or so when the tunnel took a very steep downward turn, so much so that Victor worried he might lose his footing and tumble. He turned, facing backward, and, using his hands with his feet, began descending almost like he was backing down a ladder. Lesh followed his example, but Valla seemed unbothered by the slope, partially spreading her wings and lightly hopping down, keeping pace with Victors ponderous descent.

After another hundred yards, the slope smoothed out a bit, and Victor turned to continue creeping along as he had been up above. The tunnel wended left and right for quite a while, and Victor was beginning to worry hed wasted a lot of time checking the side passage when he heard a strange, vibrating susurrantion in the air. He paused, straining his ears, and looked to Valla and Lesh with raised eyebrows. I know not, Lesh hissed. Valla shrugged, and Victor continued. When it rounded the next prominent curve, he saw an opening ahead and, for the first time, the glow of a light source other than his own.

He pointed, and Lesh and Valla nodded. They both held their weapons ready, and Victor reached over his shoulder, trusting his magical harness to push Lifedrinker into his hand. He pulled back the thread of Energy feeding his Globe of Insight, reducing it to a tiny spark that hovered near his head, and then he silently stalked forward, ready to see what lay beyond the dim opening. At the tunnels edge, he leaned his head forward, peering around the strangely smooth corner.

A vast space greeted him, a hall that rose hundreds of feet in the air and stretched for such a distance that the far wall seemed tiny. Lining the long walls of the chamber were rows of cells just like those the warriors slept in, carved from the earth and stacked atop each other by the thousands. These were slightly smaller and lit with a faint amber glow. When Victor focused on one of the closer cells, he saw the source of the glow: The ivid within was slowly consuming a pile of yellow-orange, luminescent sludge that looked very much like peach jam. Another difference he noted was that they were all opennot a single cell was closed off by the hard, clear resin that coated the tunnel walls.

There must be ten thousand in this chamber, Valla said, her voice just a faint breath beside Victors ear. Victor nodded and pointed to the far wall, where he could just see a procession of much smaller insects winding out through a narrow tunnel. Valla leaned forward, close to him, peering where he pointed, and when she realized what she was looking at, she moved her mouth close to his ear and whispered, Are those a different kind of worker?

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Dunno, Victor said, trying to whisper as softly as she did and failing miserably. Still, he didnt seem to have alerted any of the ivid, so he turned and included Lesh in his following words, Those insects at the far wall are different. Maybe they brought the food in here. Maybe that tunnel goes deeper.

Lesh nodded, pulling his magical perfume dispenser from a dimensional container and holding it up. The message was clearhe thought they should refresh their disguising scent. Victor nodded, producing his own bottle. Valla did the same, and soon, they were all silently gagging amid a cloud of rank, eye-watering ammonia. Crouching low, eager to be out of the cloud, Victor started forward, trying to dart quickly past each occupied cell, hugging the short sections of wall between them. By

the time theyd cleared half the chamber, the line of smaller insects had finished exiting, leaving Victor a clear tunnel opening to hurry toward.

None of the workers seemed to pay them any attention. It looked to Victor like their eyes were closed as they doggedly nibbled at the glowing piles of jelly in their cells. Did they rest while they ate? Were they too simple of mind to do anything but one task at a time? He figured hed never learn the answers to his constant questions about the strange species, but he was glad for whatever kept them calm in their cells, ignoring the three intruders hiding in their cloud of caustic odor. The smell of the perfume was strong to Victor and the others, but to the insects, it must have been a familiar, non-threatening odor because they made it through the enormous dormitory without incident.

As Victor slipped into the new, much smaller opening, he had to duck to keep his head from scraping the hard, resin-coated ceiling. He took a dozen steps, rounding a slight bend, and then turned to look at Lesh and Valla. Good?

If uncomfortable, Lesh replied, grimacing as his hunched shoulders rubbed the ceiling.

Lets hope this smaller tunnel opens into something bigger. Cmon, I wanna see where those bugs went. Victor turned and started forward again, and he heard the other two close behind. He barely rounded the rest of the curve when he found himself face to face with an insect that wasnt only much smaller person-sized, as Erd Van might put it but also bipedal with two sets of arms ending in three-fingered, hook-like hands. The two-legged ivids eyes, while definitely those of an insect, were far more expressive than those of the giant workers and warriors, and Victor swore he saw the carapace around them widen as its beak-like mouth opened and a warbling, clicking sound of obvious distress sounded from deep in its thorax.

Victor knew a cry for help when he heard it, and he reflexively cast Energy Charge and streaked through the ten feet between them in an eruption of hot, rage-attuned Energy. He barely had time to lift Lifedrinker, but he did, and her blade cleaved sideways between the sharp razor-like ridges of the insects mouth, carving off the top half of its head. The warbling alarm cut off as abruptly as it had begun, and Victor stood in the silence, Lifedrinker dripping yellow gore onto the fallen body of the ivid. He strained his ears, worried it was too late, that the cry had gone out and nearby warriors would be on top of them in seconds.

He stood that way, with Valla and Lesh similarly silent, their weapons ready, for thirty long seconds, and when they didnt hear anything more, Victor finally lowered his axe and turned to regard Valla and Lesh. What the fuck is this thing? Hed barely finished the question before a bunch of golden Energy motes gathered around the dead insect. Victor sighed with relief and pleasure as they all streamed into him.

Ah, that must be nice. Valla shook her head, tsking her tongue at him. Anyway, it seemed more intelligent, and its alone . . . She shrugged. I dont know enough about insects to guess.

Some sort of hive attendant, I would guess, Lesh whispered. Performing rounds, checking the status of the workers, perhaps reporting to the queen what it sees. The big lizard-like warrior strode forward, spraying some of his alchemical mixture on the corpse. If these things communicate with scents, then we have to assume a corpse would alert something or other. Best to delay that if we can.

Yeah, Victor said, then he stooped and pulled the dead body and its dismembered head into one of his storage rings. Hows that?

Lesh didnt laugh aloud, but something like amusement rumbled deep in his chest. Good. Victor grinned and then turned back to the tunnel, advancing with Lifedrinker held ready. The passage continued, more or less straight, for another hundred paces before they came to a T junction. Victor peered left and right and settled on going right because it had a slightly downward slope. It wasnt long before they approached another intersection, this one more like a Y, and from the left-hand branch, Victor heard clicks that reminded him of the strange alarm the insect hed killed made. However, these clicks were more varied and far quieter, and he wondered if it was the sound of the insects talking.

Are they communicating? Valla whispered, echoing his thoughts.

Victor shrugged. Maybe. Maybe one of those hive attendants is down there giving instructions to some workers or something.

This tunnel is too small for workers. We should investigate. Leshs hunched, dark form loomed close behind Victor, and his low, rumbling whisper barely carried more than a few inches. Victor was torn part of him knew Lesh was right and that they should learn what they could about the insects before going deeper, but another part wanted to avoid any possible interaction. Shouldnt they just turn right and skip whatever was making those clicks? In the end, Valla helped him with the decision.

Yes, lets see what we can see.

Victor shrugged and stalked down the left passage, very carefully and slowly rounding the slight curve, aware of the faint glow of amber light from ahead. When an opening began to come into view, he froze, ever so slowly inching his head to the left, past the curve, so he could see what was there. The passage opened into a low but vast space, and in it were thousands of insects that looked to be halfway between the attendant theyd run into and one of the big workers upstairs. They were probably a match for Victor or Lesh in mass, but they walked on all six legs. Their forelegs ended in articulated joints but were only two-pronged, and their coloring was less yellow and more brown than that of the bipedal creature Victor had killed. Even so, they were clearly different from the workers up above.

Stranger than their appearance was their behavior. The smaller workers were arrayed in dozens of rows, fanning out from the center of the room. They all faced the middle, and there, on a raised dais of resin-coated dirt, stood one of the bipedal insects and, before it, kneeled, for there was no better way to describe their posture, five of the small workers. The kneeling insects faced the ground, heads low, and the attendant insect paced before them. It was from his beak-like mouth that the clicks emanated.

Victor felt Valla and Lesh press close behind him, peering down the short length of the tunnel to the large, strange gathering of insects, but his eyes were glued to the scene in the middle. The bipedal insect walked before the five workers, its four hands gesticulating as it clicked. After a minute, though, it bent before the kneeling insects, one by one, and while Victor watched in fascinated horror, it bit

through the chitin atop their heads with a clear, echoing snick. With each bite, the victims spasmed, arms twitching, chitinous bodies shivering, but they didn't die.

First, the attendant bit the two on the left, then the two on the right, and when Victor thought it would bite the fifth one, the one at the center, he was proven wrong. Instead, it took its dexterous-looking fingers, pulled something wet and glistening from the incision it had made in the others, and held it in its palm for the fifth worker to consume. Victor felt his mouth go dry as a dizzying sense of nausea came over him. That thing was feeding parts of the four workers to the fifth while they still lived! Valla's hand tightened on his shoulder, and that was the first time Victor realized she'd gripped him.

He looked at her and saw her wide eyes and frantic gestures for him to turn around, so he followed her back toward the last intersection. Lesh was already there, waiting when they came around. The big dragonkin nodded when they approached and softly rumbled, I know not what rite it was performing, but we should move while they are all in attendance. If it finishes and releases that horde, we'll be overrun.

Yeah. Victor started down the other branch of the intersection and continued to whisper, Pretty weird, though. Did you see it pull something out of their heads to feed the one?

Perhaps it's lifting one up. Lesh said the lifting one up as though it had a universal meaning. Victor looked at him quizzically.

Huh?

Perhaps it can elevate one caste to the next with the sacrifice of its fellows.

Is it replacing the one we killed? So quickly? Valla asked.

Perhaps. The Kothids were quick to replace the forces we slew during the war. Evolved hives are . . . disturbingly alien in their operation. We should consider that there's a greater awareness here, that there is a mind at work beyond each individual, even beyond the queen.

Victor nodded, looking back to reply, Like a network.

I wish we knew how deep we had to go and how deep we've come. I wish we knew what to expect, Valla sighed.

Yeah . . . Victor started to agree with her, but Lesh spoke too, and his words came more quickly, his thoughts fully formed.

I expect death. This cannot end well. We've been descending for a mere hour, and already, tens of thousands of insects lurk above us. Already, we've learned that there's some intelligence at work. I'll be amazed if this stinking concoction works much longer. He wrinkled his short snout as he sniffed his forearm in illustration.

Neither Valla nor Victor responded to his sudden bout of negativity. Victor figured it was his memories of the war he'd fought back on his homeworld. It couldn't be easy sneaking into a massive hive like this; it was bound to dredge up all sorts of feelings. Still, he had to admit he was feeling a little less optimistic. They'd passed a hundred side passages. They'd descended through miles and miles of tunnel. What were the odds they were on the right track? What were the odds the magical

egg artifact would be waiting for them when theyd gone down as far as they could? How many hordes of insects would be waiting? What other weird castes were there? One thing gave him a glimmer of relief in the darkness of doubtthey had the recall tokens Erd Van had given them.

Lets just hope they work, he muttered, rounding yet another gentle curve and nearly stumbling into a black void. His light was dim, only allowing him to see a few feet ahead, but it was enough to show him that his next step would be into empty air. He braced an arm on the tunnel wall, then looked back at Lesh and Valla. Do we want to risk a brighter light?

Valla sighed and stepped forward. Perhaps its time I put my wings to use.

Book 7: Chapter 23: Deeper

Wait, Lesh rumbled, nudging past Valla to better peer into the darkness. Victor felt a small surge of Energy, and then the giant warriors reptilian eyes began to shine with mossy green luminescence. I see a great chasm with tunnels branching off at the bottom. Its fifty times as deep as I am tall. There are shapes moving at the bottomivid, Id wager. Theres a narrow path cut into the face of this wall. If were careful, we should be able to descend, though Id brighten your globe a bit.

Victor nodded and willed his globe of light closer to the ground, brightening it slightly. Sure enough, a narrow path led downward to the left. Too narrow for anything but the bipedal ivid, he whispered, stepping down and onto the path, hardly wide enough for his large, booted foot.

Should I fly down?

If you do, you wont be alone. Leshs reply, for some reason, made Victor chuckle. He supposed it had to do with his dry tone without any judgment. He wasnt saying Valla shouldnt fly down, but he wasnt saying she should, either.

Ill stay with you. She didnt sound happy, and Victor could imagine why: being forced to trudge around through tunnels deep underground when youve tasted the freedom of flight in an open, windy sky . . . He shook his head, pushing the thought aside; he needed to focus. The narrow path had come to a switchback, and there wasnt much room for maneuvering. He almost slipped as he turned back the opposite way, but the resin-coated dirt was hard, giving good traction, and his boot caught well enough for him to recover his balance.

Victor, Lesh hoarsely whispered as they made the next turn.

Yeah?

You should put your light out. Some of the insects have been glancing up at us. Ill warn you when the next switchback is coming.

Great. Victor pulled his Energy back from his globe, reducing it to a tiny flickering mote of light that he kept close to his feet. It was barely enough to illuminate the tops of his boots, but his Quinametzin eyes used it to paint the path before him in monochromatic gray anglessufficient to keep him from walking off into the abyss. They descended like that, painstakingly slowly, for nearly an hour before they came to the final stretch that would take them to the bottom of the underground crevasse. Victor couldnt quite make out the furtive, clicking shapes below, so he turned to Lesh, waiting for the big warrior to tell him when to move.

The ground is ten feet below us, and theres a tunnel straight across. I havent seen any of the small workers going into it, so we should be safe to regroup there. Take hold of my belt, Valla, and Victor will hold your hand as we move. Straight down and across when I say. Ready?

Ready, Victor replied softly. Valla said the same, and then they waited for Lesh to choose the right moment. Seconds ticked into minutes, and then, just as Victor was beginning to daydream about things he wanted to search for in Sojourn, Lesh silently dropped off the ledge. Valla made a soft yip of surprise, and then she dropped after him, and Victor followed. When he landed beside her, surprisingly without stumbling, Valla fumbled for and grabbed his hand. Then, Lesh darted forward, pulling her and Victor along. Victor could barely see the ground around them, but when they ran forward, he could feel the weight of the space above them, and his skin crawled with the sensation of being watched by a thousand sets of eyes.

He was almost surprised when they made it to the tunnel without some sort of clicking, hissing alarm being sounded. Lesh pulled them in, then turned back and rumbled, You can make your light brighter here.

Victor did so, finding that they stood in a tunnel very much like the one theyd left up at the top of the chasm. At least were still going down.

Lesh nodded. We are deep, indeed, by now.

Lets keep moving, Valla said, and Victor thought he heard some strain in her voice. As Lesh turned, leading the way deeper, he moved his light closer to Valla to see her face better.

You doing all right? he asked, motioning for her to walk ahead of him.

Not really. I think part of my racial evolution has made me more . . . claustrophobic, I suppose, is the right word. Im not enjoying having miles of earth and insects above our heads. What if the recall tokens dont work? She looked back at him, eyes wide with stress as she asked her question.

Look, Im not loving it down here, either, but I promise you, if I have to move the earth itself, I will get you out of this hive. Of course, Victor recognized his Quinametzin ego asserting itself, but it seemed to put Valla at ease, so he went with it. Was he really sure he could get them out of there? He supposed not, but hed die trying, and that was good enough; thered be time in the next life for regretting poorly made promises. Valla followed Lesh, and Victor followed Valla, and they made their way steadily downward.

They passed another great worker hall, this one housing tens of thousands of the smaller workers. In that hall, narrow catwalks made of dirt and resin ran between the dozens of upper tiers of insect cells. Constant traffic flowed over those high, strange bridgeways and at the ground level where Victor and the others walked. Still, the workers moved purposefully, heads down, and as long as they kept their distance, the bugs didnt seem to pay any mind to the three outsiders.

Lesh was good about keeping a retreat planned; every time a worker or one of the attendants approached them, he hastily moved back to a side tunnel or an empty cell, ducking to the side while the ivid went by. Another hour of descent became two hours, then three, and Victor lost count of the chambers full of cells and side passages they passed. Though they traversed mile after mile of tunnel, they constantly moved downward, and Victor began to wonder just how deep they were.

After a long period of silence, he asked, There's no way we could have doubled back, right?

We're always going down . . . Valla started to say, but Lesh shook his head and rumbled over her.

No. I can feel the ground around us. It's different—we make progress.

I know patience is important and that I don't want to fight the entire hive, but I'm starting to lose it here. You guys don't think I should summon my coyotes? They're pretty damn sneaky . . .

I can feel vast voids below us. I think we grow close to the heart of the hive. Lesh pointed downward in illustration. Give me another hour before you call forth your spirit scouts. Victor nodded, and the dragonkin turned and started forward. Valla followed, and Victor, still gripping Lifedrinker, brought up the rear. He felt a tremendous build-up of tension in his neck and back and yearned to feel the sky above him. He was sure Valla was suffering even more, so, with her as an exemplar, he kept himself under control, venting some pent-up energy by gripping Lifedrinker's haft tightly, twisting his hands back and forth.

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True to his word, Lesh's downward path eventually took them into a vast tunnel that reminded Victor of the main thoroughfare of Great Bone Mine. It was illuminated by strange veins of yellow-white minerals, giving the whole place a kind of hazy, sepia glow. The vaulted ceiling was a hundred feet overhead, and the sides of the tunnel were separated by a hundred paces of smooth, resin-coated ground. The tunnel that led them to that great passage was high in the wall, and down below, Victor could see rows of orderly insects, some traveling inward at a slightly downward grade and some traveling up and, presumably, out. Between the high ceiling and the ground, suspended highways of dirt and resin crawled with the hunched, earthen-toned insects. The columns of ivid stretched further than Victor could see.

There must be tens of thousands of them marching along down there, Valla whispered from where she lay, peering over the lip of the tunnel.

Do you see that side passage? Lesh pointed, and Victor thought he saw what he meant. A wide, oval opening about half a mile up the tunnel. I believe that leads down to a great cavern that way. He pointed, indicating the side of the tunnel ahead of them. It's a bigger space than any I've sensed.

How do we get there? There are a thousand ivid between us and that tunnel. Victor frowned, contemplating the violence he'd have to unleash to fight his way into the tunnel. Then what?

We must choose a time when none of the attendants are near. We'll refresh our odor, then jump down and shuffle along with the workers.

Do you think they won't raise an alarm? Valla asked. So far, they hadn't stood near one of the small workers long enough to determine whether they'd notice them.

We are close. We cannot teleport or tunnel through this dirt. What option is there? Lesh, for the first time, sounded a little on edge. Victor wondered if he was starting to lose it, being down in the belly of the hive for so long. While Lesh and Valla stared at the ground, contemplating what they had to do, Victor let his eyes drift over the many suspended walkways and the crazy architecture that allowed the ivid to take advantage of that third axis. As his eyes settled on something interesting, he nudged Lesh with his elbow.

Look. That suspended walkway is empty. It was on the far side of the tunnel, only about fifty feet above and parallel to the ground. If they could get on it, it seemed like it would take them right above the opening Lesh had pointed out.

Lesh must have been thinking similarly because he said, How do we get to it?

I can fly over there. Valla's tone was matter-of-fact.

You could string us a line. Victor nodded as Lesh produced a thin, silky rope rolled in a tight bundle.

This is razzka silk; it will not break.

Valla took the loose end and said, Feed it quickly; I don't want to get hung up.

Wait, Victor said, bringing out his scent-dispensing bottle. We should refresh this stuff before we go into that big tunnel.

Lesh and Valla nodded, and soon, they were all breathing into their sleeves, eyes watering as the caustic chemical settled over them. Once the air had cleared enough to breathe without gagging, Valla climbed to her feet and stood at the tunnel's edge, knees bent, wings partially open, staring into the big open space, perhaps trying to choose a moment when none of the attendants were passing near. Victor wanted to tell her to be careful, but he knew it was stupid of course, she would be. Nevertheless, he was nervous for her, and his knuckles were white where they gripped Lifedrinker.

After several long seconds in which Victor and Lesh exchanged several looks, Valla abruptly dropped off the ledge, and her wings whooshed back, just once, propelling her like a silvery arrow straight through the gap between two of the suspended walkways and then to land with perfect grace upon the empty, target walkway. As she flew, the silky rope whistled softly as it rushed between Lesh's fingers. Victor watched her loop and tie her end around the walkway; it was only about three feet wide. She crouched low, utterly exposed out there, but so far, the insects had ignored her.

You first, Lesh said, holding his end of the rope tight in his scaled fist.

How are you gonna cross without anyone to hold your end?

I'll leap out, swinging from the rope, and climb up.

Victor looked the huge dragonkin up and down and snorted. Hermano, you aren't built for that kind of shit. Let me hold it while you climb across, then I'll do the leaping, yeah?

I suppose. Lesh frowned. You could reduce your size further?

Yeah, of course. If I fall, I can probably jump up to that walkway, too.

Very well. Lesh handed him the rope, and then, as Victor pulled it tight, he tested his weight against it, pulling hard. Victor grunted and had to dig in his heels, but he knew he could support the

dragonkins weight. If he got worried, he could always cast Iron Berserkhe was already channeling his Sovereign Will into his strength and vitality.

Go on! he urged the dragonkin. Lesh gave him one more nod, then, with surprising grace, leaped out onto the silken line, pulling himself hand over hand toward Valla. Victor was surprised by the initial leap and had to jerk back on the rope, leaning backward with all his weight to keep from being pulled out of the tunnel, but after that, it was easy to keep the rope supported. Luck must have been with them, or the fresh dose of ivid scent must have been especially potent because, though Lesh passed between two other walkways, none of the ivid gave him a second glance as he passed over and under them.

When he was safely squatting beside Valla, Victor nodded, contemplating things. If he dropped off the ledge and hung from the rope, hed be hanging across another walkway, and his line might touch one of them or, worse, knock one off as he descended. The only apparent way he could see himself getting to the walkway where Valla and Lesh waited was to jump past the other intervening span. Then, he could let himself swing and climb his way up beside Valla. Yep, gonna have to do it. He hung Lifedrinker back in her harness, then gathered up the feather-light rope and backed up for a running start.

He wrapped the rope around his right wrist several times and then switched his Sovereign Will boost from vitality to agility. Here we go, he breathed, then took two long strides and leaped out of the tunnel, aiming to cross the walkway about twenty feet out and five feet below the ledge. He soared over it effortlessly and had enough momentum that he was afraid hed hit the far wall on his way down, but then the silken rope snapped taut, pulling on his right arm, and he swung upward. Victor didnt wait to swing back the other way; he immediately started to climb the strand, easily pulling his weight up hand over hand. By the time he reached the end of his swing and started back the other way, hed shortened his hanging distance from the walkway by half.

In seconds, he slapped a hand onto the smooth span and felt Lesh and Valla grab ahold of it. Once, with their aid, hed scrambled onto the walkway, Lesh untied his rope and gathered it up. Very nimbly done, he rumbled as they hunkered down together.

Lets go! Victor didnt like being out in the open like they were. He took the lead, crouching low and hurrying along the walkway toward the distant tunnel opening Lesh had pointed out. Ivid moved along all around them. Some shuffled in the same direction, others in the opposite. They made strange sounds as they walked, like a constant susurrations that filled the air, and Victor wondered if it was their breathing or just the sound of their chitin or fluid-filled joints. Whatever it was, it was nerve-wracking being amidst it, and he moved very quickly toward their goal, trusting that Lesh and Valla would speak up if he went too fast.

They reached the tunnel, and, for the first time in the hive, Victor saw smooth stone walls and flooring. Either this tunnel had been there before the ivid, or they had another caste of workers that could shape stone. He looked back at Valla and Lesh. Ready? Lesh held up his rope, so Victor nodded. Could the big dragonkin really not drop fifty feet? Or was he worried hed be too loud? Victor held the rope for him without arguing or questioningtime for that later. Lesh made short work of the climb down, and soon, hed darted into the stone tunnel, peering up at Victor and Valla.

I can hold the rope for you, she said.

I can jump down . . .

Will that not be loud?

Victor frowned, more annoyed that he'd been mentally judging Lesh for needing a rope than that she was right. All right, he sighed, giving it a tug and grinning as Valla stumbled toward him. Hold it tight. I'll put my weight on it slowly.

You'd better! She bared her teeth at him in a nervous smile, and he realized she was doing everything she could to keep it together. He quickly stepped toward her, trying to hug her, to offer some comfort, but she bristled, pushing him back. Not now! I . . . I can't keep it together out here among them much longer!

Right. Sorry. Victor gripped the rope and slowly backed off the walkway, waiting for Valla to have his full weight before he rapidly descended. He set foot on the smooth stone only ten feet from a long column of workers, and he hurriedly turned and jogged into the tunnel to Lesh. When he glanced back, he was almost surprised to find that none of the bugs had chased him or raised an alarm. With a flutter of ammonia-laced air, Valla landed beside him and passed the silken rope to Lesh.

Come on! she hissed, moving further into the tunnel away from the crowded ivid highway. Lesh and Victor followed her, and they'd only descended into the wide stone hall for a dozen paces before she pulled up short and slammed herself against the stone wall, trying to sink into the darkness there. Lesh followed her lead, and Victor slowed, crouching low, trying to see what had alerted her. He didn't have to look far about a half mile down the smooth, straight tunnel was a massive arched opening backlit by what looked like daylight. On either side of the tremendous, bright archway stood bipedal ivid with shiny, silvery, metallic carapaces and wielding enormous polearms.

What the fu . . . Victor started to say, but Valla slapped a hand to his mouth. One of the ivid guardians had turned toward them, though it seemed its eyesight couldn't peel Victor's shape from the shadows. After just a moment of scrutiny, it turned forward. Victor put his lips just a fraction of an inch from Valla's ear and whispered, I can see why other groups failed this bullshit quest.

Book 7: Chapter 24: Hive World

They're certainly more intelligent seeming than those we've encountered thus far. Valla leaned past Victor, peering down the long, gradual slope of the tunnel toward the two huge insectoid guards. Guards they clearly were standing still, armored, holding weapons as their shiny-carapace-covered heads swiveled left to right, ever alert. Victor had stared at them for a long while, using his excellent Quinametzin vision to discern details in their appearance. He'd convinced himself that the insects, with their four bulky arms and long, scorpion-like stingers, were similar enough to the ivid that they must be the same species.

The similarities were most apparent in their faces and torsos, though the weird metallic nature of their chitin made it a little hard to see. It was the eyes that really made Victor sure; they were identical in shape and number five slightly ovoid eyes on each side of the nose, all of them narrower at one end and getting wider away from the cluster. More than the shape, their eyes had the same weird iridescent shimmer over the predominantly black color. Do we try to talk to them? He didn't see a way to sneak past them, so, in his mind, it was either fight or talk. Or talk, then fight.

If they raise an alarm . . . Lesh grumbled, leaving the rest of his concern unspoken.

So, we can try to murder them quickly or speak to them. Vallas choice in verbiage wasnt lost on Victor. Did her using the word murder mean she wanted to try a more peaceful tactic?

He wasnt one to play guessing games. You think we should try talking?

Yes, but first use your scope.

Victor snapped his fingers, grateful shed remembered the device that he constantly forgot. He pulled the little brass and glass device out of his storage ring and pointed it at the ivid guard on the left. Immediately, a soft yellow aura bloomed around the creature. Victor pointed it at the other one, and if he wasnt mistaken, the yellow aura on that one was a little darker. Yellow. He hadnt used the scope since hed been on Fanwath, and everyone there gave him green or blue responses. He turned the scope on Lesh, having never tested it on him, and found that he, too, had a yellow aura, though much paler than the two ivid. Victor handed the scope to the dragonkin. You try.

Lesh held the little scope, comically small in his big, clawed fingers, to his eye and peered down the ramp at the two ivid. Orange and . . . dark orange, almost red. He handed the scope to Valla, and she held it to her eye.

She stared for a long while, then lowered the scope and said, Deep red.

Darker than me?

No. She pointed the scope at him, double-checking. Youre so red its almost purple.

Am I to believe this device has determined that those creatures are more powerful than I? Lesh didnt sound happy.

Its not really that exact. I dont know what it measuresmaybe just total Energy or something simple like that. Still, we can bet these two pendejos are going to be a lot tougher than the bugs weve fought already.

Valla sighed, shaking her head. We should try to reason with them. If they can communicate, we might save ourselves much trouble.

Victor nodded, twisting Lifedrinker in his fists while he thought aloud. Its not really that Im afraid to fight two tough guys, but I doubt we could kill them quickly, not before we made some noise, anyway. Im sure theyd call for help. Could we take on another ten bugs that tough? What about a thousand? Who knows whats through that archway? Why does it look like daylight?

Weve slain their kin. Will they even speak with us?

Good question. Victor shrugged. Be ready to try to kill them as quickly as you can. Charge up your best offensive ability. Try to look intimidating. Victor looked at Valla and Lesh, nodding. Im going to take on my full size and cast Iron Berserk. Hopefully, theyll be more willing to talk if they think we could pose a threat. Ready?

Vallas eyes began to shimmer with silvery-blue flashes deep in their depths, and a charged breeze picked up around them, ruffling her feathers. Im ready.

Leshs chest expanded as he inhaled and stood up straight. Belagog, gripped firmly in both hands, began to smoke and drip caustic green liquid to the tunnel floor, each drop sizzling and sinking into the hard, smooth stone. I am ready.

Victor turned and started walking down the slope. Okay, chica. Get ready. He channeled his Sovereign Will into strength and vitality. He cut his connection to his Alter Shape spell, expanded to his full, nearly ten-foot height, and cast Iron Berserk. His body surged with power and hot, potent, rage-attuned Energy. His vision tinted to crimson, and he swelled massively. His armor shivered and clanked as it grew with him, his boots and pants strained against his bulging proportions, their resizing capabilities not quite as robust as his finer gear. The tunnel resounded with his further steps as he, faintly flickering with red, rage-attuned Energy, stalked down the pathway toward the two ivid guards.

They noticed him almost immediately, and though something like half a mile of tunnel separated the insects from the trio, they stepped toward each other, crossing their long, metallic polearms, clearly signaling their intent to stop anyone from passing through the archway. As Victor approached, despite the rage smoldering in his chest, held in check by his iron will, he felt heartened not to hear any outcry. It seemed the guardians would wait and see what sort of threat Victor and his companions posed.

As he descended and the ivid grew more prominent, he began to realize the perspective he and the others had enjoyed, looking down the long sloping tunnel, had been misleading. The tunnel grew gradually wider, and Victor realized the archway leading into the brightly lit area was much bigger than hed thought. He was still a few hundred paces from the ivid, and he could tell the tunnel opening was something like a hundred feet high, making the ivid standing before it nearly his fully berserk size.

Theyre huge, Valla whispered, walking behind and to the left of him. Lesh was on his right side, and he could feel the tension in the dragonkins postureif there were hundreds, thousands, or millions of ivid like these two, then the adventurers were in way over their heads. It was hard to see beyond the two guardians through the bright opening; some kind of haze hung in the air behind them, making the air translucent but blurry, obscuring whatever was in the brightly lit space. Victor thought it must be some kind of magical warding, something to keep prying eyes, mundane or magical, from seeing what the ivid were up to at the heart of their hive.

The guardians posture became more and more threatening the closer they got. By the time Victor was a few dozen yards away from the giant insects, they were hunched forward, their polearmslong metallic bars with enormous, triangular spear tips on one endheld menacingly high, ready to be swept down or thrust forward. Their many eyes were trained on Victor, and he could see a kind of Energy pulsing in them, a smoky gray, shimmering aura that hinted at deep wells of power. Victor stopped thirty yards from the enormous, bright archway and cleared his throat. We seek an audience with your rulers.

He still held Lifedrinker in his hand, and he made a show of lifting her to his shoulder and allowing his harness to snatch her out of his hand so she sat snugly against his back. As soon as he did so, the two ivid noticeably relaxed,

their posture straightening slightly, the angle of their weapons moving away from Victor. Put your weapons away, he said. He heard Vallas sword slide into her sheath and the clunk of metal on stone as Lesh lowered Belagog. The two ivid straightened further and moved their weapons back together, forming an X before the archway but no longer threatening the trio. Can you speak?

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His query was met with silence as the two insectoid guardians continued to stare. Lesh spoke, his voice rumbling softly in the enormous passageway, Perhaps they simply respond to threats. Could we pass if we dont exhibit any hostility?

We could try . . . Victor took a step forward, but then something happened behind the crossed polearms of the two guardians. The air shimmered, and with a soft pop like a large soap bubble bursting, a much smaller ivid stepped out of the archway. This one was similar to the hive attendants theyd seen on their way down through the endless tunnels. There were significant differences, however, starting with the fact that it was clothed in shimmering gray, silky robes and carried a long rod of transparent rose-colored stone.

In a clicking, rasping voice that made the hairs on Victors neck stand up, it addressed them, Do you understand this one?

The statement took Victor by surprise. Hed expected many things, hostility being the most likely in his mind, but this hadnt been on his list. I understand you.

This one was created to speak to you. It stopped speaking words and clicked and hissed oddly for several seconds. After staring at Victor through its ten eyes for several seconds afterward, it said, You cannot understand our language, but it is far superior. Can you not learn?

Um, Victor glanced at Valla and Lesh, neither offering him any help. Not easily. Can we keep using this language, please?

This one can speak this language. Why do you trespass? The smaller ivid, about the size of Valla, stepped forward directly under the arch of the two giant guardians polearms.

We didnt know our presence wasnt allowed. Victor figured he wasnt exactly lyingthey knew the ivid would attack intruders, but he hadnt known they were smart enough to understand trespassing. He thought it was just an automatically defensive posture.

The hive is for ivid. Many hiveless have entered, only to be consumed and added to the record. From those memories, we have constructed this one to speak to you. Would you like to join the hive? Would you like your memories to live in the record?

No! Valla said before Victor could wrap his head around the weird question.

Then why do you come? It would benefit the hive to add you to the record.

We seek an artifact and will trade in kind, Lesh rumbled, stepping forward.

Knowledge, not artifacts, makes the hive stronger. We can take knowledge with your memories. Why will you not join the hive? There is no strength in the individual, no continuance.

While your hive is glorious, Lesh said, We owe our memories to others on a distant world. There is no threat to your hive here. He gestured to Victor and Valla, then to himself. We will leave, and you will be stronger for our visit. Victor had to hand it to him; he seemed to have grasped the idea of how to talk to the hive emissary rather quickly.

What artifact do you seek? Only recently have we begun to clothe and arm these ones.

Lesh looked at Victor, raising his scaled eye ridge in question. Victor shrugged and spoke up, his voice booming in the tunnel, We want one of your eggs that never hatched, one of your dreamers. The insect didnt react but stood unmoving for several long moments. Victor was starting to wonder if he should say something more, but then it lifted its crystal rod, tracing a strange pattern in the air. A disc of shimmering light appeared, floating in the air before the ivid. It lifted one three-fingered hand to the disc, shifting it so its eyes could peer through it at Victor and the others. Was it examining them somehow?

We will trade one of our sleeping children for one of the female's eggs and a sample of the males seed.

Victor felt his rage flare, felt his fists clench, and he gathered his breath, ready to tell the damn bug-man off, but then Vallas cool fingers gripped his wrist, squeezing, reminding him that he wasnt there alone. Before he could speak or react further, she said, May we discuss your proposal?

Yes. Hiveless must communicate with sounds or script. This, we have learned.

Valla tugged Victors wrist, leading him down the tunnel further from the three ivid. When theyd put another fifty feet or so between them, she said, We have to think about this rationally.

I dont like the idea that these insects will have my seed to experiment with, Lesh growled.

I mean, same here. But worse, how the hell will they take one of your eggs, Valla? Victor hissed, trying to whisper but struggling to contain his emotions. He contemplated dropping his Iron Berserk to push the rage out of his pathways.

Victor, Lesh said before Valla could answer, use your scope on the speaking insect.

Grimacing with frustration, Victor did as he asked, summoning the scope from his ring and pointing it at the diminutive ivid between the two hulking, metal-plated guardians. At first, he thought something was wrong, that the ivid wasnt showing up, but then he realized what it was the hive representative had an aura so thick and dark that it looked like a shadow, a hole in space between the two guardians. Dread crept into his chest, pushing the rage back, summoning tendrils of fear-attuned Energy from his Core. He didnt have an instruction manual for the scope, but something deep in his gut told Victor all he needed to know this thing was an order of magnitude more potent than he was.

He pushed the scope back into his storage container and, with a cold shiver threatening to cancel his Iron Berserk before he was ready, said, That things a lot more powerful than the others.

What color?

Black. Like a hole in the universe.

Lesh grunted. So, we should eschew violence. It seems willing to bargain. Perhaps we can negotiate different terms.

Any ideas? Victor glanced back at the ivid as he waited for Valla and Lesh to think it through.

Lesh rubbed his chin, tapping a sharp claw against one of his hanging canines. I have some treasures from my various conquests. I have a Kothid ravager pincer. Perhaps it would be interested in another insect species.

I have some things, too. Victor's mind went to Dunstan's crown, still sitting in the hotel room back on Sojourn. He might have killed two birds with one stone if he'd brought that along. He reached to his chest where the key hung, the one with the silver globe that would expand into a room, its purpose unknown to him. It seemed stupid to bargain with things he didn't understand. I have the hide from the lava king I was awarded. I think it's worth a lot. Also, the legendary magma-attunement gem.

They may be interested in such things. Lesh nodded, then looked at Valla. Victor followed his gaze, looking into Valla's distant eyes. She realized they were looking at her, and she smiled, shrugging.

I don't think they'll want objects. If it's an egg they're after, is that so much to ask? We want the same from them, after all. If it will save Edeya, I'll give one up. She pressed a hand to her abdomen, and Victor could only imagine what was going through her mind. The idea of some weird, powerful insect hive wanting her genetic material, wanting to take an egg from her ovaries . . . He shook his head, hating the thought of it.

Just a minute. Victor turned and stalked toward the ivid emissary. He knew Valla's bloodline was special; he knew Lesh, too, had potent ancestry. Victor was Quinametzin, though, and if the bugs had to pick one of them to sample, his pride wouldn't let him believe they'd choose either of his companions. He stopped a dozen paces from the ivid and, with a deep, firm voice, said, We want one egg. You can choose one of us to sample.

A moment. While the ivid stared into space, Victor felt Lesh and Valla step beside him. Valla took his thumb in her much smaller hand, holding it. Thanks to his constant inner heat, her skin always felt cool, and he felt his rage slipping further from his pathways at her touch. Some part of him knew he wasn't going to fight, and it was harder and harder to keep his Iron Berserk stoked. As he wrestled with the urge to let the spell slip away, the ivid began speaking again in its unsettling, clicking, hissing voice. This one will guide you to the queen. Your companions will be fed and housed during your absence.

It didn't wait for a response. In perfect unison, the two guardians lifted their polearms and sidestepped away from the center of the bright, shimmering passage. At the same time, the emissary turned and walked back through the hazy curtain of light. Chingado, Victor hissed, looking down at Valla and then at Lesh. Do we go in?

Valla sighed, shaking her head. We must. Thank you, Victor, for being protective of Lesh and me, but I hate that you're once again risking yourself for me. She didn't look happy as she let go of his finger and stepped into hazy air.

My thanks are without caveat, Lord Victor, Lesh rumbled, stepping after Valla. Victor, frowning, annoyed that Valla was annoyed, followed them. The air felt normal. The haze didnt smell, wasnt moist, and didnt sting his eyesit had to be some kind of magical screen. The bright flare of light forced him to shield his eyes as soon as hed stepped through. As they adjusted to the brightness, he couldnt help the exclamation that slipped through his lips.

What the fuck? He stood atop a hillside with a long stretch of smooth, glassy-brown roadway leading down toward a massive, sprawling city of smooth, stone towers. A yellow sky with a glowering orange sun hung overhead, and beneath it, as far as he could see, stretched roads and buildings. He could see thousands and thousands of the ivid moving around down there, traversing the streets, walking in and out of the buildings. Most of them were bipedal, though there were quite a few variants of the six-legged ivid theyd seen up in the hive.

The foliage was strangeeverything was sharp and angular. The trees and shrubs beside the ivid roadway reminded him of desert plantscacti and thorn bushes, with very little green. A weird, rumbling buzzing sound overhead grabbed his attention, and Victor looked up to see a great, bulbous insect with huge, buzzing wings floating by lazily, a colossal platform hanging from its long, black legs. He could just make out the tiny forms of bipedal ivid crowding the metallic railing of the platform. They were using another insect for transportation.

None of what he saw explained how a world, complete with sky and sun, could be twenty miles beneath the planet's surface. Had they gone through a portal? Were they in yet another different world? He couldnt contain the questions. Where are we?

You are in the hive world. Follow me, individuals. You will not be harmed by the hive if you do not threaten these ones. The emissary gestured left and right with its crystal rod, indicating everything below the hill.

How many? Valla licked her lips and spoke a little louder. How many of you are here?

The ivid didnt answer right away as it started down the hill. Victor and the others followed, and after a short while, it turned to look at Valla. This one cannot answer that question with words. Our memories of other outsiders indicate that the best way to reply is to ask you how many cells are in your body?

Cells . . . Valla breathed, shaking her head. Victor had learned from his time on Fanwath that the people there were quite familiar with the world of microscopic things, from cells to bacteria to concepts very much like DNA. Valla knew what the insect was implyingit, or the hive speaking through it, didnt see its individual ivid as people but as parts of itselftiny, replaceable parts, too numerous to count. It was a frightening concept, considering the apparent power of the emissary.

Book 7: Chapter 25: Transport

The ivid emissary led them down the hill into the weird cityscape of towering, smooth, funnel-shaped buildings. Some of them were wider at the top and some at the bottom, and once they were among them, it felt like they were underground again because it became impossible to see beyond one or two of the structures. Meanwhile, ivid walked everywhere, always moving with purpose, sometimes carrying things from rocks to plants to glittering gemstones.

Many of the ivid in the city were clothed in shimmering robes like those of the emissary, while others wore nothing but their chitin. Stationed at nearly every building, Victor saw the members of

the guardian caste with their metallic carapaces. As they walked, Valla cleared her throat and asked, Do you have a name?

This one does not, the emissary replied almost immediately.

A title? she pressed.

No, but you may think of this one as a spokesperson or . . .

Emissary? Victor provided, hoping to keep thinking of the strange insectoid as he had been.

This term seems adequate. The emissary led them between identical-seeming buildings, walking in the center of the road between the lines of ivid traffic that marched in either direction. None of the insects looked at them, and certainly none spoke. Though they never uttered any words or even sounds, the air was filled with the steady background hum made up of tens of thousands of ivid breathing, clicking their mandibles, and tapping their hard feet against the resin-coated roadways. It was loud enough to make Victor feel like he was in a machine shop. They walked for probably half an hour before the emissary directed them to the oval opening of one of the stone towers.

The arched entryway was large enough for one of the guardians to hunch within it while leaving room for Lesh and Victor to pass through behind their guide. The guardian didnt even look at them, and it made Victor wonder if the hives awareness, the entity talking to them through the emissary, was able to control the insects on an individual level or if the emissary was emitting some kind of pheromone to keep the ivid around them placid.

The inside of the tower was much as Victor had imagined itsmooth walls, no furnishings, and round tunnels leading in every direction. The ivid emissary took them on a winding path, past many identical openings, and finally stopped in a round room with soft, silken cushions lining the far wall. They looked like they were made of the same material as the emissarys robes. The ivid turned and gestured with one of its four arms at Victor. Please wait here, companions, while this one takes this individual to see our queen. He will be returned before the sun crosses the sky twice.

Two days? Vallas voice conveyed her alarm as she looked at Victor.

The brooding center is quite distant.

Lesh frowned, looking around at the bare room. We must stay within this chamber?

Valla added her objection, How will we gauge the time? We cannot see the sun! Victor supposed she had a pointeven if she took a clock or watch from her storage devices, they had no idea how long an ivid day was. How long would it take for the sun to cross the sky?

This one can amend this. The emissary stepped past Valla over to the smooth wall and rested a hand against the stone. Victor felt a violent surge of Energy, pure and potent. Then the stone began to swirl like liquid, receding from the ivids touch and forming a smooth, four-foot-wide tunnel that stretched upward for nearly twenty feet until the pale, yellow sky was exposed. Will the individual companions require sustenance or waste receptacles?

Victor spoke up on his companions behalf, A room to wash up and a toilet would be nice. The emissary didnt respond but touched its hand to the wall again, and Victor felt the familiar surge of potent Energy. A door-sized opening opposite the window appeared, and Victor watched as a tunnel expanded beyond it, rounding a gentle curve. He couldnt see what transpired after that, but he heard

the weird liquid sound of shifting stone and, moments later, the faint trickle of water flowing into some sort of basin.

Please inspect the accommodations and ensure there is nothing else required.

Thank you, Emissary, Valla said. Then, she took Victor's hand and tugged him toward the new exit. Please allow me to speak to my companion privately as we inspect your work.

The emissary stared at her from its strange, faintly shimmering black eyes and, after a pregnant pause, said, Privacy is an interesting concept. We will endeavor not to hear your vocalizations.

Thank you. Valla pulled Victor through the opening, and though she didn't say he couldn't come, Lesh sighed and sat down on one of the silky cushions. Once they'd rounded the corner, Victor saw that the emissary had created a spacious and practical bathroom. There were three fountains in an oval space one shaped like a bath, one like a sink, and one obviously meant to serve as a toilet. The bath-like basin steamed faintly, making it clear that the water was warm. Valla sighed, looking around the room. Whatever memories it took from those the hive has slain seem to have provided it with the knowledge for making a restroom.

Yeah, I guess so.

Valla faced Victor, taking his wrists in her cool fingers, concern digging a furrow between her eyes. What will you do? Are you really going to give this hive your seed?

Can you think of another option? I guess we could ask to leave and try to find another way to help Edeya.

What if it wants to . . . copulate with you?

With a giant insect? Victor tried to keep his voice pitched low, but some incredulity entered his tone.

It created that emissary to speak with us. What if it creates a . . . concubine for you?

Um, not happening, Valla. Victor couldn't imagine the insect hive mind creating anything he'd be willing to have sex with, but even if he could, it didn't feel right putting Valla through that. Look, it's embarrassing enough trying to imagine giving these insects some of my seed, you know.

I could offer to come along. To . . . help. She grinned a little mischievously, and Victor chuckled.

I'm glad you can find some humor in this.

Her smile faded, and her eyes narrowed as she said, her tone deadly serious, You understand what it might mean to give a hive like this your genetic material? It's evident that these ivids have gone through some massive changes since Erd Van last sent explorers here. What might they do with a sample of your Quinametzin heritage?

I don't know. It seems kind of far-fetched that they could even use it. There's no way insects and titans were meant to mate. I think they'll need to do a lot with my . . . sample before it's of any use to them. Maybe they just want to study it. Shit, I don't know, Valla. Can you imagine those giant guardians with titan blood? Maybe I should refuse just for the sake of the universe.

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She sighed and shook her head. As much as I want you to be careful, as much as I'd like to find a way around this situation, I'm reminded that the universe is vast. I can't imagine these ivids are the only hive species to reach this level of ascendancy. We know there are worlds where dragons reign. We know there are places where people like Tes are commonplace. You felt the powerful beings striding through the heights of Sojourn. I don't think a sample of your seed given to these insects will upset the balance of the universe. Her eyes narrowed further, and she grew quiet as her expression became decidedly pensive.

What else? Victor prodded.

What if . . . what if it's not looking to do research but to create children? What if it's curious about individuality and wants to make offspring that can think for themselves? Do you want children sprung from your . . .

Valla! Victor cried, then more softly, Valla, Valla, Valla. He pulled her close, gripping her behind the shoulders and peering down into her eyes. He had half a mind to reduce his height further to more easily hold her close, but he didn't want to interrupt his train of thought. Anything this hive creates will not be a child of mine. It might have some of my DNA, but come on! I can't imagine a more alien species. Nothing it grows will be anything like me and certainly won't need me to take a role in its life. He laughed, imagining a half-insect, long-lost child coming to collect some overdue child support. Valla didn't say anything, so he pressed on, I'll talk to this queen or, if she can't speak, the emissary and try to get some reassurances.

Promise? Promise you'll walk away if it doesn't sound tenable?

Promise.

Well, let's get you going. The sooner you leave, the sooner you'll be back, and the sooner we can leave this strange place. She spoke softly, and though her words said she was ready to head back to the emissary, her face said another. Victor stared at her eyes, the big silvery-teal irises, the soft, feathery eyebrows, and all he wanted was to hold her close and get away from all this bullshit. It felt like he was always going from one emergency to another, and he was fucking sick of it.

I just want to do that be done with this bullshit, so I can spend some time with you, doing what we fucking want to do without having to solve some goddamn crisis. If this is what it takes, me giving these asshole bugs some of my pinch leche

, then I'm going to do it. His voice had grown hoarse with emotion, and when he heard the expletives flowing from his tongue like the old days, he chuckled and shook his head. Sorry.

Don't apologize for expressing how we both feel. She grabbed the sides of his head and pulled him down so she could kiss him squarely on the mouth. It was a hungry kiss, hot and full of carnal intent, and Victor almost lost it right there. She wouldn't allow that, though, laughing and pushing him off as he tried to push her back toward the bathing fountain. Come on, now. Get goingtime for this when we're done with this hive. Victor calmed himself, nodded, and, as they turned to walk back to Lesh and the emissary, she snickered. Really? Milk?

Victor groaned. Its slang . . . and its Spanish in my head.

Your language? Victor had spoken to her about Spanish and English and how strange it was to have all of his words translated the same by the System.

My dads language. Theyd also talked about their childhoods a few times, and she knew what he meant. She knew hed never been fluent in his fathers language and that it had been one of the many factors giving him a chip on his shoulder when he was younger. He couldnt get into it right then, anyway; they were already back to the waiting room. Ready? he asked the impassive insect man, still standing where hed been when he and Valla had left.

This one will guide you now. It started walking for the hallway theyd come through, but before he followed it, Victor looked at Lesh.

You good?

He nodded, rumbling, I will take this opportunity to meditate, cultivate, and expand my breath Core. Valla and I will be well. Be wary and wise, Lord Victor.

I will. Victor nodded, then squeezed Vallas hand again before letting go. Her jaw fairly trembled with her desire to say something, but she clamped her lips into a tight line and watched him, unblinking, as he turned and followed the insect into the oval tunnel. When he caught up to his ivid guide, he asked, Well, Emissary, can I ask if you have a gender?

It didnt hesitate to answer, This one is non-gendered.

Victor followed it quietly until they exited the building and started meandering through the city again. Then, he decided to try to get some of his many questions answered. When you met us deep underground, and we walked through the misty opening, was that a portal? Are we very far from the world where we met?

We met at the aperture to the hive world. We are not far from the world where we met but within it.

I dont understand. How can a sky and sun exist within a planet? Are those illusions to make your hive more comfortable?

The hive world exists within its own universe, young individual, a universe of our devising. That simple statement carried so many underlying messages that Victor found himself dumbstruck, pondering them all. This hive was creating a universe? Is that what it meant by our devising? If they could do that, if they could somehow manufacture worlds and suns . . . Victor couldnt wrap his head around it. It couldnt be that. How could any being create a sun? They were too damned massive. Even the System had called volcanos sleeping gods. What would it label a sun? What would it label a species that could create a sun?

Do you create all of the things in this universe? Did you create the sun?

We do not create these things; we find them and bridge our universe to the space where the things we covet exist, encapsulating them.

You coveted the sun?

The hive world required heat and light. We found a sun to match our needs and brought it and its planets into our universe. Now we have heat and light and the resources of five planets.

Did those planets have life?

Two, yes. Very plentiful resources.

Victor chewed on those words for a while, stunned by the idea that a species of insect could simply snatch a solar system out of its universe and bring it into its own. What was this universe? Was it a gigantic pocket dimension within the planet where the hive originated? Was it even really inside the planet, or was that simply where the aperture was? The train of thought brought another question to mind. Why do you keep that aperture open? Why do you still have a hive on the planet where we met?

The answer to such a question is not easily explained to one not of the hive.

Victor tried a different approach, What about the System? Are you part of it?

We know of the System from the memories of individuals who have joined the hive. This entity has no connection to us. Victor could have guessed as much; if the System were present in the hive, surely it would have translated the insects native language.

They turned left, past one of the giant conical towers, and, for the first time in the ivid city, the horizon opened up ahead of them. Victor was looking down a long, straight stretch of road toward an enormous, open area shaped like a hexagon. At its center, on a platform the size of a city block, sat a gigantic beetle with two gas-filled membranes straining against cable-like tendons attached to its back. The membranes were shaped like oblong balloons and looked, from Victor's vantage, to be five or ten times the size of the hot air balloons he'd seen on TV. What is that thing?

That will serve as this one's transport to the brooding planet.

Brooding planet?

Yes, this one will guide you to the queen's residence within the hive world.

That balloon beetle is going to take us to another planet? In less than a day?

In less than a day for this planet, yes.

Victor frowned, worried something had been lost in translation. He tried to think of a way to get the answer he wanted out of the emissary. Can you search your memories for terms my kind use to describe time? For instance, everyone in the System-controlled part of the universe knows what a day or week means. There's a standard. Can you . . .

This one apologizes. We have accessed memories that make your meaning clear. Our journey to the brooding planet will take two of your months.

Goddammit. Can you somehow communicate to my companions how long this is going to take? It sounds like we'll be gone longer than they expected.

They were walking quickly, the emissary having no trouble setting a pace that had Victor striding with the entire length of his legs. As they descended the sloping road, the beetle's size became more and more impressive. It was roughly as big as one of the gigantic mine dump trucks Victor had seen on a school field trip. He could still remember how unbelievable it had seemed when he'd stood near one of the tire-stallers than three adults standing on each other's shoulders. Nowadays, such scale wasn't as impressive, obviously, but the beetle was still something else. They'd closed half the distance before the emissary finally responded.

We have altered another of our children for speech. It will relay your situation to your companions.

Ah, shit. Is that what you did for this emissary?

This one was created when you were approaching the aperture.

Then how did it get here? You said the brooding planet was a months journey.

This ones Energy reserves and tolerances are much greater than our other children's. We sent it between space.

Between . . . Did it mean it teleported? Can you not do the same for me? Do we really have to ride that beetle for two months?

The emissary stopped walking for the first time and turned to regard Victor. We do not believe you will survive such transport. It turned and, once again, continued toward the beetle. Victor hated the idea that hed lose so much time and that Valla and Lesh were essentially in prison while they waited for him, but he couldnt think of a way around it. Realizing that, realizing he couldnt even grasp the concept of how it had transported its emissary between space, he tried one more angle.

You seem to have great knowledge about universes and worlds and space. Can you not think of a method to transport me that wouldnt be fatal? There are those far more fragile than I who can teleport great distances. Again, the emissary didnt answer immediately, and Victor watched the beetle as they continued toward it. It was black with rather beautiful, curlicued orange patterns on its carapace. Its legs were probably fifty feet long, and the pincer-like mandibles jutting from its jaw looked like they could slice a city bus in half. Now that they were closer, he could see the shimmering, iridescent quality of the air bladders and wondered what kind of gas was in them. Frowning, he studied the beetle for some sort of structure, wondering how they were supposed to ride it . . .

We have considered your question. The primary difficulty lies in the density of Energy and space around the brooding planet. The forces required for instant traversal of that space would separate your molecules. We will, instead, transport you to a waiting transport beetle outside the dense space. The emissary stopped and turned to face him. Are you prepared for the journey? This method will shorten transit duration by more than ninety-eight percent.

Yes! Yes, lets do that. Victor nodded enthusiastically.

Very well. Please grasp this ones appendage, and it will initiate the transfer. It held out one of its four, three-fingered hands, and Victor reached down to grasp it. Hed expected it to be hard, but the chitin was strangely springy and tactile, and the three digits grasped the side of his much larger palm firmly. Then, with a surge of Energy so strong it took the wind out of his lungs and drained the blood from his brain, the world exploded into light, and Victor ceased to exist.

Book 7: Chapter 26: A Sense of Scale - Also, VoT is taking a short break - back April 7th.

When Darren left the Genesis Center, hed had the determined mindset he often felt when he knew he had to prove somebody wrong. If he had the self-awareness to look back on his life, he might have seen a patternfailure leading to perceived judgment from others, leading to him trying to demonstrate how hed been right by any means necessary. Hed tried other tactics; hed tried doing things their way many times. In fact, hadnt he tried to put himself in Y-sevens hands? Was it his

fault they wouldn't help him unlock his potential? How would he prove himself to Victor and everyone back home if he settled for a middling Core and the least of his affinities?

Part of him was angry Y-seven had ever told him about all of his potential, especially if he'd intended to deny him access to the knowledge he'd need to tap into it. Still, another part of him was grateful. Even if they wouldn't help him, they'd at least made him aware of the latent gifts waiting beneath the surface. He wasn't meant to be a failure; would a failure have so many potent affinities?

Those were the types of thoughts running through his mind as he made his way through the city, further and further from the great crystalline towers at its center, toward the glowing dot on his magical map Rodar's Emporium of Esoteric Knowledge. The directory didn't list things as plainly as he would have liked; there were no entries for Core Building Instruction, Affinity Tutoring, or any of the other hundreds of ideas he'd searched for. What it boiled down to, he'd decided, was that he sought knowledge and, so, he'd searched under the subheading for libraries and book shops, and that's when he'd settled on Rodar's business. It just sounded right. At the very least, perhaps this Rodar person would be able to direct him to the right place.

The further he wandered from the city center and the area where he and his traveling companions had secured lodging, the more diverse and strange the populace seemed. He saw clusters of beings who looked more like deep sea creatures than people: tentacles, sometimes floating, with eyestalks and clothing made of living moss. He saw a man he assumed based on the beard with nine-foot-long legs that seemed to be made of hardwood, a turtle's shell, and flesh as green as a granny smith apple. He passed a group of dog-like ruffians who gave him menacing stares but either feared the laws of Sojourn or determined he wasn't worth their time.

At one street corner, he walked by a group of children with red, beetle-like bodies and long, black antennae. If he were describing them to a friend, he might say he saw some humanoid ladybugs. Along with the innumerable variations in people, the construction of the buildings grew less and less uniform as he meandered. He saw domes made of colored glass, a cylindrical tower with a dozen steam-venting chimneys, and an inverted silo-type building with an endless winding stairway leading down into depths too distant for his eyes to see. He stood against the wrought-iron railing around that open pit and stared for a long while, wondering what sorts of people might live or work in such a strange place rather than above ground in the wondrous city.

Despite his many ogling pauses, eventually, he came to his destination: a large, two-story red-brick building decorated with a dozen elaborate murals. He stood before the wooden door with its inlaid polished stones, admiring the fanciful landscape painted around it. His eyes traced the green hills, the bright stars, and the young, very human-seeming woman leaning against a tree, reading a book, wonder on her face. The artwork reminded him of something he'd seen as a kid, something on a book cover, perhaps, but he couldn't put his finger on it. After a while, feeling good about his decision to visit that particular establishment, he opened the door and stepped into Rodar's Emporium.

Darren was struck by something like vertigo as he walked over the threshold. His brain reeled at the disparity between his expectation and the reality of the interior: shelves of books, equipped with rolling ladders, rose up to a ceiling that had to be a hundred feet above his head. The central row, into which the door opened, stretched so far into the distance that the counter and bookcases behind it seemed tiny from his perspective. The store's interior might well have been the single largest room he'd ever seen, and he'd been in some considerable auditoriums in his day. What baffled his mind,

even more than the space that couldnt possibly fit inside the building hed seen, was that it was utterly crammed with books.

If there were other patrons in the shop, he couldnt see them. Of course, a thousand bookcases were obscuring his view in every direction other than straight ahead, so there was no telling if he were alone. After he gathered himself, accepting that this was undoubtedly just a very advanced use of the same spatial and dimensional magic that made his storage pouches work, he started forward, aiming for the distant counter, hoping there was a proprietor to help him find the knowledge he sought.

He'd only traversed the first hundred yards before a deep voice cleared its throat and spoke up from off to his right, coming from behind the nearest towering bookcase. Welcome in, stranger. Might I help you find something?

Darren paused and looked at the case, peering between a shelf and the books below it, trying to spy the speaker. Um, hello. I certainly hope so because Im quite overwhelmed by the number of books I see!

Haha! Yes, old Rodar is quite the collector. He buys out libraries regularly. As he spoke, a figure emerged from behind the books, surprising Darren with his appearance. Despite his deep voice, he was quite diminutive, a three-foot-tall man who looked remarkably like a bipedal hedgehog wearing a green and brown pinstriped vest and pants. I am Rodars assistant, Ferl.

Pleased to meet you. Im Darren. He gestured around him at the cavernous space and its millions of books and asked, Is there any sort of system to all of this?

Oh, of course! Rodar wrote the cataloging spells himself. We have sprites that gather and organize the books on a constant basis.

Sprites?

You arent familiar? Magical entities with a penchant for various things. The ones Rodar employs are knowledge sprites or book sprites. Hmm, I believe he has an ink sprite or two. In any case, they keep things well organized and maintain Rodars catalog. He stepped closer, peering through beautifully crafted, amber-tinted crystal spectacles up at Darren. What can old Ferl help you find, youngster?

Darren was slightly taken aback by the little, furry mans choice of words, but he held his tongue, trying to remember some of the humility hed been working so hard to display when near Victor and his companions. I, well, you see, I come from a world where Energy is very new. I dont know much about it or Cores and whatnot. I was hoping to find some texts to learn from.

Ah! Im sure I can find quite a lot on that subject, but have you visited the Genesis . . .

Darren held up a hand, cutting him off. Ive been there and learned a few things, but its not for me. I prefer self-study.

Well, this is the right place for that. Lets see here. Ferl held out his left palm, and a heavy black, leather-bound book appeared. My copy of the catalog, he said by way of explanation. He placed his pointer finger atop an inlaid silver rune and closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, the book flipped open, and the pages, thin and densely filled with text, fanned with a rustling whirl.

Several seconds later, the pages stopped moving, and Ferl peered at the page the book had settled on. Row ninety-seven, stack fourteen, shelves one through eighty-four.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

That was quick. Can you point me in . . .

Ill lead you there. Not much else to do, if Im honest. The sprites handle most of my job. Ferl turned and began waddling, for there wasnt a better way to describe his gait, up the central aisle. Other sections might suit your needs, but I think this is the best one. Its categorized as Core Development by Affinity Type. Have you purchased books from Rodars before?

No, this is my first visit.

In that case, I should explain the usage policyRodar doesnt run a charity. You may peruse the books at your leisure, but the enchantments of this emporium will prevent you from seeing anything beyond the first one percent of the pages.

Thats . . . fair. So, if I want to read more, Ill need to purchase the books?

Exactly so.

What if you have a book with only a single page?

Hah! I cant say Ive seen any single-page books, but we do have many with fewer than a hundred. We also sell scrolls. You can rest assured, my good lad, the magic is clever. It will prevent you from reading more than a single percent of the content. My earlier explanation is generally enough for the youngsters we get in the emporium. Im impressed by your curious wit!

Darren couldnt ignore the continued references to his age, so he asked, Excuse me, Ferl, but how old do you think I am?

Oh, Ive no idea! We get all sorts of species in here, and they all have different ideas about what constitutes adulthood.

But you keep calling me things like youngster. Why is that?

Well, youve barely a whiff of Energy about you! I assumed you were a child.

No, Im a grown man, sir. As I said, Energy is new to our world.

Apologies, then, sir. Though his words said one thing, his tone said anotherFerl was patronizing him, Darren was sure. Regardless, he let the matter drop; he needed the little mans help, after all. If you dont mind me asking, how did you come to visit Sojourn? Surely, if youve not even had a chance to cultivate a Core, you couldnt have built up a System stone capable of transporting you here. Did a powerful Energy user visit your world? Did they open a portal for you?

Yes, sir, something along those lines. As they walked, turning down one long row of books after another, Darren plied the furry, well-dressed little man for information. How will I know the cost of a book? Will you stay with me while I peruse?

Each book is clearly marked with a price in Energy beads. Rodar has been known to consider other trades, but wed prefer to keep our exchanges simple. As for whether Ill stay with you, thats entirely up to you. As I said, Ive time to help, and so long as another customer doesnt require my service, I will be happy to attend you.

Well, thank you. Are there books that are . . . Darren tried to think of the best way to phrase his question. Hed been about to say banned but figured that might be a bit too severe a term. Restricted to certain, um, castes?

Restricted? Thats the case, though caste would be the wrong word. Rodar protects the innocent by placing dangerous books in a separate section.

Dangerous? As in dangerous ideas, or do you mean something more literal?

Oh, quite literal! Some books would turn you or me to dust if we read them; their contents are meant for those of significant power.

So, these books, the ones youre taking me to see, will they have information about all sorts of affinities and Cores or only those deemed appropriate by society?

Society? Why, this world is a crossroads. You realize this, yes? What one society deems acceptable, another might consider abhorrent. Rodar, wisely, does not take sides.

Just what I wanted to hear, Ferl. Thank you. As he spoke, Ferl stopped walking and gestured to the towering stack of shelves on his left.

Here we are, Darren. Now, I can help you sift through these if youll just tell me the affinities you are interested in. I believe thats how the sprites sorted them . . . He paused and ran his finger along the spines on a shelf at his nose level. Yes, yes, thats it. Here we have a whole row about Cores for various nature affinities.

That will be very helpful! Lets see, Im most interested in learning about chaos and mind affinities. Do you think there are any books on those subjects?

Chaos and mind? My, my! I see why you were curious about Rodars policies on restricted subject matter. No matter, no matter. Lets see here . . . Ferls words trailed off as he peered through his special glasses at the shelf, his odd, button-like black nose twitching as he mumbled titles to himself.

Darren grinned, excitement filling his belly with butterflies, relief washing over him, banishing the unspoken worries hed been battling the entire time theyd walked through the bookstore. Part of him had been sure the books he sought would be locked away or banned from sale in the city. Hed thought that if the Genesis Center was so concerned about the affinities, undoubtedly, the city would have rules about them. Hed feared hed have to find an illicit merchant, someone selling things on a black market of sorts. I love a free market, he said, mostly to himself, but he thought he saw an answering gleam in Ferls eyes.

#

Victor swore he felt his body coming apart, shredded, atom by atom. It was the most agonizing thing hed ever experienced, and though it happened in an instant, it felt more like a thousand years. Time stretched and yawned, light bent and streamed around him, the individual waves of photons speckling his vision in cascades of brilliant dots. Not a single thought entered his mind while, simultaneously, he re-experienced every second of his lifetime. He thought hed go mad; he thought he was mad, his consciousness dashed to bits by the potent, solar-system-moving power of the hive channeled through the emissarys hand into Victor.

Later, when he looked back at the experience, he'd never be able to truly recall the horror of that infinite-seeming instant, as that moment of time and space dilated to infinity and then snapped back, ripping him from one part of the universe and inserting him into another without care or concern for the rules of physics. One second, Victor was standing in the enormous square, looking at the giant beetle; the next, he was in an empty glass-walled room, looking down at the curve of a verdant green planet as whatever carried him descended through layers of swirling, silver Energy. That time between, that eternity of horror, disappeared from his mind, and all he remembered was that instant, hurtling transition.

When he felt the glass beneath his feet and saw the madness of the view before him, Victor fell to his knees and heaved his guts out onto the smooth surface. As the contents of his stomach his most recent meal and a large quantity of fluids sloshed away from him toward the smooth curve where the glass wall met the glass floor, hot embarrassment flushed his neck and ears, and he looked up to see the emissary regarding him. Are you unwell? it asked.

The . . . transition, Victor started to say, unable to find the words to explain what had made him ill. He felt like something had happened during the teleportation, something that had bothered him, but it was like trying to remember a dream; all he could grasp was the vaguely disturbed sensation that something bad had occurred.

Ah. The transport, while survivable, was difficult for you to tolerate. This one did not experience difficulty, but other members of the hive have suffered worse. It is good that you yet live.

Was, Victor coughed and stood up, his wooziness fading. Was it in doubt? Were you not sure I'd live through that?

We were certain your flesh would tolerate the transport, but we failed to consider the fragility of your mind. We'll endeavor to modify our transport spell for your return, ensuring an easier transition for your consciousness.

That would be nice. Victor coughed again, summoned a bottle of water from his ring, and drank it. He was starting to feel normal again; the sensation that something was wrong had nearly faded. Looking down, he wasn't surprised to see that his vomit was gone; somehow, the emissary, or perhaps whatever vehicle they were in, had cleaned it up. The vehicle passed through another swirling, shimmering layer of silvery Energy Victor wasn't sure how he knew it was Energy, but somehow he did. As the sparkling flashes faded, he saw that they were much closer to the planet's surface, enough so that he could make out individual trees.

Big trees, he noted.

Vast and wonderful in their ability to house and channel Energy. The emissary didn't say more, but it didn't need to. Victor could feel the Energy in the air; not only were they passing through dense rings or layers of it, but the planet felt like a smoldering roiling ball of it to his inner eye, the one that saw and felt Energy in and around himself. In the past, he'd looked inward to his Core and been proud and impressed by the power there. Now, in the face of this planet and the power radiating from it, he felt like a speck of dust being tossed around in Jupiter's atmosphere. He was nothing to the power before him.

He blurted the thought that came to mind, unable to stop the words forming on his tongue, You guys don't need my DNA.

This one is not familiar with the term.

My genetics. The information in my seed, as you put it.

Ah. The hive wishes to expand its universe. Thus, all knowledge has value. We will learn much of interest from your elder genetics.

Expand? Are you going to take over other solar systems like this one?

We think not. We are on the verge of something monumental, something that will allow us to release our hold on our origin world. Soon, we will transcend the need for other-made matter and Energy. Soon, we will spark our first hive-made sun.

Spark . . . Victor swallowed, unable to think of a proper reply. Instead, he asked, You always say we or this one. Am I ever going to meet you? Are you the queen speaking through this emissary?

We have met. This one contains part of me, as do all members of the hive. Still, when you meet the queen, you will meet one with individual thoughts. Brace yourself, for the transport will now rapidly descend. Behold and be honored you are the first outside individual to visit the brooding palace. The emissary gestured to the clear glass wall, and Victor looked to see that the trees he thought enormous were, in fact, absurdly so.

He hadn't had anything to measure them against until now, but as he looked out, he saw a pyramid growing huge as the ship, or whatever it was, rapidly approached. It was a smooth-sided, pale, rust-colored structure, but the slopes were decorated with immense carvings of ivid faces, their eyes tiled with millions of glittering, blue and black gemstones. He barely registered the pyramid, though, because he kept dragging his eyes back to the trees that towered over it, dozens of times larger. From the perspective as they approached, he guessed that the pyramid was several thousand feet tall at its apex, meaning the millions of trees they'd flown over were miles tall.

Holy shit.

Book 7: Chapter 27: Crystal

When the vehicle or insect carrying Victor and the emissary descended to the immense pyramids base, depositing the glass carriage to the smooth sandstone ground, it settled with an almost delicate series of clinks. Then a dark shadow moved away, and Victor craned his neck, looking through the translucent ceiling to see a great shape rapidly climbing into the air, its precise form obscured by the streamers of bright sunlight filtering through thick, white cumulus clouds. Was that one of those giant beetles?

This is an accurate description. The emissary strode toward one of the glass walls, and with a pop and tinkle, their conveyance burst into billions of silvery motes of Energy. Victor stumbled briefly as he fell several inches to the sandstone, and when he straightened and looked around, he saw no sign of the vessel that had transported them to the planet's surface. From his current vantage, the trees surrounding the pyramid looked like skyscrapers, and if it weren't for the clearing around the structure, he was sure he wouldn't be able to

see the sky through their thick canopy. He turned to the pyramid and saw that the emissary was several paces away already but had turned to regard him.

Im coming. Victor followed him toward an opening in the pyramids yawning passage that could easily allow a dozen passenger planes to fly through it at once. As they approached and its scale became apparent, and the pyramids heights grew too distant to see, he said, Why is the pyramid so damn big? Do you have, um, children that need an opening that size?

This pyramid houses our young in their millions before they move off to other facilities. Every eleven of our days, a brood must pass through the nineteen stages of this structure. The emissary spoke almost off-handedly, but Victor's mind reeled at the idea, trying to imagine the hordes of ivid children as they hurried through their mysterious stages.

Of course, he voiced the most disturbing of his thoughts, How can your queen lay so many damn eggs? Is she gigantic?

The queen is similar in size to your titanic form. Fear not for her health, for while her eggs are great in number, they are tiny, and their production does not overly tax her.

Huh. Victor watched the streams of ivid moving down avenues lined with trees, into and out of the pyramid, and flying in endless streams from the heights. After theyd walked for a while and were still quite far from the great opening, he asked, Why no wings for your emissary?

This one has wings, though you cannot currently see them. Our journey is short, however, traveler. The queen will see you in one of her gardens.

The queen has gardens? Victor's imagined idea of an insect queen laying eggs in a massive underground nest began to crumble.

Please be patient, individual. This one will save explanations for the queen.

All right. Victor grew quiet and let his eyes explore as they walked. To his surprise, they didnt enter the pyramid but took a side path that led toward the distant corner of the structure. As they progressed, he found many such side paths meandered up and down stairs, into walled-off sections of the grounds, and even down into steeply sloping tunnels. From the air, the grounds had seemed flat, covered in stone, and simply there to provide a clearing for the pyramid. This is different than Id imagined. Its . . . pretty.

We appreciate your complimentary language. The queen has particular aesthetics. The emissary led him around a high, sandstone wall, then through a red crystal gate that swung open noiselessly. Victor found himself standing in a garden of tall hedgerows bedecked in immense purple and red flowers. He couldnt see far in any direction because of the enormity of the hedges, but what he could see was something out of a fantasy, for it wasnt simply the flowers and perfect hedges, but the attendant ivid that drew his eyes.

They wore shimmering silvery robes, not unlike the emissarys, and carried delicate, crystalline clippers, but more than that, they hardly looked insectoid. Unlike the emissarys robes, theirs were hooded and veiled, and their hands were covered in gloves of the same material. If Victor saw those strange, silent gardeners elsewhere, hed assume they were just ordinary people under those

garments, not members of a bizarre, alien insect species. The emissary pointed to one of the clipper-bearing, hooded ivid. These are attendants to the queen. She will be nearby.

Ah, Victor nodded, unsure what else to say. He followed the emissary through the maze of hedgerows until he stepped through into a wide clearing dominated by a crystal fountain with fluted spouts that delicately dropped clear water into a basin filled with floating purple and red flower buds. The ground at the center of the clearing wasn't tiled in sandstone like the rest of the area Victor had seen but covered in a well-manicured lawn. Reclining on that lawn was a being that had to be the ivid queen.

Her robes were made of silky material just like all the others Victor had seen, except for their color rather than silver, they were golden. As the emissary had indicated, she was large, but not the gigantic, building-sized insect with a bulbous egg-laying appendage that science fiction movies had told Victor to expect. No, she was shaped very much like the other bipedal ivid. She had a crystal device in front of her, sitting on a small, delicate wooden table, and was busily shifting tiny levers and strings with her four delicate hands. Victor couldn't see her face through her golden, diamond-studded veil, but he could see her eyes, and they were beautiful, if alien.

The ivid he'd met so far all had ten black eyes with an iridescent sheen. The queens were fully iridescent, shimmering in rainbow hues, with a silvery backlight that shone forth. More, there were only two of them, angular and inset beneath a hairless brow that was absent on the other insects. The emissary stopped walking as soon as they rounded the corner into the clearing, and it held two of its hands out, indicating that Victor should stop as well. Please wait for the queen's attention, individual.

Victor nodded and stood still, looking around the clearing, slowly becoming aware of all the other ivid in the area. They stood like statues near the hedges, robed attendants, guardians with metallic carapaces, and another sort of warrior-ivid with twin crystalline blades crossed before their chests. Victor counted twenty-one altogether. When he turned his gaze inward, opening his inner eye, Victor saw that the ivid around him were all restraining prodigious auras. If he had to guess, he'd say the twenty-one attendants in that clearing were on par with the emissary in power. Still, when Victor tried to gaze at the queen with that inner eye, he found it akin to looking at the sun with his eyes, and he had to turn away quickly. The being before him was exceptional on a scale he couldn't quite wrap his head around.

The queen didn't look up, but a sharp, melodic voice, clear and natural, sounded in Victor's head, You may approach, outsider. Immediately, the emissary's hands dropped to its side, and it stepped away from Victor, clearing the path forward.

Victor nodded and started toward her. He was no longer altering his size, but he wasn't berserk, so he felt rather puny approaching the enormous insectoid monarch. Her size was an insignificant factor, though, for within her raged the power of a being on the scale of deities. This was a being capable of moving worlds, capable of, as the emissary had mentioned, sparking suns.

Your thoughts are inaccurate, outsider. While I am the focal point of their efforts, those powers belong to the hive. I am but a vessel for all of us.

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You're an individual, though?

I am. In our evolution, we have seen the value of having some individuals in the hive. We see things from perspectives the hive could not fathom in its infancy. After a slight pause, the voice resumed, Ah, you wonder how clearly your thoughts unfold before me. Quite clearly. No, Victor, I do not intend to force you to mate with me. I will take the promised payment, and the gift of a dreaming egg will be yours. You are made uncomfortable by my intrusion . . . apologies, Victor. I will withdraw from your mind.

Victor felt the weight of the alien mind pull away, and he sighed in relief, tension falling from his neck and spine. The queen had entered his thoughts so suddenly, and her presence had been so powerful that he'd almost been struck dumb, struggling to keep up with her one-sided conversation as he fought to contain his emotions. His prideful outrage was a tiny voice beside his relief, so he simply muttered, Thank you.

Let us speak, Victor. This time, the queen's voice came from behind her veil, smooth and clear. While listening to you and your companions, we endeavored to improve upon the vocal capabilities we granted our emissary. Does my voice please your ears?

Um, yes, it's very clear.

If I hadn't learned your name from listening to your conversations, I would have learned it when I rudely invaded your mind. My apologies. You may call me Crystal.

Crystal?

Yes. Until this moment, I did not have a name, but this one came to me during my brief exploration of your thoughts. You found our fountain to be beautiful, and that word stood out. Will it suit?

Victor swallowed, nodding. Yes, it's a nice name.

I know our emissary told you that you're the first individual to visit this planet. We find you intriguing, but I'd like you to know that these circumstances only came about through happenstance. Earlier visitors to our origin hive were more violent in their intrusion, and our more autonomous defenses saw their demise. Additionally, we've made many strides in recent years, and our . . . understanding of alien nature has become more comprehensive.

Is, um, have you always been the queen?

No, Victor. My life serves the hive, and so have the lives of the many queens before me. When the hive deems it necessary, I will be replaced. I believe I have much time to enjoy my gardens and my trivialities, she gestured to the crystal device on the table before her, before that happens.

She smiled and laughed, a soft, delicate sound that didn't seem right coming from an eighteen-foot-tall insect lady. I listened to your conversation with the emissary. You know we are on the verge of great things. We do not believe in deities, but we believe in fate and the bonds of spirits on the ethereal plane, ties that are difficult to see but hard to miss once they've been exposed. You were meant to come here, and it is fortuitous that it happened at this hour. Soon, we will sever our connection to our origin world and be gone from the universe we once called home. Contact with us will be impossible for most beings. I am pleased that we will have your bloodline to study as we separate.

About that . . . Victor cleared his throat and shuffled a little nervously. What exactly are your intentions with my . . . bloodline. He decided he was tired of talking about his seed and went with her choice of phrasing.

You walk proudly with the blood of an elder race. There are those among the elder species who gained power enough to ascend beyond the mortal realms. While we toil to craft our own niche, our own pocket carved out of the void, we do so with the intent to continue our advancement, to move onto a higher plane. We hope that your bloodline will provide clues in that endeavor. It will be a millennia-long task, but one to which we are quite well attuned.

So, youre not going to create a species of, um, titan-insects to take over the universe?

Again, that trilling laugh sounded, and the queen shifted where she sat, lying down on her side in the grass, head propped up with one of her arms so she could more easily look Victor in the eyes. Why would we trouble ourselves with your universe when we are creating our own? Our kind is not smitten with material things or the worship of lesser beings. We seek elevation and true enlightenment which cannot be found in the subjugation or destruction of others.

I hope thats true. I hope youre right, I mean. There are powerful people in the worlds Ive visited who believe strength comes only through the conquering of others.

For a time, that seems true; the theft of Energy from others and the gathering of resources far and wide serve to provide advancement, but we are beyond that. We generate more Energy each second than the consumption of a hundred heroes like yourself could provide. No, we have determined that growth at the cost of destruction is no longer a wise course. You can see it wasnt always so. Did you note the world of our origin hive? It shames me to say we killed it. Only our more instinctive children now live in its soil.

But you stole this whole solar system, right?

Yes. Again, we have learned lessons from each stage of our development. Such theft is no longer necessary; we have learned many secrets in the study of this star. Victor, do you know about stars? That they arent gods or fires but massive generators? I oversimplifyof course, they burn, so there is fire, but its only a side effect. I was newly born when we annexed these planets and our sun, and the revelations in my lifetime from its study have moved us forward so . . . The queen stopped speaking and cocked her head sideways as though listening to something.

Her hypnotic, beautiful eyes stared into space for several long seconds, and Victor looked around nervously. None of the other ivid had moved. Is, um, Queen Crystal, is everything all right?

Apologies, Victor. A matter of some import will soon require my attention. Shall we conclude our business so our emissary might guide you back to your companions and thence on your way?

Victor swallowed, looking around the garden, very aware of all the ivid standing around. It wasnt so much that he was embarrassed, but he wasnt exactly sure he could even perform with everyone looking at him. How was she going to get his . . . sample? Um, yeah. I mean, sure. How, exactly . . .

If you will permit me, I have the means to painlessly retrieve a small sample of the seed that lies within your sexual organs. I will not harm you, Victor. She laughed softly, and Victor wished he could see her face behind the veil, wondering if she was smiling or if she could even smile. With

that thought, he decided he was glad he couldn't see; he'd rather imagine she had a nice mouth with friendly lips and not mandibles or something worse. I know from the memories we have of outside individuals that this might be rather mortifying. Think of this as a business transaction, Victor. Just as I'll soon have a sample of your material, you'll be walking away with one of my very own eggs, a dreaming ivid fetus that has been nourished and kept alive with great care.

All right. You can collect it so long as you promise not to take one of my cojones. Victor snorted, amused by his absurd turn of phrase.

The queen took him seriously. Nothing of the sort. She held out one of her golden gloved hands, and suddenly, a tiny crystal jar appeared on her palm. It was minuscule in her hand, but Victor could see it was small by any measure, not much larger than the sewing thimble his abuela used to wear on her thumb when she mended his torn jeans. We are in agreement?

Yes.

Excellent. Victor felt a pulse of Energy, experienced a slight sensation of warmth, and then the crystal jar flashed and disappeared. That's your half of the bargain. Now, please carefully accept the dreaming egg from our emissary. Please never send it into one of your crude storage devices; it would be torture. As she spoke, Victor felt the emissary's presence as it stepped beside him, and when he turned to face it, he saw that it held a blue, silk-wrapped bundle.

Thank you, he said, accepting it. He could feel the egg within, round, pliable, and warm, about the size of a soccer ball. He could feel the Energy pulsing steadily from it.

I am pleased by you, Victor, the queen said as he carefully cradled the egg in the crook of his elbow, tucking it against his chest. May I give you a gift?

Victor looked back at her and raised an eyebrow. You've already been kind. I was very damn nervous about providing my, uh, sample. You made it painless.

Are you refusing further gifts, then?

Hey, if there aren't any strings attached, I'm not going to turn down a gift.

The queen nodded and gestured to the emissary, and it hurried away. The emissary will fetch my gift for you. I am doing something the hive doesn't understand being impulsive. I have few individuals to interact with; the seven of us have important roles to fill, and our duties do not often allow for it. Impulsivity is something I've only recently begun to explore, but I must be cautious; worlds are at stake when it comes to my actions. This whim, the desire to gift you with something valuable, feels harmless, but I suppose there is some risk to you.

Risk?

My gift is potent and, outside our hive, something that would be nigh impossible to acquire. I'm giving you a sample of the royal jelly my attendants fed to me in order to make me a queen. It's the same substance they will feed to my replacement. I do not feel it will threaten our hive at all to give you this small sample. You will take it away to your world, and soon, we will be separated from your universe. For this reason, I'm willing to risk the unknown effects it will have upon you. It will be up to you to decide if you are willing to take that same risk.

Ah . . . Victor didnt know how to respond. For once, his mouth, both the polite and impolite versions, was struck dumb.

We have not fed this jelly to those not of the hive, but you have the constitution of an elder race, Victor. I believe you will survive and reap some benefits. Still, it would be wise to grow more powerful on your own first. Use this gift when you have encountered a ceiling with regard to your advancement.

All right. Well, thank you. Im, um, honored, Queen Crys . . .

Simply call me Crystal. No one else in my life would do so.

Victor looked into those weirdly alien, hypnotically beautiful eyes and smiled. She was a person, no matter how powerful and strange, and she was clearly very lonely. In a way, he wished he could spend more time with her, but in another way, he was ready to be away from that strange place. Still, his smile was genuine, and impulsively, he stepped forward, holding out his free hand. Thank you, Crystal, he said as the alien insect queen took his hand in hers, and he felt the spark of her power lurking beneath the flesh, enough power to destroy worlds.

Book 7: Chapter 28: The Return

The longest part of Victors return trip was the slow ascent upward through the enormous brooding planets atmosphere. First, he had to wait for what felt like half a day for the great beetle to return. He did so in the expansive courtyard of the pyramid, following the emissary from one garden to another, taking in the scenery and trying to build memories solid enough to last a lifetime; he kept reminding himself that he was in a different universe entirely and that the chances of him or anyone he knew ever returning to the ivid world were microscopically small. So, he stared at the strange crystal fountains and the decorative mosaics of glittering gemstonesart from an alien mindand tried to imprint them in his mind, images he could conjure up in times of reflection.

When the beetle came, and the emissary recreated the glass bubble for them to ride in, Victor sat on the floor and watched the great planet slowly recede as they rose into space. It was an experience he wanted to savor, a memory to add to the collection of his visit to these strange, powerful beings. It was evident to him that the ivid had somehow gone around the System, somehow found a way to advance their species to the level of transcendence; they wouldnt just be moving to their own universe, but theyd be progressing beyond this reality, moving on to the next stage, whatever that was. One thing he was sure of, though, was that hed gained new perspectives on power, individuality, and the many roads and doorways that might seem closed but were waiting to be opened with the proper application of leverage.

The ivid queen had indicated that they were generating Energy, which created more questions for Victor, questions the emissary didnt seem capable of answering. He supposed that might not be the case; the emissarys silence might just as well indicate an unwillingness as much as an inability. The ivid had their secrets, and Victor would have to content himself with the clues hed seen. As the mossy-green orb of the ivid brooding planet fell away, becoming smaller and smaller, and flickers of dense Energy indicated the beetles passage into deeper space, the emissary spoke, breaking an hours long silence, We will soon move between space again, individual. This passage will be more comfortable for you as weve modified the technique to shield your mind.

All right. Should I stand?

That will not be necessary. Are you ready? The emissary stepped closer to him, holding out one of its three-fingered hands. Victor nodded, but his hands were full; he still cradled the dreaming egg, and, clutched in his free hand, was the warm, spherical crystal container of amber-colored royal jelly. It was about the size of a billiard ball, but Victor estimated its weight at something like fifty pounds. It was dense in more than one way; when he turned his inner eye toward it, it blazed like a miniature sun. He'd never seen an inert substance with such potency, and the idea of consuming it gave him serious pause.

Ah, um, this is all right to put in a storage container?

Yes, though your spatial devices will degrade rapidly as they attempt to contain the royal jelly. We recommend . . . The ivid trailed off as it reached up to its shoulder and, with the precision of a laser scalpel, severed its voluminous sleeve. It held the length of fabric out to Victor. Use this as a sling. You can hang the orb of jelly from your belt until you've acquired a more durable storage device. This material will have the added benefit of shielding the jelly's potency from casual observation.

Ah! Victor gently set the egg down in his lap, then took the sleeve, pulling it over the heavy, crystal globe. Once it was nestled in the tough, magical silk, he tied the two ends together and then looped the extra length around his belt, tying it off. Thank you. He picked up the egg, tucked it against his chest, and then reached up to take the emissary's hand. White light flooded his vision, and then he found himself sitting on a smooth, glazed roadway leading to the great aperture that led from the hive world back to the ivids' origin world. Valla and Lesh sat nearby, facing each other, speaking quietly.

We have returned, the emissary said, and Valla leaped to her feet in surprise. Lesh made a reptilian hiss, clearly also startled, and scrambled to his feet, reaching for Belagog.

Victor! Valla cried, rushing to him. Victor, meanwhile, was clambering to his feet, awkwardly cradling the priceless egg.

Hey, beautiful. He smiled as she grasped his free hand, helping him up. Mission successful! He glanced at Lesh, nodded, and then jerked his head toward the enormous, misty opening in the mountainside. We're ready to get out of here?

Lesh strode forward, nodding. We were surprised when the other emissary told us to await you here this morning. We thought you'd be gone longer.

Yeah, I think the, uh, intelligence behind the emissary perfected their teleportation magic while I spoke to the queen.

We made improvements. The emissary nodded its expressionless, ten-eyed head. This one will accompany you through the aperture and, once on the origin world, move you safely out of the hive.

Lesh frowned and rumbled, Move us?

A trivial jump between space.

Victor laughed, shaking his head. Don't worry, Lesh. It's painless. With his free hand, he took Valla's and started toward the opening. Come on. Let's get back to Sojourn. I'm ready to be done with this weird quest. He heard Lesh's heavy footsteps behind him, then he stepped into the misty air hanging in the opening, and when he'd taken half a dozen steps, he found himself beneath the crossed blades of the guardians' polearms. He was, once again, deep in the ivid hive. The guardians didn't react to

him; it almost seemed like they hadn't moved since their party had gone into the hive world, but Victor couldn't believe that was the case. They'd been in there for more than a day, maybe closer to two.

He turned, still holding Valla's hand, to watch Lesh and the emissary come through the opaque archway, and when their shadows resolved into their flesh and blood bodies, he nodded to the emissary. Can you take us up from right here?

This one will do so. Please, each of you, take one of this one's hands. It held its four arms out to the sides, palms up, and Victor reached for one of them. Seeing his quick compliance, Valla followed suit, and then Lesh took one of the two free hands on the ivid's left side. Another flash of white light clouded Victor's mind, and then he was standing on the dead grass atop the hive beneath the hazy yellow sky of the ivid home world.

That was sudden! Lesh grunted, stumbling back in surprise, shielding his eyes from the glaring orange sun. Valla coughed, holding an elbow to her nose, as the weird chemical scent of the air began to make all of their eyes water.

This one will leave you here, travelers. We bear a final word of caution: Do not return to this place, for its departure from this universe is imminent.

Victor nodded, and Valla said, a slight wheeze in her voice, Thank you.

The insect nodded, and then, with a surge of potent Energy, it was gone, and they were standing alone, very near the spot where they'd first arrived. Is that the egg? Lesh asked, looking at Victor's cradled bundle of silk.

Yep.

And this? Valla touched the sling of silver-gray silk hanging at his belt.

A gift from the queen. Something too potent for any of us to contemplate consuming yet. Consuming? Lesh rumbled, and Valla's eyebrow arched.

A heart? she guessed.

No, but something just as good, I'm sure.

Just as good . . . Valla scoffed and shook her head.

Lesh had had enough dilly-dallying; he held up his coin-shaped token of recall and asked, Shall we be gone from this place?

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Victor nodded, summoning his token from his ring. Do we just channel Energy into it?

That's right. Lesh nodded and looked at Valla, ensuring she was ready.

You guys first, Victor said, watching Valla delicately twirl the token between her long, nimble fingers.

As you say, Lesh said; then, with a crackle of silvery Energy, the coin rippled with light and power, expanding with a bright, slow-motion flash that vanished with a soft pop. Lesh was gone.

He was ready to go! Valla laughed.

Yeah, this trip wasnt what hed hoped. He hardly got to fight a single bug. Victor chuckled and shook his head, then nodded to Valla. Your turn.

Together. She held up her token, locking eyes with him.

All right. Victor gripped his token in his fist and counted down. Three, two, one . . . Just as when theyd teleported via the System from world to world, he felt the transition as he hurtled through space back to Sojourn. It was a decidedly different experience now that hed tasted the teleportation magic of the ivid. Somehow, he was aware of the enormity of the distance he traveled, and it wasnt instantaneous. Still, when he appeared in the World Hall back on Sojourn, he barely stumbled as his feet caught up with his brain, and his senses were pounded with the sounds, sights, and smells of the vastly different location.

To his relief, Valla and Lesh were there, and she ran to him, hugging her arms around his waist. I thought you were deceiving us somehow. I thought youd made some damnable bargain and had to remain or go elsewhere.

Why? Victor laughed.

Because you told us to go first! She punched him in the shoulder.

Lesh rumbled a deep laugh. I didnt fear any such thing.

Because you dont know him well enough! Valla cried.

All right, all right. Were here, so just relax. He shifted the ivid egg from his left arm to the right and nodded toward it as he did so. Lets go deliver this thing cause Im ready to see Edeya get some damn help. Im ready to be done running from one fire to the next. Bout time we did something we want for a change, dont you think?

Mmhmm. Valla nodded and took his hand, walking with him as Victor moved off the metal teleportation disc toward one of the sunlit exits. Lesh followed behind, but as they exited the building into the shadows of tall, dazzling, sunlit crystal towers, the big dragonkin stepped up beside Victor and grasped his shoulder to get his attention.

Lord Victor . . .

Victors fine, man.

Yes. I was wondering if youd mind if I took my leave and returned to the inn. Ive a mind to check in on my charge.

Ah, yeah. I wonder how old Darren got along with his training. Yeah, sure, Lesh. Valla and I can deliver this egg.

Thank you. Ill await word of your success at the inn, then. He nodded to Valla. Lady . . .

Just Valla, Lesh. She giggled and winked, and Victor knew she was making fun of him.

Lesh rumbled his deep, purr-like laugh, the one Victor was beginning to understand was reserved for things that genuinely amused him. He nodded his big, flat, angular head, and then he was gone, striding purposefully away from the city center. Hes a character when you get to know him, Valla said, squeezing Victor's fingers.

Yeah. Hes a good guy, but Id hate to be Darren if he hasnt behaved himself. Victor laughed at the idea and started walking, falling in behind a large group of black-robed women, each with their long, red hair coiled atop their heads and adorned with jewel-laden veils. It still rankled something in him to know that people the society of Sojourn found greater-than were striding along the shimmering, rainbow-laced walkways above his head, but something was different now that hed tasted the power of the ivid. There were things in the universe that could humble the beings above him, so why should he be upset that they did so to him? All it meant was that he knew he had growing yet to do, and there was something worthy in that having a goal to attain.

It didnt take them long to reach their destination. As the building where Erd Van kept his shop came into view, Victor paused and looked back, noting the distance theyd traveled. Theres some pinch magic going on here.

Hmm?

I think the sidewalks make you move faster than normal. Look. Victor pointed to the distant crystal towers. Weve covered something like ten miles, but it only took us, what? Twenty minutes? We werent exactly running.

I . . . Valla looked back, then turned and looked at Erd Vans shop. I think youre right!

Funny, we didnt notice it before. Must have been too immersed in finding our way.

A passing woman, small and round, wearing a bright yellow cloak tied tightly beneath the wagging flesh of her extra chin, looked up at him with angular, deep, red eyes and said, Pardon my intrusion, but I couldnt help hearing your conversation. These walkways will speed up your travel, but only if you know your destination and dont pay attention to your surroundings. The trick is to let your feet do the walking and allow your mind to wander! She laughed, winked, and then hurried past.

Interesting woman . . . Valla watched her go, then she squeezed Victor's fingers and tugged his hand, pulling him toward their goal. Come. As you said, its time we were done with this quest. He followed along, pondering the idea that an entire city had enchanted sidewalks. Then he grew distracted as she pulled the door open and stepped inside, accompanied by the magical chimes Erd Van had hung from the entryway. Victor cast Alter Self almost automatically, reducing his size to fit through the doorway more easily, though he and Valla still had to duck beneath the lintel.

Inside, things were just as he remembered, though Erd wasnt in sight. Valla looked at him, shrugged, and then walked over to the couches, taking a seat to wait. Victor didnt feel so patient, however, and he walked over to the counter and rapped his heavy knuckles against the polished wood. Erd!

A distant voice came to him, muffled by the closed door in the far wall, A moment, please!

Victor sighed and walked over to Valla, sitting on the couch and depositing the silk-wrapped bundle between them. Valla shifted to look at the egg, gently resting one of her pale, silver-blue hands atop it. She sighed softly as she felt its warmth and said, Its . . . I think I can feel something! Almost like its tugging at my consciousness.

Careful. Victor took her wrist and lifted her hand away. It didnt do that to me. It might be dangerous to someone without sufficient will. I have no idea.

Valla licked her lips, her eyes shifting back and forth from Victors eyes to the egg. Then, almost reluctantly, she nodded and folded her hands in her lap. I think you may be right. The sound of the door clicking open took their attention, and Victor looked up to see Erd leaning against his counter, looking at them with narrowed eyes.

So, youve returned. You met with failure? Did the alchemical perfume not work? He sighed and shook his head, waving a hand dismissively. No matter. Im sorry if you lost any comrades in the effort. Im afraid my coffers cannot fund another expedition at this time.

We didnt fail, Victor growled, something in him deeply annoyed by Erds assumption.

Oh? Erds eyes darted from Victor to Valla, then to the silk-wrapped bundle between them. But I cant sense anything that could possibly be the object of my . . . His eyes bulged, and he gasped, his hands falling to his knees to steady himself as Victor unwrapped the egg and lifted it in his bare hand. Hed only briefly touched the egg back in the hive-world, wondering what it looked like under all that silk. He could feel it, the weight of the power in the thing. It was definitely spirit-attuned Energy, but not one of his affinities. Still, it was something else, that heavy, powerful spirit presence.

Vallas eyes opened wide, and she stared at the egg longingly, but her reaction was different from Erds. He gasped and took a stumbling step toward them, faltering and falling to one knee. W-wra . . . he coughed and rubbed a hand over his face, slapping his cheek several times. Wrap it! Please!

Victor chuckled and wrapped the egg in the silken cloth, and Valla sighed longingly while Erd began to gasp deep breaths. When hed recovered a little, he laughed like a madman. Oh, by the ancient elder gods! Youve done it! Youve actually done it! Master Dar will be so pleased! So pleased! Heroes! He scrambled to his feet and rushed forward, hands outstretched, but Victor pulled the egg close, snugly in the crook of his arm. D-dont you intend to uphold our bargain?

Oh, I do. I just need to make sure were clear on the terms.

You bring me the egg, and I get you an audience with my mentor, Ranish Dar! Erds face had begun to flush with frustration and perceived insult.

Relax, Erd. Listen; sit down. Victor nodded to the couch nearby. Erd scowled at him, but he complied, and Victor knew the guy was afraid of him. If it hadnt been obvious when hed fallen to his knees before his Quinametzin anger, Victor would have figured it out when he sent them on what was basically a suicide mission. Lets start being very honest with each other, yeah? You expected us to fail, right?

Something in his eyes or voice must have cautioned Erd because he didnt try very hard to deny the statement. I had high hopes for the alchemical perfume, but Ive had so many failures over the years, I didnt think there was much chance youd be able to retrieve the egg. He shrugged.

You sent us to die? Valla growled, the stupor brought on by the exposure of the egg rapidly fading.

No! Erd cried, then more quietly, No, no, no. I gave you tokens of recall, did I not? I spent a great deal of money in that regard, ensuring you had a way out. I simply thought the task would prove too much. None of my earlier questors ever even laid eyes on the eggs.

Okay, so, as you felt, this things very damn powerful. I dont want to get an audience with this master of yours only to discover he has a laundry list of requirements before he helps us. If you want this egg, if you want what it promises, you need to impress upon him that weve earned his help.

Ah, Erd held up a single finger and clicked his tongue, almost wincing as he continued, Ah, I may have misled you slightly. The egg is, um, as you say, powerful and valuable, but its beyond me. No, that egg is for my master. Still, I believe he will be very grateful for it. Im not the only student whos been trying to get something of this caliber for him; I believe its instrumental for his next breakthrough. Even so, Im unsure that hell grant me what I need in addition to helping you. The best I will promise is that I will ensure that he sees you and hears of your friends plight.

Victor growled, but Valla put her hand on his wrist, gently squeezing, and he knew she was trying to remind him to be reasonable. He was just so damn tired of playing games. Im not fucking around, Erd. If this egg is for your master, then well go with you. I dont want you to take it to him and then get some line about how your master is busy and hell see us in a month or a year or some other bullshit. Yeah. When are you going?

I . . . he looked both panicked and excited. I will go now! Hell surely see us if we have the egg, even before my assigned meeting time.

Victor nodded. Thats the spirit. Lets go pick up our friend, and well all go together. I told you Id give you this egg, and I will, but I want to be standing in front of the guy who can help us before I hand it over. Fair?

To his surprise, Valla spoke before Erd, I think it sounds fair. Come, Erd. You can still claim credit for sending us after it.

Well, he stood up from the couch, his eyes darting around, clearly searching for a suitable response. Finally, he nodded and said, Very well. Its enough. As though to reassure himself, he repeated. Its enough. Hell be pleased. Yes. He continued nodding as he walked over to his front door and clicked the locks shut. Yes, this will be fine. Well take my coach. Come, its in the back alley.

Book 7: Chapter 29: Costs

Erd's coach was a rune-inscribed brass-colored globe the size of a small sedan that floated two feet off the ground. When he tapped a matching brass rod against a panel on its side, it rotated on hidden gears, sliding open like the aperture on a camera, revealing a spacious interior upholstered in soft red velvets. Victor and Valla had to struggle to get through the opening, but once inside, they had plenty of room to stretch out. All the while, Victor kept the egg held tight in the crook of his arm, shaking his head at Erd when he offered to hold it as he clambered through the doorway. Something about the man didnt inspire Victors trust.

The coach surged forward, smoothly but quickly, and whatever magic guided it delivered them to the partys hotel in just a few minutes. During their brief transit, Erd was silent, though he looked occupied, and when the coach pulled to a stop, he said, Ive communed with Master Dars assistant,

and the master has agreed to see us. Its difficult to tell, but I believe hes excited! This means good things for us, Victor!

Yeah? Victor scooted toward the door, ready to go into the hotel to fetch Lam and Edeya.

Yes! Id hoped the egg would be something he needed, but I wasnt entirely sure. Now that weve secured an audience, I dont mind telling you that my relief is monumental. Id feared your wrath if hed been uninterested in the artifact.

Is that why you seemed so nervous? Valla asked as she scooted forward in her seat, ready to follow Victor.

Yes. I apologize for not being wholly forthright with you. I was reasonably sure the artifact would get his attention, earning me Dars favor and his aid in my development, but I wasnt certain. Things seem to be working out, however. He nodded, grinning widely, and his relief was palpable.

Part of Victor wanted to cuss the guy out for sending them into the ivid hive on what was starting to feel like a hunch, but he simply grunted and said, Ill be right back. He slipped through the doorway and reached up to take Vallas hand, helping her down. You mind waiting here and keeping an eye on this guy? Ill go get Lam and Edeya.

Of course. She pointed to the egg. Want me to hold that?

Thanks, but no. If someones going to try to steal this, theyll have to take it from me. When Valla nodded and leaned back against the coach, Victor turned and hurried into the hotel, up the magical stairs, and directly to the room where Lesh and Darren were staying. He only had to knock twice before the door opened wide, and Leshs draconic countenance greeted him.

He looked down at the bundle in Victors arm and said, You ran into trouble?

Not exactly. Were going to meet that guys master right now, but I want you to watch this. Victor reached down with his free hand and began unlooping the sling of ivid silk that held the globe of royal jelly. I dont know how good this silk is at hiding whats inside it, but if this guys as powerful as we think, he might sniff it out. I dont want to get mugged, you know?

Ah. Of course. Ill keep it safe here.

Yeah, dont go wandering around with it. Just wait for me, all right? Keep it out of your storage containers unless you dont mind destroying them. Victor held the heavy bundle up, and Lesh nodded, taking it with a profoundly sober expression.

I will guard it with my life.

Victor thought about telling him it wasnt worth his life and not to do anything crazy, but he decided that no matter what he said, Lesh wouldnt relax about the responsibility. It was just the way he was. All right. Thanks, Lesh. Hopefully, well be back soon. Have you seen Lam yet?

No. Ive been listening to the fosterlings report. He seems to have learned a great deal about his Core and has acquired some texts to aid his study. Ill give you the details after I hear it all.

Uh, all right. Victor almost chuckled, but he held it in. He didnt really care all that much about what Darren was learning, but he had to give Lesh credit for taking his duty so seriously. Still, every time he called Darren a fosterling, it made him smile. Yeah, lets catch up when I get back. As Lesh nodded, Victor turned and walked to Lams room. On the way, thinking about the jelly hed just left

with Lesh, he remembered the crown Lam was holding for him and wondered if he should give that to Lesh, too, or just carry it with him. He doubted it had a fraction of the value of the royal jelly, but he still didnt want to tempt thieves.

Lam opened her door immediately and surprised Victor by rushing to hug him. Im so relieved to see you! Is everyone well? Wheres Valla? Her response to his arrival surprised him at first, but then Victor put himself in her shoesleft behind, tending to her near-comatose friend, waiting in a strange city on a strange world in the hopes that the only people she knew wouldnt die trying to invade an alien insect hive. He gripped her shoulders as she released him, her cheeks reddening in sudden embarrassment.

Shes fine. Waiting downstairs. Fetch Edeya; were going to see that guy about helping her now.

Truly? Moisture sprang into Lams eyes, and she turned, hurrying toward a couch near the big, floor-to-ceiling windows facing the park. Victor stepped inside the doorway and watched Lam use the control rod to get Edeya up and moving. What about your crown?

Hide it here. Ill see to it when were done with this business.

Its already hidden. I was nervous with that thing around.

You felt something? Victor had, too, every time he held the crown, a kind of uneasiness like distant whispering and watching eyes.

Yes. It made my skin crawl. Lam led Edeya to the door, and Victor stepped back out, holding it wide for them. As they all walked to the steps, Lam asked, What was it like? The insect world?

Dead. Nothing lived except for the bugs. We got to the bottom of the hive and found out that the ivid had evolved, opening a . . . gateway, I guess, into a new universe they were creating. I gained a new perspective on power from them, Lam. Their queen . . . Victor trailed off, unsure how to describe what hed felt.

That bad, huh? Did you have to fight?

Only at first, against the insect soldiers near the top of the hive. Then we snuck down, and the, um, evolved ivid dealt with us peacefully. He finished his sentence and stepped down the magical stairway, waiting for Lam and Edeya to join him before continuing. Keep that between us. I had to trade for the egg, but it wasnt nearly as hard to get as Erd Van thinks. Ill use that for bargaining.

Understood.

While they walked, Victor looked at Edeya, noting the dimness of her wings, the wan, sallow look of her face, and the deep, dark circles under her eyes. He knew shed looked bad before they left, but she seemed worse, and he didnt think they could keep her like this much longer. They exited the hotel, and Victor pointed to the floating globe-shaped coach down the sidewalk. Thats our ride.

Lam started forward, but he stopped her and said, Listen, Lam, if this guy wont or cant help, then Im going to find a way to get to Dark Ember, and Im going to kill my way to Victoria or Catalina, whatever that bruja calls herself, and Im going to rip her apart bone by bone until she frees Edeyas spirit. Dont give up hope.

To his surprise, Lam smiled and nodded. She didn't try to protest or insist that she'd join him. She just said, I know you will, Victor. He looked into her emerald eyes for several seconds, wondering at the pain, guilt, and loneliness he saw there. After a short, awkward silence, they walked the rest of the way to the coach, where Lam and Valla embraced before they all climbed inside, Victor bringing up the rear, still clutching the warm, silk-wrapped bundle in his left arm. The coach didn't have windows, so they couldn't see exactly where they were going, but Victor could feel the coach lifting them and had the sensation of great speed as he was pulled down into the cushions.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Where are we meeting your master? Valla asked.

Erd smiled at her and made an expression that seemed almost smug. He awaits us in a private tower of the Arcanum.

Lam came to everyone's rescue and asked, The Arcanum?

Ah, yes. I keep forgetting you're all new to the city. The Arcanum of a Thousand Towers. It began as a library and research facility and has become something of a university over the centuries. People like me save our money and favors and spend them there, learning from people like Ranish Dar. Well, when they have the time and patience for those of us so far beneath them.

Does it really have a thousand towers? Valla asked.

Oh, likely far more by now. Erd rubbed his chin, looking around the coach's interior, then added, Apologies for the lack of a view. You'll get a good look at the Arcanum when we step out, though. His answer seemed to satisfy Lam and Valla, and Victor had enough on his mind, so the coach grew quiet as it silently conveyed them through the air.

After a few minutes, Valla said, Edeya doesn't look well.

She hasn't . . . Lam started to say, frowning.

I mean, she looks worse.

Does she? Lam leaned closer to Edeya, taking her limp hands and gently massaging her palms with her thumbs. I've been ensuring she eats good food and gets sunlight, but something still fails within her.

A body cannot exist long without a spirit. Her fragment will suffice for a time, but the flesh will fail. Erd looked at Victor and continued, Forgive my unearned knowledge, but when I glimpsed your Core when you first came to my shop, I was surprised you were seeking help from me. I'm surprised by how little you know of spirits, considering . . .

Erd, I earned my power through combat and suffering. I've never found a very knowledgeable teacher, so, yeah, there's a lot I don't know.

Of course. I don't mean to imply any willful ignorance . . . He stumbled on his words, obviously aware of Victor's irritation, and then the coach rapidly slowed, sending everyone lurching forward in their seats. With a thunk and soft grinding sound, it came to a halt, and he announced, We've arrived! He practically flew

out of the coach, and Victor had a feeling he saw their arrival as a lifeline, saving him from the awkward conversation.

Lam and Edeya followed Erd out, and before she stepped through the open doorway, Valla grabbed Victor's hand and said, Be patient. We're out of our depth here, and I don't think your rage will serve you well.

I don't plan to get angry, Valla; it just happens. Anyway, I'm out of patience where Edeya's concerned. He stared hard at her, unblinking, and eventually, she nodded and climbed out of the coach. Victor followed, and when he stepped out, he had to take a minute to regather his wits as they were blown out of his mind by the vista that awaited him.

The coach had come to rest on a dock of sorts, built from gold and pearl inlaid marble a short span of solid stone that stretched out from the roof of a floating tower, which was, in turn, connected to ten other towers, also floating in the sky, and connected to hundreds more. The cluster of floating towers and the tunnels and bridges between them were, literally, hanging in the clouds, and Victor could see, distant and small, like a city seen from an airplane, the crystal buildings and streets of Sojourn down below. Holy shit, he said, slowly turning in a circle, trying to guess how many towers hung there in the sky and losing count in the hundreds.

Some of the spires were marble, some were gray stone, and many were made of bricks of all sorts. Victor saw tile roofs, copper gables, and everything in between. The diversity of building materials might have seemed haphazard if not for the fact that every building was a tower, and they were all floating together high among the clouds. The sun was dim, approaching the western horizon, and the clouds and breeze turned the stiff wind chilly. Though it hardly bothered Victor, he could see the goosebumps standing out on Edeya's frail arms, and he nodded toward the doorway at the center of the roof. We should get her out of the wind.

Of course, of course! Erd hurried to the door, resting his hand on the latch and muttering a few words that were indistinct and strange to Victor's ears. Lam pulled Edeya after him, and Victor and Valla followed. By the time they'd all gathered, Erd had the door open and pulled it wide for them all to go through. When he reached the door, Victor held it open with his free hand and nodded to Erd.

I'll follow you.

Erd swallowed his reply, nodding and looking down, then hurried in. When Victor stepped through, he let the metal door clang shut behind him. Erd led them down several flights of stairs, past a few closed doors, and finally to the base of the narrow stairway where a single door opened into an arched, spacious gallery from which three doors and two other stairs led away. Erd approached the central door, a wide, darkly stained wooden one, and delicately knocked. This is his usual study.

Come! barked a deep, scratchy voice, and Erd visibly flinched as he turned the brass knob and pushed the door open. Ah, um, Master Dar, it is I, Erd Van, here to gift you with the vivid dreaming egg . . .

The deep voice laughed and said, Erd Van! It's been a decade at least, no? I'd nearly written you off as rusted.

Valla looked at Victor and mouthed, Rusted?

Victor shrugged and continued to listen, stepping forward to see through the doorway where Erd still stood. He couldn't make much out. Soft golden light, seeming to fall from an overhead fixture, illuminated stacks of books, built-in shelves, and clutter of every sort. Most prominent, obscuring most of his view, was a wrought-iron rack formed to delicately hold dozens of shimmering crystal globes that looked very much like tiny planets to Victor.

Um, no, Master, since my last session with you, I've advanced three levels and sit upon the cusp of tier eight. I hoped that, with this gift, I might earn a bit of guidance . . .

Yes, yes, I heard your message. Come in, boy, and bring your entourage. I'll have a look at you all.

Erd turned and furtively motioned for everyone to follow him, and then he stepped through. Lam moved to the side with Edeya, waiting for Victor and Valla to precede her into the room. Valla seemed hesitant to go in for some reason, and Victor was out of patience, ready to see the man behind the voice, so he moved past her. Clutching the egg close, he ducked under the lintel and entered the study. Once inside, he saw it was cluttered but large, with massive bay windows on the far wall providing a stunning view of the sunset and the golden, ochre, and rust-colored clouds laid out like a magical cotton-candy landscape outside.

Amid the shelves, cases, tables, stacks of books, curios, and artifacts was an imposing desk with legs carved like dragon claws. Sitting behind it was a man who had to be Ranish Dar. Victor had expected an old, cranky scholar-type. He'd pictured a man with glasses and white hair with sharp eyes. What he saw was a giant made of black stone that moved like flesh. His eyes blazed like miniature golden suns, and bizarrely, he wore mint-green silken pajamas. At least, they looked like pajamas to Victor.

Hah! rumbled the colossal man, easily a match for Victor's usual size. What's this, then, Erd Van? Did you convince one of your betters to fetch the artifact? And is he willing to share the prize? What's your name, berserker? Victor stepped forward, making room for his companions to follow him in. He didn't answer right away, and when Ranish Dar caught sight of Edeya, he made a sound that reminded Victor of a train whistling and said, And a shattered spirit? Well, I'll hand it to you, Erd; this is the most interesting supplication I've had in a good many years.

Um, thank you, Master Dar, I was hoping that . . .

Quiet now while I see what I've got before me. Well, berserker? Ranish Dar leaned forward on his desk, the wood creaking under the pressure of his elbows.

I'm Victor.

And you hail from?

Victor shrugged and said, Tucson, I guess by way of Fanwath.

Yes, that's quite a Core you've been building for yourself, there. Well shielded, too. It's no wonder Erd's willing to lead you about, acting the prancing prince, unaware that he's got a dragon by the tail. Quite impressive, indeed.

Victor didn't betray any emotion or even flinch as Ranish Dar effortlessly saw through his Aura Veil. He thought the imagery of his idiom was apt and amusing, picturing Erd walking around with a dragon's tail, unaware of the monster on the other end. He wondered how accurate it was. Was he

really so much stronger than the nearly level eighty spirit expert? Surprisingly, his Quinametzin pride wasn't the least ruffled, perhaps because something in him recognized the power of the man before him. Some instinct in him wanted to show respect. Thank you. He decided no other words were yet necessary.

So, an ivid dreaming egg, is it? He nodded to Victor's bundle. Bring it here. I'll have a look before I hear any more of your story.

Victor glanced at Erd and saw him looking down, clenching his jaw, clearly humiliated by Dar's earlier words. Deciding there wasn't much else he could do, he was reasonably sure Dar could take the egg if he wanted to. He stepped up to the desk, and, as he walked, he canceled his Alter Self spell, rising to his full height. He didn't want to have to reach up to put something on a desk. As he smoothly stretched upward and outward, expanding in size and power, Ranish Dar chuckled and said, A dragon, indeed!

Victor couldn't contain the inner voice that insisted he correct the record, and he said, Titan, as he placed the silk-wrapped egg on the desktop.

Of course, of course. A figure of speech, young man. Erd pulled the bundle close and carefully unwrapped the silk. When the pale, glittering flesh of the egg was exposed, and Victor felt its warm, potent Energy wash over him, he heard the gasps behind him and saw the smile on Dar's stony face. Lovely, lovely, lovely! He rested two huge fingers on the egg and closed his blazing eyes. A moment later, he said, Yes, this will do.

Are you pleased, Master Dar? Erd asked, his voice high and strained. Victor looked at him to see he'd fallen to his knees. His fists were clenched, and he was sweating bullets over his squeezed-shut eyes. Victor turned to see Lam and Valla leaning on each other, wan and gasping as they stood in the wash of power coming off the egg. Victor was a little surprised; he could definitely feel the egg's influence, feel the weight of it, but to him, it was like standing out on the pavement on an Arizona summer day. It was hot and uncomfortable, but nothing he couldn't handle.

You're entirely too strong for an iron-ranker, Victor, Dar said, ignoring Erd's question as he chuckled and slowly wrapped the egg, to the others' great relief. Well? How will my blessings be bestowed upon this party? Erd Van would have me believe he is responsible for this great treasure. Is that the case?

I . . . Erd started to say, but Ranish Dar held up a hand, silencing him.

I'll hear from the only one of you capable of standing in its presence. He fixed those blazing eyes on Victor.

Something in Victor wouldn't let him take all the credit for the egg despite his significant role. He said, Erd told us about the egg. He paid for our transport and gave us the means to sneak past many of the ivids. We, Victor nodded to Valla, fought and bargained for it.

And what do you seek, Victor? I know what Erd wants.

I wish to have my friend's spirit made whole. I hoped that you'd be able to pull it home. If you can't do that, I hoped you'd help me find a way to the world where it's being held, and I'll kill the one who's taken it.

Gods, Ranish Dar said, surprising Victor. Such conviction and power behind those words. Did you feel that, Erd? An oath of power made in our presence, one with binding karmic ties, and he did it with hardly a thought for the repercussions! Thats the sort of spirit we need to cultivate, Erd. What a bloodline! What a Core! What a spirit! Erd, you need another few decades of hard, hard toil before you can hope to put such an edge to your words. Ill grant you your desired lessons, five of them, but then youll need to put yourself through a crucible or two before Ill look upon you again. Go now. Await my summons. He made a shooing gesture at Erd, and the man stood and practically flew from the room, glancing at Victor on his way past with haunted eyes.

And us? Victor asked.

Ill aid your friend, Victor, the titan from Tucson, but my help will come with a cost. A cost for your friend and a cost for you. Will you bear it?

Victor didnt hesitate. He was ready to be done with this situation, ready to help his friend, and he wasnt afraid of any fee this man might charge. He opened his mouth to say yes, but Valla spoke first, filling the brief silence, He will hear the cost before he decides.

Ranish Dar slammed his palm atop his massive desk with an ear-popping, thunderous crack and barked a short laugh, Hah! A wise woman and a boon companion. Very well. First, well discuss what it will cost your friend. The mending of a shattered spirit and the trauma of my indelicate, mighty pull, dragging it through the fabric of the universe to be made whole in her body, will take a toll, paid for by the Energy shes gathered in her life. She will likely lose many levels. As for you, Victor, the cost I will demand of you will be years of service, for I need a protg worthy of my knowledge.

Book 7: Chapter 30: Whole

After Ranish Dar spoke, the room grew quiet as everyone looked at Victor for a reaction. When he stood there for several seconds, clearly deep in thought, Lam broke the spell and asked, How many levels will she lose?

Unknown. Ranish peered past Victor at Edeya for several seconds, then said, Shes just barely into the iron ranks. Just touching tier three, yes?

Thats right.

With so little to draw upon, she might find herself back in the stages of a neophyte, Classless and ready for the crucible. Victor heard him; part of his mind was listening to their conversation, but most of his concentration was dealing with his many half-formed reactions to Dars demand. Hed hoped to have Edeya healed and to be done with obligations for a while. Hed hoped for some freedom to explore and live his life, enjoying some real, quality time with Valla. What kinds of demands would Dar make of his protg? Would Victors entire life be co-opted? Could he refuse and risk Edeyas life in the hopes that hed find another solution?

While he struggled with his concerns, another part of him began to weigh the demand in the light of an opportunity. Hed seen firsthand how badly some iron-rankers desired the guidance of a man like Ranish Dar. Erd Van had spent a fortune and decades of his life to acquire the dreaming egg, and all it had gotten him was five lessons with Dar. Should Victor pass up the opportunity for regular

tutelage from the master? As his brain spun through the implications, he felt Valla move beside him, entwining her fingers with his.

So far to fall . . . Lam said, her expression drooping into something like despair.

It is far, Dar said, chuckling, to you. To me, those first few dozen levels in the iron ranks are a blink of an eye, a drop in the ocean of my journey to this stage of my life. Theres more I can tell you that might give you comfort. Would you believe that there are iron-rankers who pay tremendous sums to spirit casters like myself to put them through such a process intentionally? Its not without risk, either, as you well know. Still, there are those who would give anything to make another gamble with Class selections, to focus their advancement differently. No, your friend will suffer some loss, but shes likely to come back stronger than ever. Its not as though shell forget what she learned in her young life. Well, she shouldnt. Some memory loss is one of the many risks, however.

Lam nodded, and in the corner of his eye, Victor saw her put her arm around Edeya, pulling her close to her side. Still, we cannot ask this of you, Victor.

Youre not asking. Edeyas not asking. Victor glared at Ranish Dar and asked, What sort of service will you require of me?

Dars smoldering, fiery eyes flared, and Victor swore he felt some heat waft over the desk into his face. Dont be too confident, young titan. Im impressed by you, but Ill not be disrespected in my own study. Ill have your commitment, and then, after Ive helped your friend, well discuss the details. Ill not say more on this matter, so either accept or take your broken friend and depart.

For the first time in the huge stone mans presence, Victor felt the pressure of his rage-attuned Energy seeping into his pathways. He felt his pride begin to bristle, but with a tremendous effort of will, he pushed it back and calmed his angry expression. He focused on Vallas cool fingers, lightly gripping his palm, and took a slow, even breath. All right. I accept.

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Darren closed the book and looked up, frowning, as his giant babysitter repeated the demand, Explain to me again why you were not given a Core at this citys nursery. Darren sighed and closed the book, Averas Treatise on the Mind and its Elusive Affinity, and looked into Leshs green and yellow reptilian eyes.

Well, they dont exactly give a person a Core there. They guide you in the process of creating one. Darren thought about lying. So far, all hed said was that he didnt get the help he needed at the Genesis Center and that hed found some books to figure things out on his own. Still, a lie was something he felt would be easy for Lesh to pick out; he was far shrewder than he looked. Instead, Darren decided to give him part of the truth. They said my stronger affinities were too dangerous and offered to teach me to build a Core that didnt utilize them.

So you took the initiative to find books on the subject and to teach yourself? Lesh nodded. I, too, would have balked at the idea of settling for a weaker Core than my potential would allow. Tell me, then, what are these affinities you are pursuing?

Again, Darren knew better than to lie, My strongest one is chaos, and I have a lesser affinity for mind-attuned Energy.

Ah. Lesh sat on the hard marble floor opposite Darren, his back to the window behind him. Both are rare in my home world, but a strong mind caster is someone to fear. I can see why a soft place like this would discourage it. Ive never met a chaos caster, but I can imagine what might come of such an affinity. So, this world found the prospect too daunting. Again, I cannot feign surprise. You had no other affinities that interested you?

I have a strong affinity for lightning, but its hard to find a Core that will accommodate that and mind-attuned Energy. Chaos seems more malleable, able to be worked in with many different types of Energy.

Lesh grunted. Lightning is a strong battle attunement. Youre so set on mind-attuned Energy?

I just feel it will help me to achieve the goals Im most interested in.

There are many worlds where the rule of might is the only law of the land. There are other places, like this one, where many laws keep people civil. I visited several worlds on my way to find Victor, and some of them had strictly enforced laws regarding certain affinities; they were either seen as abhorrent and banned from existence, or they were tightly controlled by the powers that be. Mind casters are often in that category.

When he didnt say anything more, Darren prompted him, And, Elder?

And you should know that. He shrugged. Its your choice.

Youre not going to try to talk me out of it? You wont forbid me to study it?

Why would I? Do you think I fear any affinity? If you try to toy with my mind, Belagog will mash you into a paste. Id say Victor would likewise be willing to correct you. Knowing that, and also knowing that there are beings here who could just as easily smash me, I hope you will understand that caution and good judgment are more important than any affinity.

Darren was surprised and strangely grateful. For once, he wasnt being judged by his past or for what he might do. Before he could think about it, he said as much to Lesh, Thank you, Elder. Im glad to know that you dont assume I will do something terrible. Ive made mistakes in my life, but its nice to know you arent judging me for them.

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Youve yet to give me a reason to doubt you, fosterling. In my book, youve barely a page written. Let us see that you inspire tales of praise rather than condemnation. Lesh pointed to the book Darren was reading and asked, Well? What sorts of Cores are you considering?

Darren nodded. Of the Core types Ive found for mind affinities, only one meets the criteria I need. First, it has to be compatible with chaos-attuned Energy. Second, it must be something I could hope to create. Several require certain bloodlinesthings Ive never heard of. Darren flipped the pages so he could read aloud. For instance, Tovekian Arkashi or Sevenii Ash Progenitor. Some require rare artifacts like a pearl of introspection. Still others require a cadre of Mind Casters to help focus the Energy into a specific aspect. The only one I think I can create is fairly generic soundingChaotic Mind Core. Still, the book describes it as robust with wide Energy pathways suitable for any caster whose primary sensory organ is visual. What do you think?

Do you sense things with your eyes more than your nose or ears?

Yes. I believe so. Humans have evolved with sight as our predominant sense.

Then I think you are a grown man with no Core, and you should quit dawdling and create something.

This is a momentous decision, Elder. If I steer myself wrong, God knows what it'll take to correct my course.

Lesh scoffed and waved his hand, leaning back into the window, basking in the warm sunlight. As he closed his eyes and folded his arms over his prodigious chest, he rumbled, Speak to me when you've decided on a course of action.

Darren sighed and looked back down at the book in his lap. He'd spent the last couple of days reading nearly nonstop, pausing only to use the bathroom, eat a quick meal, and, when exhaustion truly set in, sleep a few hours. While Lesh and the others had been gone, Lam had hardly bothered him. He doubted she'd even looked in on him if not for some obligation to Lesh. All in all, he'd been happy to be left alone. He'd spent most of his savings acquiring three books. The one in his lap, another about chaos Energy, and a third about air affinities—the closest he could find to a book relating to his lightning affinity.

He'd found a Core that would allow him to cultivate lightning and chaos Energy but set it aside because of his strange fascination with his mind affinity. After speaking to Lesh, though, he was beginning to wonder if he'd been acting out of some compulsion to defy rules or the expectations of people he didn't respect, namely those damn living lights at the Genesys Center, Y-seven and K-eight. Mind was a minor affinity for him, after all; shouldn't he focus on the lightning and chaos? Darren reached over and picked up the book about air affinities.

It was called Borton's Electric Life and was an autobiography of sorts, following the career and adventures of Borton as he rose in power from a novice to a master Wind Elementalist. It was only partially applicable to Darren's lightning, as Y-seven had so smugly reported, a more specialized form of the elemental affinity. Still, in the small section at the beginning of the book, Borton mentioned some Core options he didn't pursue, and one was called a Wildarc Core, which Darren also found mentioned in his chaos-focused text. He read the small paragraph he'd annotated again:

On the subject of Cores, Maester Fulavius suggested a Wildarc, but Daenistra doesn't think I have the necessary minor affinities to make it worth the effort and slow cultivation. Fulavius, of course, argued. He was of the opinion that the slower cultivation meant greater gains in the long run, but I tend to side with Daenistra. My air affinity so outstrips my minors that the need to weave in something else would surely slow me down, and let's not forget that slow growth with high potential sounds wonderful, but quick growth might mean the difference between life and death in the Reekvah Trials, which I'm due to start in two short years.

Darren set the book aside and picked up the chaos tome, cryptically titled Seeds of Infinity. The first hundred pages or so were dedicated to the creation of a chaos-focused Core, and he had to flip through more than a dozen before he came to the section boldly titled Wildarc The Surge Lord Core. He'd only glanced

at it before, being obsessed with mind-affinity-focused Cores, but now he gave it a careful read, pleased to see that each step of the process was explained and that he had everything he needed affinities for lightning and chaos and an undeveloped Core. Suddenly, Darren was excited by the prospect, and he had to set the book down and take a hard look at himself.

Had he really been about to embrace a minor affinity out of spite? Had he wanted to build a Core around mind-attuned Energy because he wanted to influence peoples minds or because of how taboo Y-seven had made it sound? What was that? Some sort of defiance? Some self-destructive need to rebuke authority? It would be one thing if the mind affinity were the best thing for him, but he didnt think it was. If he were honest, he could see how it might lead him into one troubling situation after another. When would he ever use it for good? He supposed that if he could influence peoples minds, he could try to find bad people and get them to change their behavior, but that was a slippery slope, and Darren wasnt good at slippery slopes.

Once again, he felt grateful to Lesh. If he hadnt come over and asked about his studies, if he hadnt given him the benefit of the doubt, Darren might not have been introspective enough to see what a foolish decision hed been about to make. Elder Lesh, Ive made a decision. Im going to create something called a Wildarc Core, and it will allow me to cultivate and use lightning and chaos-attuned Energies.

Good, Darren, Lesh mumbled, clearly dozing.

Darren nodded, for some reason feeling like hed shed a heavy weight. He sat up straighter and propped the book against the other two, tilting its open pages to make it easy to read. As illustrated in the book, he assumed a lotus position and squinted, reading the first instruction softly to himself: Turn your inner eye toward your accumulated Energy and, while studying it, contemplate the chaotic nature of the many branches in a bolt of lightning.

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Ranish Dar led the party out of his study and up one of the other stairways just outside. Despite his stone-like black flesh, his bare feet were silent on the steps, and he moved with the grace of a cat. Hed asked Lam and Edeya to follow him, and, of course, Victor and Valla accompanied themhe hadnt said they couldnt. They walked through high, vaulted corridors brightly lit by an invisible source, past stained-glass windows, a dozen closed doors, and, eventually, into a large room with floor-to-ceiling cabinets lining every wall. The only other furnishings were two long tables lined with stools. Everything was made for a person of Dars size, so it was a little amusing to see Edeya standing beside one of the tables, the top an inch higher than her head.

Victor, place your companion here, Dar said as he shifted one of the stools from the side to the head of the table. Place her head here. He gently tapped the smooth wooden surface in front of him. I will conduct a spirit walk. Are you familiar, Victor?

Yes.

Yes, Im sure you are. Dar looked at Victor, then let his eyes drift to Lam and Valla. Perhaps you think Ill be helpless while spirit walking, but please be aware that my Spirit Walk is at the legendary tier and that a fragment of my spirit will be standing guard over my physical form. I do not suspect you of duplicity, but for your safety, do not make any threatening actions toward me.

Victor lifted Edeya in his arms, disturbed by how light she was, and gently laid her on the table. Dar continued speaking, I will need to channel a great amount of Energy, and, depending on the distance between this world and the one where this young womans spirit lies, I may need to refresh my stores. He held out his hand, and a softly glowing, silvery-white potion appeared in his palm. He held it out to Victor.

Victor took the little bottle, amazed by the depths of Energy he felt within it. What do I do with it?

Watch me with your inner eye. Youll see my spirit fragment standing guard. If it begins to fade, pour this into my mouth. Hopefully, I wont need it, for it was costly and time-consuming to produce. He looked at Victor and tsked, shaking his head. A pity we dont have more time to prepare; I believe I could make use of that inspiration-attuned Energy in your Core. Its close to one of mine. Youll feel it. With that, he nodded and rested his fingertips on either side of Edeyas head. One more thing before I begin. What is this womans name?

Edeya, Lam said, breathless with anxiety.

Fear not. Your loved one will be whole again soon. Ranish Dar closed his eyes and, with a soul-sucking vortex of Energy, he slipped into the spirit plane. Victor stumbled forward and caught himself on the table. Lam fell to her knees, and Valla slowly sank to the ground, gripping Victors wrist to slow her descent. Victor shook his head, forcing himself to focus, and turned his gaze inward. When he saw his Core, he quickly traced his pathways out and looked at the room with his inner eye. Just as Dar had promised, Victor saw his spirit-self standing there, a great, hulking shadow wielding a dark spear that bled waves of darkness like smoke from a torch. It regarded him with eyes like singularities, and Victor felt his blood grow cold.

If that thing was only a splinter of Ranish Dar, something like one of Victors coyotes, then it only confirmed what hed already known: He didnt want to make an enemy of that man. It also made him wonder what Dar had meant when hed said Victor would feel his Energy, something close to his inspiration. That shadowy fragment felt a lot more like his fear affinity.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, though, he felt a surge of Energy erupt from the master Spirit Caster, so potent and brilliant that, once again, Victor had to fight for balance, gripping the edge of the table to the point where the wood creaked and groaned from the pressure of his fingers. He knew Lam and Valla were still down; theyd just begun to gather themselves when this new wave of power wracked the room.

As the initial shock of the Energy surge passed, Victor realized he was feeling something deep in his heart, something that sang to his spirit and made the Energy in his Core roil and churn. He felt endless possibilities and saw the shadowy gloom haunting the periphery of his thoughts fall away, only the brightest paths shining brightly before him. Everything would be all right, of that, he was sure. Edeya would recover, hed find a way to work with Ranish Dar that would still allow for some freedom, and the specters of distant enemies wouldnt find their way to him, not before he was ready. Hah, Victor said as realization dawned on him. Its hope. Hes using hope-attuned Energy to pull Edeya home.

He glanced down to see both Lam and Valla openly weeping, great, wracking sobs of relief and joy, and he knew the Energy was overwhelming them. He turned to the gloomy watcher, noting that

despite the warm, wonderful hope in the air, the specter was still dark, still balefully watching, his dark spear still held ready. It didnt look like it was fading, but Victor held the potion ready; he wouldnt fail in his task. He never had to prove it, thoughwith a suddenness that left him gasping, the flow of hopeful Energy suddenly cut off, and Dar opened his blazing eyes, announcing, Her spirit is whole.