

Victor BK7: Ch31

Book 7: Chapter 31: Apprentice

Ranish Dar reached down and pulled the rune-inscribed circlet off Edeyas head, handing it to Lam. This will only make it harder for her to wake. He took one of his thumbs, massive beside Edeyas much smaller form, and gently smoothed some hair away from her face. Standing close as he was, Victor could see the masters strange, stony flesh bend and compress just like normal skin. It made him wonder why it looked like stone to the eye while behaving like flesh. Would it feel hard if you touched it? Was it resistant to damage, or was it all just a visual artifact of Dars exotic species, whatever that might be? While he speculated, Dar took the warm potion from his grip, and it disappeared into some hidden storage device. He said, She will wake soon. I will give you some space.

Thank you, Lam said, climbing atop one of the tall stools to lean close to Edeyas face, peering intently at her slightly twitching, fluttering eyes. Victor watched Dar move to the other table and take a seat. He still watched them, and when he caught Victors eye, he nodded. Victor knew what the gesture meanttheyd talk after Edeya woke. Victor returned the gesture, then turned back to the others, taking one of Edeyas slender, limp hands. To his surprise, it was much warmer than the last time hed held it. He could feel a change in the flesh, a vibrancy that had been absent before.

Shes in there, he said. Lam looked at him and nodded; she held Edeyas other hand. Valla took hold of Edeyas wrist, stroking it gently with her thumb.

Edeya? Lam said. Wake up, sweet girl. Victor looked from Edeya to Lam, a little surprised by those words. Hed seen Lam show affection to Edeya, knew she was desperate to help her, but the depth of emotion in those words was a little surprising. Clearly, she loved her, but he wasnt sure if it was the love of a sister, a mother, or something altogether different. Of course, he wasnt stupid enough to ask. When Lam gasped, and new tears sprang from her eyes, dripping down her sharp cheekbones, Victor looked back to Edeya and saw that shed opened her eyes. She blinked several times, and her brow creased in confusion.

In a raspy, scratchy whisper, she asked, Where are we?

Youre safe, Dey-dey. Lam leaned forward and pressed herself against the young woman, resting her head on her chest. Valla sniffed, and Victor looked to see tears in her eyes, too. He put his arm over her shoulder and smiled when Edeya squinted his way.

Victor?

He squeezed her hand. Thats right, brat.

Brat? Her voice was hoarse, and she cleared it and swallowed, then added. Youre the brat! She coughed again and peered down at the top of Lams head. What happened?

Lam lifted her head to look with bloodshot, streaming eyes at Edeyas face. What do you remember?

I feel . . . She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head briefly. I feel so weak. I remember floating in darkness. Was I lost at sea? I feel like I was surrounded by water and fog. Her eyes sprang open, and she said, What happened with the fire? I remember we were in a keep. Its all so blurry. Victor was going to have them burn the forest. The undead . . . As she spoke, her voice grew more and more hoarse, and she cut herself off, coughing so violently that Lam sat up, retaking her hand.

Hush. Ill fill you in, but now you should rest.

Excellent advice, Ranish Dar said, his voice loud and sharp like boulders scraping against each other. Take her to your residence. Feed her. Give her a healing draught. Shell be fine, physically, in a day or two.

As her fit subsided, Edeya looked to the voice, and her eyes sprang wide. Her hand gripped Victors like she was about to fall off a cliff, and she looked at him. Victor! Who . . .

Dont worry. Hes a friend.

Ill tell you everything, Lam said, reaching to scoop her arm under Edeyas knees, easily lifting her from the table.

Do you have to carry me? I think I can walk . . . Edeyas words trailed off as Victor released her, and she leaned into Lams chest.

Lam kissed her forehead. Id carry you anywhere, sweet. Youre not heavy.

Victor. Ranish beckoned him over. Well have a talk now. Your companions can await you at their residence. I wont keep you long today.

Ill stay . . . Valla started to say, but Ranish cut her words off with a stern shake of his head.

Ill speak to Victor alone. It was a pleasure to meet you all. Perhaps our paths will cross again. He snapped his finger, and a shimmering, misty bird appeared, swooping and trilling delicate, musical cries. Guide these women to the lower dock and instruct Fregasius to convey them home. The little misty, glowing bird trilled something that sounded almost like words and swooped over to Valla and Lam, circling them, trailing glowing mist that slowly faded into nothing.

Go, Victor said, giving Valla a brief hug. Ill be fine. See you soon. She looked into his eyes for a long moment, then nodded and turned, walking to the door where Lam, Edeya, and the swooping, magical bird waited.

As they walked out, Victor heard Edeyas sleepy voice ask, Who . . . is that Valla? But you have wings!

Ranish interrupted his listening by saying, Come over here, Victor. It is good news that your friend remembers you all.

Shes lost something, though. She should know Valla has wings, and more than a month passed between what she said she last remembered and her . . . injury.

That will come. Be pleased that she can speak and knows your name. Ive seen worse. He pointed to the stool beside his. Sit here. Victor nodded and approached, climbing atop the large stool, just about perfectly sized for his nearly ten-foot frame. We have much to speak about. Youve agreed to enter my service as an apprentice, and I appreciate the consternation this has caused you. Would you like to give voice to your concerns?

Victor wondered if the invitation was a trap. Would Dar use what he said against him? Was a cruel heart lurking in that chest? Was his affable nature with Valla and Lam a show? Hed certainly let his anger flare at least once in Victors presence, and he hadnt exactly been kind to Erd Van. With those

thoughts in mind, Victor decided to hold his cards close to his chest. He shrugged. I was looking forward to some time when I wasn't running from one problem to the next.

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Much of your life has been a trial, hmm? He watched Victor until he nodded. If that weren't true, I wouldn't be interested in mentoring you. It's made you hard in ways that Erd Van will never understand. Looking at you, I can see that you've felt death's talons on your flesh, gripping so tightly that you nearly fell through the veil. Hmm? Victor nodded, images of some of his close calls flashing through his mind—the boss of the dungeon near Greatbone, Rellias lightning-fast rapier, the Nightbrute Prince, a horde of undead reavers, and the sharpest, most painful one, his time beneath Hector's veil star.

Yeah, I guess that's true.

And yet, you sacrifice much for a friend. I can assure you, Erd Van would never do such a thing. Victor didn't respond. He didn't know what Ranish was looking for; did he want Victor to trash-talk Erd? He didn't care enough about the guy to do so. Ranish didn't seem bothered by his reticence. You have much to be proud of; I have the ability to see a great deal about you. Your Cores, for instance. Do you know how rare it is for a non-draconic species to have a breath Core in addition to their primary Energy Core? I can see you've done much to advance your bloodline, too. You've the blood of an elder race in your veins, and not just a hint of it. What's more, I can see that you have acquired a legendary Class. It's not unheard of for an iron-ranker to do that, but it's usually the scion of an ancient family with resources that make even my wealth seem insignificant.

Victor shifted uncomfortably. It was one thing to dread what this guy would put him through, but having him heap praise upon him made him feel decidedly awkward. Was he supposed to say thank you? I had plenty of help.

Hah! Another thing those lapdogs who come crawling round here for scraps wouldn't say. Ranish sighed and stretched his neck, bringing forth loud cracks and pops that sounded like someone snapping pieces of slate in half. I'm a very busy man, Victor. Think of the obligations you have around the worlds where you've traveled and multiply that by a hundred, nay, a thousand. Still, I find I must take time to myself now and then, or I begin to go mad. I begin to react to problems in ways that might seem . . . overzealous. I happen to be enjoying a time like that—some respite from the duties I've created for myself around the worlds, and one of my favorite places to come, when I'm using my time selfishly, is here, to Sojourn.

Victor contemplated his words, thinking about his friends back home, about Olivia and First Landing, about the Ridonne, and even about Zaafor and the Warlord and the promises he'd made to the Degh. He tried to imagine a thousand times as many concerns and failed to wrap his head around the idea. I think I get it.

Well, the reason I'm telling you this is two-fold. One, you should know that demands on your time will always exist, and you'll have to carve space for yourself and your own desires. That problem doesn't go away. Two, you should know that I'll be here, in Sojourn, for perhaps a decade before I get back to my other obligations. When I take time, I take enough to savor it. What that means for you

is that Ill spend some of my recreational time instructing and guiding you, but Ill also send you places to manage tasks that I feel will challenge and instruct you.

Victor thought about his words, forcing himself not to react impulsively. Part of him was glad to hear that Dar was going to be around Sojourn for a while and that he was going to be giving Victor things to do on his own, but another part was utterly freaking out at the mention of ten years and an open-ended hint at getting back to obligations after that. Just how long did this guy expect Victor to work for him? Hed already upset him once that day when hed asked. Hed taken it as a show of disrespect. With that in mind, Victor spoke very evenly, trying to avoid lacing his words with any emotion. Can you give me some idea of how long you expect me to work for you?

Dar sighed heavily, but his eyes didnt flare, and he didnt smash his fist on the table, so Victor felt like hed managed to avoid pissing him off again. Its not a matter of working for me, Victor. Its a matter of learning from me. In the process of which, you will certainly do some tasks that benefit me, but, and I wish you could trust me here, theyll benefit you more. He looked at Victor for a long, measured minute, during which neither of them blinked.

Finally, satisfied with whatever hed read in Victors eyes, he nodded and continued, That said, I am ancient in comparison to you, and I move in a timeframe that likely seems glacial to one so young. In these ten years that I linger in Sojourn, I will relax, contemplate my recent gains, and take amusement in your progress. After that, I will become busy, and our interactions will become less frequent. Decades may pass between our meetings, and during that time, Ill expect you to make progress, following the guidance I give you. The length of this engagement between you and me will depend entirely on your growth. With any luck, there will come a time when I can be proud to name you as my protg, and you will need to strike out on a path of your own making.

So, a long time. Victor tried not to sound glum or even to betray any emotion, but something must have shown on his face because Ranish Dar chuckled and reached over to grip his shoulder.

Is it so bad to learn from a master? What is it that rankles you, Victor? I could list a thousand spirit cultivators who would be singing in the streets for this opportunity.

Victor tried to smile and nodded, then shook his head, his body unsure what his mind wanted. I dont know. Its something in here. He thumped a fist to his chest. Maybe my Quinametzin ancestry or maybe growing up wanting to carve out my own future, but something doesnt like the idea of such a long commitment. Then, theres the issue that Ive already committed myself to other people for things . . .

Such as?

There are people back on Fanwath who depend on me, but, well, I guess I dont necessarily have to live there to help them. If could visit now and then? When Dar graced him with a slight nod, he continued, Theres also this. He lifted his bracer and tapped the pink shard of the Degh ancestor stone. I promised the Degh giants on Zaafor that Id return and mend their ancestor stone, and, he grinned fiercely, I owe the Warlord there an ass kicking.

Dar let go of Victors shoulder and pressed one of his thick, stony fingers against the pink crystal. Very, very interesting! He laughed and shook his head. You think Id deny you such glory? No, lad, that would be a good lesson for you, if nothing else. As I said, Ill take some amusement from your progress these next ten years, and during that time, if you feel ready, Ill quite enjoy seeing you take on a warlord in a barbaric world.

Id also like to hunt down the bruja who stole Edeyas spirit. Shes on a world filled with undead, and some of them are thousands of years old. I guess Im not really ready to go there and start throwing shit around, but . . .

But you will be! Elder gods! It feels good to talk to someone with some fucking spirit! Victors eyes opened in startled amazement, and he answered Dars smile with a fierce grin. The master nodded, narrowed his blazing eyes, and said, Enough. I must learn more about you, so Ill give you your first . . . learning task, shall we call it?

Victor nodded, still a little dumbstruck after hearing the ancient, powerful being cuss. Sure.

Those like me who fancy themselves the lords of Sojourn often partake in competitions with each other. One such contest is a dungeon where we can send our iron-ranked students, children, or sponsored recruits to compete with each other in a dangerous, randomly generated series of challenges. Does that sound interesting?

Sure, but how will that help you learn about . . .

We will see everything that happens in the dungeon. We designed it through the use of the System stone, so we have some control over the things that happen there. While its dangerous, there are safeguards built in. Youll be given a Lifesavera magical device that will transport you to safety if you appear to be near death. Its not perfect; if someone were obliterated in an instant, the device would not save them, but for someone as sturdy as you, I dont see much risk in that.

Will I have to fight other, uh, participants?

There are no rules in the dungeon, but you could just as easily ally with someone.

What about Valla, or, I have another friend, a dragonkin . . .

No, no, Victor. Ill not sponsor another; its quite costly, and your performance will affect my influence in Sojourn. I have confidence in you, but not so much your friends. I mean no offense, but youre on a different level than your sweet lady friend. As for your dragonkin friend, I can only offer cautiondragons are dangerous beings.

How long do I have?

A new challenge begins on the seventeenth of each month. You have several days to relax. He pushed his stool back and stood. Now, Ill give you two assignments to work on. One, he produced a closed, leather-bound book, use this Farscribe book to write to me about yourself. Your life, your greatest adventures, your abilities and spells. When Victor took the book, he nodded and said, Two, acquire a dwelling in Sojourn. I take it youre staying at an inn? When Victor nodded, he continued, Ill be helping you build a cultivation chamber, so youll need your own place. It would be best if it had access to the actual soil of this small planetdont purchase or rent an apartment.

Okay. Victor felt a little numb, a little shell-shocked. How had things moved so quickly? Hed somehow agreed to spend many years helping and learning from this guy, and now he was getting signed up to compete in a free-for-all competition in a dungeon and being sent to buy a house. Uh . . .

What is it? Any questions? Ill be in touch. If you see my spirit bird, allow it to chirp in your ear, and youll hear its words.

Um, Victors mind felt scattered, so he blurted the only question that came to his tongue, I have some magical things to identify. Could you recommend . . .

Hah! No, boy. I have things to teach you, the first of which is to figure things out on your own when you can. You may leave. As I said, Ill be in touch with the details for your entry into the Vault of Valor.

Vault of . . .

Thats the name of the dungeon. Now, get going. I have an important meeting. He snapped his fingers, and the spirit bird reappeared. Show him to Fregasius. Hes to convey him home. The bird swooped around Victor, rushed to the door, and commenced flitting about, waiting for him. Victor turned to follow it, but Ranish Dar spoke again, Victor, wait.

Victor turned back to him. Yes?

Take this, he flicked something small that glinted like silver his way, and Victor snatched it out of the air. It was a signet ring a broad silver band with a black gemstone inlaid with a flickering, golden sun that seemed to burn in the depths of the facet. Wear it. It will grant you certain privileges in this tower of the Arcanum, and, should you run into trouble in Sojourn, people will know to alert me so that I might come to your aid. Do not use it to curry favor in my name, however. He stared hard at Victor until he nodded. Good. Take some time to relax and live your life, Victor. Youre going to be very busy soon.

Book 7: Chapter 32: Success

It turned out that Fregasius was some sort of being of magic and shadow, fully enveloped by dark robes and a hooded cloak. Victor could see two pale, dim orbs in the depths of the hood that must have been his eyes, but he never spoke in the short time Victor spent with him. When the flitting magical bird chirped into his ear, Fregasius stepped onto a rune-inscribed silver disc about eight feet in diameter and beckoned for Victor to follow. As soon as he set foot upon it, the disk flared with blue Energy, and the next thing Victor knew, he was standing in front of the inn where he and his companions had rented rooms.

Shit, he muttered, completely taken off guard. When hed seen the disc, he thought it might be some kind of flying platform, not a teleportation platform! Outside the inn, pedestrian traffic was light, but plenty of people were going about their evening business, and they gave him a bit of a wide berth, likely due to his sudden appearance, not because of any threat they felt. Victor made a fist with his right hand and looked at Ranish Dars signet ring. It was cool, he supposed, to have it, but it also rankled something in him, almost like Dar was laying claim to his property. He shook his head and lowered his fist.

No point crying about it now. He appreciated the comfort Lifedrinkers harness gave him, holding her out of the way on his back, but he also missed resting his hand on her silvery axe head when he spoke to himself; it made it easier to shrug off any concern about how his muttered dialogue made him look to any casual observers. Sighing, he turned and made his way up to the room he shared with Valla. When he arrived, he found a note pinned to the door with a silver hairpin:

V,

Were in Lams room. Come see us when youre back!

-V

Victor chuckled at the note from V to V, then turned and walked down the hall until he came to Lams door. The handle was locked, but when he knocked on the wood, it opened in just a few seconds, revealing Vallas hopeful face. When she saw him, she pulled it wide and veritably jumped into his arms, squeezing him around the neck. We were worried Ranish had duplicitous motives for sending us off without you.

Nah. Hes a serious guy, but I think he shoots pretty straight. When she let go of his neck, he handed her the hairpin hed pulled from their door. Im saving that note. Might get it made into a tattoo, he said, pulling her a little closer to kiss her gently on the forehead. Well? he asked, pulling back. How is she?

Vallas smile fell away, and she whispered, Inconsolable! Shes only level seven now! Also, she broke into a sobbing fit when she found out youd agreed to be Ranish Dars apprentice in exchange for helping her. You should speak to her.

Victor groaned, shaking his head. Hed hoped Edeya would only lose a single tier at most, dropping down into the twenties from her recent acquisition of level thirty. All right. He stepped into the room, and Valla closed the door with a solid thunk. He could hear womens voices from the bedroom and walked that way.

Valla didnt follow him. Ill wait out here. Tell Lam I need something from her. When Victor looked at her with a raised eyebrow, she added, You need to speak to her alone.

Sheesh. Why do I feel like Im going into an arena fight?

She chuckled, squinting at him. Be brave! Youll be fine.

Victor looked at her for a long second, savoring every detail, from her narrowed, amused eyes to the gleam of reflected light on her wings. Then, he nodded and went into the bedroom, where he found Lam sitting on the side of the bed beside a blanket-covered Edeya. They were speaking quietly, but he picked up a snippet of Edeyas last words, muttered in a bitter tone.

. . . forward to going back to the Blue Deep and hunting forest Yeksa trying to get my Class again. When her eyes fell on Victor, though, they opened wide, and she threw her blanket off and tried to climb out of bed. Lam restrained her, pressing on her shoulder, apparently easily holding her down. In frustration, Edeya cried, Let me up! I just want to hug him! Lam relented, sighing and shaking her head.

You need to rest . . . Despite her words, she trailed off and smiled when she saw how furiously Edeya charged over the soft gray carpet to slam into Victor. He laughed and gently pressed her close, trying not to ruffle her delicate dragonfly wings. They flared brightly, shimmering with sparkling blue Energy, dripping motes that fell at their feet, forming a misty cloud around their ankles.

Hey, hey, he said softly. Youre squeezing me like Im going off to prison. Im not going anywhere. She kept squeezing, and Victor laughed, Jeez, youre going to break my ribs! The truth was, he could

hardly feel the pressure, but he could see her straining and didnt want to highlight her lack of strength. Damn! Look at the Energy pouring out of those wings! Are they always like that?

Its enhanced by emotion, Lam answered for her.

Edeya finally spoke, loosening her hold on him, Thank you, Victor. Thank you so much! Lam told me everything. I . . . Im starting to remember that night. Just flashes of horrible things . . . that womans evil laugh! She shuddered against him and, frustrated with his inability to look her in the face, Victor channeled some Energy into his Alter Self Spell, reducing his size further, down to something like six feet so that he could hold her at arms length and peer into her beautiful blue, faintly-glowing eyes.

Dont think about that shit, all right? Those assholes are dead or gone, and theyll never get anywhere near you again.

Shes still out there, Victor. I . . . Again, she stammered, but she forced herself to soldier on, completing the thought with wide eyes, staring into Victors soul. I have faint memories, like glimpses of a dream. She spoke to me in my prison, whispered terrible promises . . .

Dammit! Stop giving that bruja power. She cant touch you now. Shes a trillion miles away, and theres no one in her whole fucking world who can get to you here. He gently nudged her toward the bed and helped her back into her spot. Lam stood and pulled the blanket back over her, and then Victor said, Um, Lam, Valla wanted to speak to you.

Oh? She narrowed her eyes at Victor, then glanced at Edeya and nodded. Ill be right out there, sweet.

I know. Edeya sniffed and offered her a smile. Victor sat down where Lam had been and took Edeyas small, slender hand. Roots, your hands are rough! She laughed, and the genuine amusement in her eyes looked good on her.

Youre going to be fine, Victor said, as though hed just come to that realization.

She groaned, and the amusement faded, replaced by fresh moisture as tears sprang into her eyes. Im so weak! I lost my Class; Im back to childrens levels!

Eh, I wasnt much higher than that when we met. It doesnt take that long to get up to where you were . . .

Only my entire life! She pulled her hand out of his, made a fist, and thumped him on the thigh. Her knuckles were light, and he barely registered the impact.

That was the first time. Now you have resources and friends. Youve got an advanced bloodline! This is good, Edeya. Youre going to get different Class options, and I bet theyll be a hell of a lot better than the first time through. Didnt Lam tell you? Ranish Dar said there are rich, powerful people who would pay good money for a second chance at Class selection.

Edeya exhaled a big, shuddering sigh and, to Victors surprise, chuckled again. She tried. I havent been very reasonable. What about you, though? What about what you had to promise that giant . . . stone man? She hesitated before she said stone, and it was Victors turn to chuckle.

Hes crazy looking, isnt he?

Again, Edeya went from near tears to giggling, and she nodded. He looked more like a monster than a man.

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Thats just because you didnt hear him speak much. Hes very, very powerful, Edeya. Dont worry about me, all right? Of course, I dont like being pushed into it, but learning from him will probably be good for me in the long run.

I just feel so guilty. If I was stronger; if I could have fought her off . . . Lam said she almost killed her, too. If Kethelket hadnt . . .

Didnt I tell you to stop thinking about that shit? Victor growled and took her hand again, squeezing it. Think my hands got hard like this cause I sit around moping about the fights I lost?

Edeyas eyes narrowed, and he couldnt tell if she was getting ready to laugh or yell. She settled for calling him out on his bullshit. Lam said you moped around for about a month after the final battle.

Victor laughed. Fair enough. You got me. Okay, so do you wanna compare screw-ups? You got caught by surprise by a Death Caster with thirty levels on you. I walked into a trap because I was too full of myself. He shrugged. So, yeah, you can be mad, but not at yourself. Got it?

She nodded. Ive got it.

Victor smiled and reached up to brush some lingering moisture off her cheek. Now, lets talk about how youre going to get some levels quickly, huh?

#

Darren gazed upon his newly formed Core and basked in the pride of his accomplishment. He could hardly believe hed done it, could scarcely believe that the swirling ball of crackling red Energy was his. The process had been tedious, requiring some leaps of faith and deep contemplation, but, in the end, hed done it, pulling his Energy into the correct shape and infusing it with the idea of chaotic lightning. Where before hed had an amorphous blob of golden, placid Energy, he now had a swirling, elliptical storm of wild, red lightning in his Core. It seemed richer, deeper, and more potent despite the amount of reported Energy being the same on his status sheet. Before they faded or he accidentally sent them away, he looked at his System messages again:

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Wildarc Cultivation Drill Basic.*****

*****Congratulations! You have formed a new Core: Wildarc Class Base 1.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new affinity: Lightning 8.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new affinity: Chaos 7.4.*****

He felt an overwhelming sense of pride seeing those messages and wished he could save them somehow or share them with Lesh. As they began to fade, though, Darren sighed and pulled up his status sheet:

Status

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

-

Level:

1

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 1

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

97/97

Strength:

6

Vitality:

7

Dexterity:

5

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

9

Will:

3

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

-

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Wildarc Cultivation Drill

Basic

Spells:

-

-

He didnt know how impressive it might look to anyone else, but to him, it was a damn sight better to see that he no longer had blanks where his Core was listed. It didnt hurt that the tome hed been studying and the process of building his Core had granted him a cultivation drill. If he hadnt listened to his colleagues back in First Landing going on and on about their levels and Energy, he wouldnt have a clue what that meant. Still, he had listened to them and knew he now had a way to build up his Energy reserves and, hopefully, level up his Core.

He was still sitting, legs crossed before him, in front of the big bay windows, and he looked out at the beautiful lights in the nighttime city of Sojourn. It was, literally, magicala view that would rival a Manhattan penthouse for sheer impressiveness. The crystal towers of the city center looked like the fingers of gods sticking up from the glittering streets. Magical conveyances filled the night sky, all lit up with one magical light or another. Some glowed like faint neon roses; others flickered like rainbow bottle rockets as they zoomed hither and yon. God, Im glad I came with them, he muttered, feeling something like contentment for the first time in many, many years.

He was startled from his nightgazing when the hotel room door opened and shut with a thud. Fosterling! Lesh boomed. How goes your toil?

Darren sprang to his feet, his knees almost buckling from the sudden straightening after being crossed for hours. Lesh! Er, Elder Lesh! I did it! I made a Core! Darren stumbled forward, almost falling to the carpet, but gathered himself as he walked toward the door and the imposing dragonkin.

I knew you would, fosterling. Youre a member of my household now; failure was impossible.

I . . . Darren suddenly felt a wave of emotion he hadnt expected. It was something he couldnt quite explain, something like pride but differentsofter, more . . . emotional. Thank you, Elder.

Well? Tell me about your Core.

I successfully created a Wildarc Core, Elder. I also learned a cultivation drill in the process.

Excellent! Not many can say the same. Thats something to take pride in! Youll be gaining levels in no time. So? You have affinities for lightning and chaos, yes?

Yes! I think theyre high, too. My lightning is . . .

Stop there, fosterling. I appreciate your trust, but you must know that the numbers the System puts on your affinities are things you should hold close to your chest. I will hear them if you trust me; youve already shared with me your affinities, so I know much that could harm you already. Still, keep such information well-guarded. Only share them with people you fear no betrayal from, only with people who wont spread your secrets.

Darren stood only a few feet from the huge man, and he could feel something different about him, something like a palpable, heavy heat radiating from him. Was that his Energy? His aura? Darren wondered if he was more sensitive now that he had a Core of his own. He nodded and smiled, clasping his hands before himself nervously. He wanted to share! He was proud of what hed done. Would Lesh think him stupid for doing so? Despite his fear, Darren nodded and said, I trust you, Elder Lesh.

Tell me, then.

My Lightning affinity is eight, and my chaos is seven-point-two.

Lesh coughed and then chuckled, shaking his big reptilian head. Those are excellent numbers, Darren. Very high, by any worlds standard. Youre going to work great magics one day. Suddenly, a small cask was in Leshs hand, and he moved across the room, sitting before the big windows on the ground near the spot Darren had previously occupied. This calls for celebration. Well drink to your success. Sit. I also have news for you.

Darren followed and sat beside him, accepting the mug of pungent, eye-watering alcohol Lesh poured for him. News?

Lord Victor has succeeded in his quest to aid Edeya. She is awake and whole.

Oh? Thats great! Darren looked out the window, and a wistful expression crossed his face. Does that mean were leaving soon?

I think not. Lesh reached over, clicked his mug against Darrens, and said, A toast to your success! Frakgrakshra! The last word sounded like Lesh was either choking or growling, and Darren winced at the volume of the word. Lesh laughed. Its a toast from my home. It basically means that we enjoy the marrow of our enemies bones.

Darren chuckled nervously, licked his lips, and said, Ill drink to that. Of course, the liquor was potent and burned all the way down, sending him into a coughing fit until his face was beet red. Still, when it passed, he had a delightful buzz, and the view out the window looked even more beautiful. Were not leaving?

No. The young Ghelli princess suffered a great loss of Energy in the process of her recovery. Victor and the others think this city offers too many opportunities for her to leave so soon. More than that, Lord Victor has new obligations to a great master here. We may be living in Sojourn for a while.

Despite himself, Darren took another drink of the harsh liquor. This time, it didn't choke him, and he noted some of the spices he thought he tasted something like cinnamon and a weird floral aftertaste. As the warm, euphoric buzz intensified, he stared out the window, watching a soaring silver and green bird that seemed to be made of living light. When it faded from view, he said, I think I'm glad.

As you should be. I never could have dreamed of gaining my first levels in a place so rich. I have bargained with Victor on your behalf. He's agreed to allow you to accompany Edeya into one of the many dimensional dungeons in this world.

A dungeon?

Lesh nodded, grinning and drinking his booze. Darren had, of course, heard of such things. He'd heard plenty of stories about Morgan Hall and his adventures prior to coming to First Landing. He'd had to sit through many speculative conversations and meetings about the System and its strange penchant for challenging the people who lived under its rule. Something was different now, however. For the first time, he was excited about the idea of leveling. He couldn't say he liked the thought of crawling through a dark maze filled with monsters, but there had to be a price for gaining levels, spells, skills, and Energy, right? Besides, if Victor sent Edeya into a dungeon, he'd ensure she was ready. Even if he didn't like Darren, he'd probably be safe with her, wouldn't he? Did you say she's a princess?

Ah, nothing official. She just seems like one to me. Don't you think she's beautiful?

Um, sure. I mean, she seems kind of wan and sickly, but maybe if she weren't on death's door . . .

Hah! Lesh clapped him on the back, and Darren sloshed some of his drink onto the carpet. That's right! You've only ever seen her as a spiritless ghoul. You'll see what I mean. Lesh kicked his feet out and leaned back. I'm pleased by your progress, Darren. I think your growth will be entertaining. I just need to convince Lord Victor to help me improve, too. I hope he shares some of the wealth of knowledge he gains from the great master he's now bound to.

Darren nodded, sipping his drink and mimicking Lesh's posture. I'm sure he will, Elder Lesh. I'm sure he will.

Book 7: Chapter 33: The Vault

Three days after Ranish Dar healed Edeya's spirit, Victor woke early in the morning, and his mind wouldn't let him fall back asleep. He slipped from his bed, donned some comfortable clothes, and picked up the leather shoulder satchel where he'd stowed the dark-stone crown and the globe of ivid royal jelly. He stared for a long moment at Valla's sleeping form, a stupid smile on his face. Despite her wings, she looked small and peaceful, and he savored the serene expression she bore as she lay curled under the fluffy white comforter, her head buried in an equally luxurious pillow. After several long seconds, soaking in the sight, he quietly slipped out of the bedroom and left a note for her on their suites dining table.

Valla,

Gone to do some shopping - back before lunch.

-Victor

He left the hotel unarmored, but Lifedrinker hung comfortably in her harness, and he wasn't really worried about a fight without his wyrm-scale vest; he'd grown much sturdier since Tes made it for

him. It wasn't that he didn't think it helped. It was just that anything that couldn't cut through it wasn't likely to kill him very easily, especially if he berserked. Naturally, he'd rather not get cut or scraped or stabbed, but, for a shopping trip, he felt comfort was worth the risk. He'd picked out a merchant from the map's guidebook the night before and hurriedly made his way toward the address, following the little line on the crystal tablet, chuckling at how much it reminded him of GPS.

After ten minutes of his long strides through little to no traffic, he approached the building just as the sun began to rise, sending the distant crystal towers into a jaw-dropping spectacle of orange, yellow, and red shimmers. The artificer's shop was a long, narrow structure made of plain, brown brick, but it looked well-maintained, and the sign that hung over the black iron door looked like a piece of artwood carved into the shape of a sleeping dragon painted turquoise and gold, and inscribed with the words, Slevensor's Fine Enchantments.

When he pulled on the cold, iron handle, the door didn't budge. Of course, Victor sighed. Just because he couldn't sleep didn't mean the whole city would wake up for him. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned, looking up and down the street, wondering if any nearby businesses were open, hoping to find someplace to kill some time. He saw smoke rising from a chimney on the building at the corner and started walking that way, hoping he'd spy a bakery or restaurant. He'd only taken two steps, though, when a shutter clattered open above him, and a sharp, feminine voice called out, Who comes calling at this hour?

Victor turned, looking up, and saw a human-sized bird looking out at him. Bird was the wrong term; she had a beak and downy yellow feathers, but he could also see her arms and hands on the window sill. She wore a gauzy blue robe over her feather-covered but humanoid torso. Oh, hello, he said, shielding his eyes from the rising sun as he peered at her.

Well, are you here for business or something more sinister? After she finished speaking, she made a funny cooing sound in her throat.

Business.

Come on, then. I'll open the door. Just finished my breakfast. Before he could reply, she slammed the shutters closed. Victor stepped back to the door and waited. A couple of minutes later, he heard the locks click, and then the same bird-woman pushed the door open and beckoned him in. Hurry now, don't let the morning chill in.

Victor had resized himself to a comfortable six and a half feet and easily slipped into the shop, allowing her to pull the door closed. The interior was a lot like he'd expected: lots of wooden shelves built into the walls and lots of curios, figurines, books, and knick-knack-looking objects all over the place. The proprietress beckoned him to follow her to the counter, where she hopped atop a stool, trilled a pleased-sounding note, and asked, What can I help you with?

A few things, I suppose. I'm Victor, by the way.

Tria is what the beakless call me. Again, she chirped a funny, pleasant sound, bobbing her head, and Victor wondered if that was a thing avian species did because they couldn't express themselves with smiles and frowns.

Nice to meet you. Um, first, I'd like you to have a look at an item. I think it has a spirit in it, or maybe it's just conscious, but I didn't want to bond with it until I knew more. He lifted the crown from his belt and set it on the wooden counter with a thunk. Tria immediately recoiled, waving her feather-bedecked arm back and forth in front of her.

I'll not touch that, but I can see its auras and read its runes from here. You truly have no idea what it is?

Victor shrugged. I took it from the corpse of an undead son of a bitch. He frowned and added, Actually, I killed him, then found his corpse in another place with this on his head.

That makes sense. It has a wounded, mad spirit within. Moreover, the runes indicate that this is a lifeward relic—more precisely, an undead lifeward relic. It's a brutal, crude enchantment, too. Whoever created it was new to the concept, I'd wager. I can assure you that anyone whose undying life was preserved by this relic would have had a long, painful recovery. You say his body was dead, though, when you found him?

Yeah. Victor sighed and fidgeted for a minute, rubbing his chin. I, uh, pulled his heart out before he could disappear. I also destroyed a piece of his spirit that was in the heart. Would that matter?

The woman's large black and yellow eyes widened further, and she shrank back from him. Elder gods! Such savagery!

He had it coming. Victor shrugged and put his hands in his pockets, trying not to look threatening. I'm not a madman; you can relax.

Whatever the circumstances, yes, I believe what you did to the being who wore this crown surely interrupted his reconstitution. Undoubtedly, it's his damaged spirit that dwells within it. Tell me, did you not find the crown's anchor?

Anchor?

A paired artifact where the crown would bring the wearer when it saved his life.

Ah! Victor pulled the heavy key still inside the marble-sized silver ball from around his neck and set it on the counter. If I twist this key, that little ball of silver expands to make a round room. Inside that is where I found the corpse and the crown.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Lovely! Tria leaned forward, making tiny cooing sounds as she peered at the key. This is something altogether different. Where the crown is crude and brutal in its function, this is elegant and powerful. It's Fae-forged silver and of a quality, I'm not ashamed to admit, I wouldn't be able to match. I have difficulty believing this is the anchor to that ghastly crown. Can we open it?

Victor picked up the key and looked around the shop, frowning. I don't think it'll fit in here.

To my workshop this way. She stepped through the curtain hanging behind her, and Victor followed, snatching the crown off the counter on his way. The room behind the shop was very

spacious, with high ceilings and workbenches on three of the four walls. Tria pointed to some wooden tables near the center and said, If we move those to the side, will there be enough room?

I think so. It filled the top of a stone tower when I found it, but it couldnt have been more than ten paces across. Victor measured the workshop with his strides, nodding when he reached fourteen before he could touch the back workbench. Yeah, I think its plenty big.

Tria lingered by the door. Please proceed to open it, then. Ill watch from here. Victor nodded, stepped to the center of the room, and placed the little silver marble on the ground. Holding it in place with his finger and thumb, he twisted the key and stepped back. Brilliant, silver light and hissing steam erupted from the little device as it rapidly expanded, filling the center of the workshop as it grew into the room-sized, silvery, rune-etched, spherical vault. When it stopped growing and steaming, the door with the key protruding from it faced Victor and Tria. She began to make that cooing sound, rushing forward to run her delicate fingers over the surface of the rune-etched metal. I wasnt wrong!

About?

This is Fae-craftthis metal, these wondrous designs! This is, indeed, a vault, Victor. A portable vault made for the storage of items most dear. I shudder to think of the power required to open this chamber without the key. She gestured to the key. May I? Victor nodded, his mind running away with her words. Was the Fae-craft vault capable of holding the ived royal jelly? He wanted to ask her but worried about her reaction when she saw the treasure. What if she coveted it? What if she sold the information of his possession to someone more powerful who would want it? While he pondered the idea, Tria opened the door and stepped into the sphere.

Almost immediately, she cried, I can see the crowns anchor. He followed her in and saw she was pointing at the hanging red crystal, squinting at the baleful red light it cast. This doesnt belong. Nor does that silver chair. Look there, at the chairs feet; the silver clearly doesnt match the Fae-forged silver. Its crudely designed, too, in comparison to the spheres elegance.

Victor nodded. Yeah, well, the guys corpse was in the chair, under the gem, so maybe he installed it for that purpose. He frowned, lifting the crown from his belt again. Is this thing valuable? Could it save me the way it tried to save Dunstan?

Dunstan?

The name of the undead guy.

Oh, I see. No, Im afraid not. She chirped softly and shivered, ruffling her feathers up and down her arms. Not unless you wanted to become a member of the unliving. As for its value, Im sure you could find a Death Caster or even one of the openly undead here in Sojourn whod pay a tidy sum for it and the anchor. She pointed at the glowing, round jewel.

I have a better idea. Victor reached up and pulled on the red, crystal globe, putting more and more pressure on the silvery chain it hung from, smiling as the soft weld of molten silver separated from the harder metal of the dome. When it came free, he set the strange, glowing artifact atop the throne, then placed the crown beside it. Stand back. As Tria scurried away, her dexterous, taloned feet clicking on the metal, he cast Honor the Spirits and a wild grin spread on his face as the white flames of his spirit magic took the throne, the crown, and the red globe away to the Spirit Plane.

What did . . . Tria rushed forward, little clicking chirps sounding from her throat. What did you do?

I gave them to my ancestors.

What? She looked at him with wide, stunned eyes. You destroyed them? For superstition?

Suddenly, Victor's rage-attuned Energy flared into his pathways, and he felt his aura slipping from his control as his Quinametzin haughtiness asserted itself. He seemed to swell with the power, and his eyes flared with dangerous, red Energy as he snapped, My ancestors would not be pleased to hear those words!

Tria shrank back and ducked her head, waving her feathery arms over her head. Apologies, Lord! I spoke hastily, shocked at the loss of those materials, that's all. I beg you, forget I said such a thoughtless thing. Her obvious fear and obsequious behavior were like a splash of cold water to Victor. He hated that he'd scared her and was furious that he'd let his control slip. He yanked his rage back into his Core and clamped down on his aura like an iron vise.

No, Tria, I'm the one who's sorry. I didn't mean to let your words upset me like that. It's my bloodline sometimes I lose my grip on it.

She slowly straightened, dropping her arms to her side and squinting her big round eyes up at him. She was probably only about five feet tall, and clearly, any levels she'd gained had come from crafting. He felt like a total asshole for frightening her. May I ask you a question without enraging you? Her voice was trepiditous, and he could hear the nervousness in the little clicking coos she made after speaking.

Yeah, of course. I'm paying attention now; I won't lose it again.

Are you young?

Yeah. I guess so. In years, anyway.

She nodded and took a hesitant step closer. I think I understand then. My Class allows me to see more about people and objects than the average person, and I can see you've advanced your bloodline greatly. That's always harder the younger you are. As one gains the power of a potent species without much time between ranks, it's sometimes difficult to come to grips with it. In that case, I commend you for the control you've thus far displayed.

Thank you. By the way, I appreciate your help in identifying the crown and helping me understand this vault better. I'm happy to pay a fee for that help. I have another question, too, if you wouldn't mind.

I've done nothing worthy of payment today, Victor. I happily share my knowledge with clients in the hopes of building a relationship. I only ask that you please think of my shop first if you need magical goods.

Done. Victor gestured to the room, no longer tinged with the baleful red light of the crystal orb but instead seemingly lit from an invisible ambient source in a soft silvery glow. Can this vault hold more powerful artifacts than my other storage devices? My rings, for example? Victor held up his right hand, wriggling his fingers and the storage rings.

Oh, yes! This vault is much, much, much sturdier! More than that, it's safe to put sapient beings within this vault and then reduce its size. Even a living person could sit in this room while you

carried it about on that chain around your neck. She paused and made a strange, tremulous clicking coo. Well, only until they ran out of air. This space would be quite tightly sealed when closed.

Really? Victor looked around the vault's interior at the softly illuminated silver walls utterly covered with strange, engraved runes and patterns. It can?

Yes! If you have the knowledge to understand them, Ill show you the enchantments that make it possible. Whoever earned or stole this vault from the Fae had a wondrous treasure on their hands. I can create something similar, but nothing this large or this sturdy.

Victor smiled. Im not an enchanter. He tried to think of a way to ask about the ivid royal jelly without putting himself or it at risk and decided it wasnt worth it. If she coveted what he had, she was likely too weak or fearful to take him on, but there was no telling what sort of powerful people she might know. Instead, he asked, Is there any way to tell if something I put into this vault is harming it?

She made a different sort of bubbling, cooing sound, clearly a laugh, and shook her head. If you had something that could damage this vault, Id be astonished. Nothing Ive ever worked with could harm it, and Ive assisted some of the masters deep into their lustrous veils, crafting special artifacts, one of which was so potent that I had to ward myself against it lest I turn to dust in its presence.

Even so, is there any way to tell if Ive damaged it?

Certainly. The walls of this sphere will begin to tarnish and then crack. If you see that happening, remove the item, and the vault will repair itself given enough time.

Victor sighed and nodded, delighted by the unexpected turn of events. Hed thought hed have to begin a tedious search for a container capable of holding the royal jelly, only to find the thing hed been carrying around his neck for weeks and weeks was exactly what he needed. That, and being rid of the dark crown, were like two weights off his shoulders. He gestured to the door. Shall we? Before I leave, Id like to look at some of the things you have for sale.

Of course! She preceded him out of the vault, and before he followed, Victor lowered the leather satchel containing the royal jelly to the floor, setting it just inside the doorway. Once outside, he swung the door closed with a heavy, satisfying clang and then turned the key all the way to the left, locking it and reducing the room back down to marble-sized. He put the chain over his head and let the priceless talisman hang beneath his shirt. Feeling much lighter without his earlier burdens, he followed Tria back into her storefront. She perched atop her stool and asked, What sorts of things do you need?

I have a couple of very low-level friends who are going to have their first adventure in a dungeon soon. I thought I should buy them some supplies. A weapon for one, maybe some armor or magical clothing, some helpful trinkets, and maybe an expanding shelter. He chuckled and shook his head. Nothing like my vault, but, yeah, a sturdy tent or . . .

A cozy little cabin thats bigger on the inside than out? Something they might erect after a difficult battle?

Now youre speaking my language! Victor leaned his elbow on the counter, grinning. Truthfully, Im only really concerned about one of them, but I cant very well bring her a bunch of equipment and

leave the other guy empty-handed, right? I guess the better he does, the more help he'll be for her, so . . . Victor let his words trail off and shrugged.

I think we can come up with a wonderful beginners kit for both of them, and it shouldn't cost you too much, either. Let's start by talking about armor. I've got some vests with shimmersteel rings you should take a look at, and then . . .

Book 7: Chapter 34: A Brief Respite

The few days following his visit to Trias shop were some of the best days Victor could ever remember. Reflecting on that time, he knew it was because he spent it with Valla, and they didn't feel like there was anything they had to do, no emergency they had to handle. Nothing felt like life or death, and they took their time sleeping in, touring villas and townhomes for sale, eating at restaurants, and forgetting about everyone else's problems for a while. He'd purchased some low-tier dungeoneering gear, as Tria called it, for Darren and Edeya, and then he'd left them in Lam and Lesh's capable hands while he worked on his first quest for Ranish Dar: procuring property in Sojourn.

Even after buying a few excellent items for the two low-level members of his entourage, he still had roughly a million Energy beads, but Victor quickly learned that a million beads wouldn't go very far in Sojourn. He also learned that there were well-established money-lending institutions in the city and that he, being tier-six and having an epic-tier racial status, would easily qualify for enormous loans. All he had to do was sign his soul away.

That's how he thought of it, at least, but even he'd admit he was being hyperbolic. The loans were structured in such a way that should he miss a payment, he'd start to notice a tiny draw on his Energy, a siphoning of his Core. If he continued to miss them, the draw would increase, and that process would repeat until he either became a living battery, feeding the bank a constant supply of Energy, or he paid the loan balance.

To Victor, the process sounded like glorified slavery, and he refused to consider it. Valla was in his corner, and so the property broker they'd found in the guidebook relented and began showing them homes that fit his budget. They weren't exactly palatial. In the end, on the third day of touring, Victor settled on a small villa in an older part of Sojourn about an hour's walk from the downtown crystal towers, and that was taking into account the sidewalks that sped a person's movement.

The villa was sandwiched between two others, and they all shared courtyard walls, but those walls were thick, made of sturdy stone, and twelve feet tall. Once inside, it felt private. The villa was old but well-made, built from whitewashed stone of some sort, and all the floors were tiled in a way that reminded Victor very much of Saltillo, so much so that he almost immediately agreed to the asking price of eight hundred thousand beads.

The home's layout was simple, with a kitchen, dining room, parlor, three bedrooms, and a communal bath. Victor's favorite part of the place was the basement, or cellar, which was spacious, cool, and fully lined with the same stone that made up the home. He figured it would be good enough for whatever Ranish Dar had planned with regard to a cultivation chamber.

Valla loved the courtyard and garden. It was clear that the previous owner had possessed a green thumb, and many of the mature plants bore fruit and flowers year-round in the city's mild climate. A small fountain trickled musically amid a tiny hidden nook surrounded by high, flowering shrubs, and it felt almost like a secret getaway from the rest of the city and even the home itself.

When Lam heard Victor had bought a property in Sojourn, she, of course, felt like she had to as well, but Victor talked her out of it. His home only had three bedrooms, but he reminded her about his travel home, saying hed set it up in the courtyard. That opened a great deal more space for the group, and he reasoned it was silly for her to buy property when she had so much building and governing to get back to in the Free Marches.

Lam had agreed, and so, thats where Victor and the others were, sitting outside in the garden on comfortable camp chairs with full bellies and glasses full of wine, when Ranish Dars magical messenger bird flitted over the wall and swooped its way through the garden until it found him. When it fluttered near his ear, it chirped so that only he could discern its words, Read the message in the masters Farscribe book! It didnt wait around for an answer. Rather, it streaked away into the night sky like a bottle rocket.

What was it? Valla asked, and everyone else stared at him with wide, expectant eyes, even Darren.

I, uh, must have a message from Dar. Victor quickly scanned through his storage ring for the appropriate Farscribe book and summoned it forth. He turned to the most recently filled page, just past the dense dissertation about his abilities and training that hed written for Ranish Dar. On the new page, he found a short, elegantly scribed message:

Victor,

The time is nigh. Report to the World Hall at midnight.

-Ranish

Huh. Short and sweet. He sighed, stretching his neck until it popped like an inch-thick branch being snapped. Guess I have to report to that dungeon tonight.

Dungeon? Edeya asked, shooting to her feet. I thought that was just me and Darren! Shed grown quite comfortable with the idea over the last few days, and, according to Lesh, she and Darren had been working hard on their basic combat abilities, though Edeya was miles ahead of the one-time politician.

Nah, my new, uh, shit, what do I call that guy? Teacher? Im not calling him master. Anyway, he wants me to go into this competition dungeon so he can watch my performance and, I guess, earn some clout in the city if I kick some ass.

Edeya looked from Lam to Lesh to Valla, scowling. You knew about this?

Yes . . . Lam started to say.

Why didnt you tell me? She looked incensed, and Victor couldnt quite figure out why, especially half-inebriated as he was. When Lam frowned and didnt reply immediately, she whirled on Victor. Why didnt you tell me?

It didnt come up! You were busy with Lam or Lesh whenever we talked about it. Whats the . . .

So you would have just slipped away tonight if I hadnt been here when that magic bird arrived?

Victor felt his pulse quicken, felt the heat of indignation on his neck, and then he felt Vallas cool fingers gripping his wrist. He took a deep breath and said, Hell no, Dey! He and Valla had picked up on Lams affectionate nickname for Edeya and had used variations of it frequently while she recovered. I wouldve said goodbye. You dont need to be worried; Dar says this dungeon has training wheels.

Training wheels? She frowned, turning to Valla with questioning eyes.

Valla nodded, smiling reassuringly. Hell wear a talisman that will transport him out of the dungeon if he becomes badly wounded. Of course, Victor had neglected to mention to her or the others Dars exact words, leaving off the part about how someone killed suddenly or near-instantlyhe couldnt remember the exact wordscouldnt be protected by the talismans.

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Do the other dungeons have those? Darren asked, sudden hope blooming in his eyes.

Lesh laughed and slapped his back, nearly knocking him off his chair. Not the one youre going into, fosterling. However, the system sometimes awards recall tokens. Perhaps youll win something like that along the way.

So, how long will you be gone? Edeya asked, ignoring the side conversation.

No idea. I guess until I clear the dungeon. He looked at Lam and Lesh. Theres probably a boss or something, right?

Lesh answered first, I know not. Ive never seen a dungeon built for competitions, nor one that allowed certain parties as spectators. I have, of course, heard tales of people competing within a dungeonkilling each other over treasures or trying to cut off access to the deeper levels. On my homeworld, there are many dungeons with entrances controlled by different factions, and Ive witnessed great battles to clear those entrances, allowing rival factions to enter. What you are about to partake in sounds far more organized.

Im no help either, Victor. I fought in some dungeons on Fanwath, but never to the end and never under any sort of organized control. Lam took a drink of her wine and smiled with purple-stained teeth. I love your confidence, though. I wonder if theres a place to make bets. Her eyes widened, and she leaned forward in excitement. I wonder if theres a place for the public to watch!

Vallas grip tightened on Victor's wrist, and she, too, leaned forward in excitement. Why didnt we look into that? Weve known about this for nearly a week! Well watch if we can, Victor!

Cool, Victor sighed, chuckling as he began to relax again. He was too buzzed and too happy, surrounded by his friends, to be stressed about anything. He was especially happy to see Edeya looking like her old self, irate as she still seemed about his imminent departure. Anyone got the time?

Lesh surprised him by producing a delicate, golden pocket watch. Four hours to midnight.

Thanks.

Is that it? Edeya asked, back in her seat but still looking irritated.

What? Victor took another drink.

Darren and I are scheduled to go into the Grotto in two days. Do you think you'll be back? Her voice, very slightly tremulous, which was a sharp turn from her indignation a minute ago, took Victor by surprise. They'd picked the Grotto as the first dungeon for her and Darren because it was listed in the guidebook as safe and suitable for Classless teams or solo explorers.

Hey, two days? Shit, I'll be shocked if I'm in that place that long. If I am, though, you guys are going to do great. He looked at Darren, amused by the idea that he was giving a guy nearly ten years his senior encouragement.

Some humor must have been evident in his expression because Edeya shot to her feet and strode down the path leading to the kitchen's back door, her wings dropping motes of blue lights along the cobbles in her wake. I don't know why everything's a joke to you, she said without looking back.

What the hell? Victor asked, looking from Valla to Lam, genuinely perplexed by the outburst.

I'd go after her, Lam said, but I think you should, Victor. She feels guilty for you being here, guilty that you must go into that dungeon, and so she's lashing out. I'm sure that's what it is.

I'll try . . . Victor stood, but before he left, he looked around the group. From Darren, with his long black hair and dark eyes, to Lesh, sprawled in the gravel, no chair needed, to Lam, still smiling despite the outburst, to Valla, looking at him with concern in her eyes. I, um, appreciate you all. I hope you know that. I'm not upset or worried about this dungeon, either. Not sure you all know this. I mean, I know Valla does, but I love competition, and I'm kind of looking forward to it. So, anyway, if anyone else is feeling raw about things, don't. His impromptu speech seemed to catch them all by surprise. Valla smiled, and he saw from the eager expression in her eyes that she was pleased.

Lesh nodded solemnly. You will crush them beneath your boot. I only wish I could fight at your side.

Darren surprised him by agreeing. As Elder Lesh said, Victor, the soft people of this world don't know what they're in for.

Lesh barked a rough laugh that almost sounded like a roar. Well said, fosterling!

Darren, if you aren't careful, I'm going to end up thinking you're an all-right guy. Victor snorted, shaking his head as he started after Edeya. He was relieved to find her in the kitchen, rooting through the pantry. Hey, he said, sitting on one of the benches that lined the long wooden table.

She groaned. I'm such a dummy. I'm sorry about that. I don't know what's going on with me. She didn't look at him while she spoke, and he could tell she was close to crying.

He decided to play dumb. Hungry? I've got some damn good pastries stashed away. I got 'em in Coloss.

Pastries? She looked at him, closing the pantry door.

Yeah. Sugary, buttery, a little cinnamon-like spice, but different. You'll see. He stared off into space for a minute while he looked through his rings, trying to find the treats in question. When he couldn't, he groaned and slapped his forehead. Dammit! I think they were in one of my dimensional pouches. They got destroyed in the volcano.

Oh, she said, her voice small, as she sat beside him.

Dont give up hope! I have other stuff stowed away. He kept looking for a minute and then snapped his fingers. Aha! A second later, he deposited a tray of gooey molasses cookies with some kind of dried fruit he couldnt name pressed into the center. It was soft and sweet, almost like a date. These solve the craving. Dont remember where I . . .

Gelica! I used to get these from a bakery near Lams estate! Edeya grabbed one and took a big bite.

Hey, he said, while her mouth was full and she couldnt interrupt, You didnt hear me out there, but you need to know that theres nothing to be upset about with me going into this dungeon. Remember I told you it would be good for me to have a mentor, even if I didnt come here looking for one? Well, this is part of that. Im looking forward to it. Im looking forward to the competition, to the fighting, to the treasure, but mostly I just fucking love the attention. Shit, Edeya, I was like that before I ever had a single level. Back on my homeworld, I used to wrestle for sport, and it was pretty much the only damn thing I was good at. I loved to hear the crowd! I loved looking at the stands when the ref held my hand up at the end of the match, watching them cheer and stomp their feet on the bleachers. You know about the pits, about the Coloss arena, shit, you saw me on the battlefield. Im built for this. Dont feel bad, all right?

Promise? Promise you dont resent me?

Never. Youre so important to me, chica! Youre, shit, youre my oldest friend. You know that? Victor felt moisture in his eyes and shook his head, squeezing them tight.

I know. Im so sorry about Sarl, Victor. They were both sitting with their backs to the table, their legs away from it, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, taking his big hand in her delicate, slender fingers. Promise me youre not going to die in there?

Promise me youll be okay in the Grotto?

I promise! she said immediately.

All right, I promise, too. He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head, smiling and inhaling, savoring and memorizing the scent of her hairbeeswax and honey and something like vanilla. Im gonna remember this moment the next time youre calling me a big dummy.

Thats all right. I want you to, she said, her voice quiet and happy. They sat that way a while longer, and then the rest of the party came inside, and the spell was broken. They relocated to the parlor, but everyone stopped drinking, giving Victor a chance to sober up. After visiting for a bit longer, most of the others went to bed, hugging Victor goodbye and good luck. Valla and Victor sat together for another hour, holding hands and being content in each others silent company.

When Victor stood and cleared his throat, Valla did, too, and she surprised him by saying, Lesh and I have been talking.

Oh?

We want to go into a dungeon when Edeya and Darren enter the Grotto. Theres a tier-six dungeon called Desperation Gap, and there are rumors of unique System rewards and titles for clearing it.

Valla, I . . .

Dont want me to risk my life? Too bad, lover. I know this competition youre going into isnt as safe as you claim. I understand, though. Its the life weve chosenwe, Victor, not you. Lesh and I need this. If youre back, maybe you can come with us, but I know Ranish Dar might have other plans, so dont let it weigh heavy on your mind. Promise me?

Ugh! So many promises tonight! Victor smiled and shook his head. I wont ever try to hold you back, Valla. I love you and trust you. If Im not back, or if I cant go, then, yeah, go kick some ass with the big, acid-spitting bruiser. She smiled at his words and grabbed him around the waist, hugging him tightly. He kissed her, tried to leave, and nearly got bowled over as she slammed into him, demanding another hug and another long kiss. He savored it and tried to memorize her taste and smell, and when he began to laugh, interrupting their amorous moment, she pulled back, looking scandalized.

Youre laughing?

Its just . . . Im trying to memorize how you feel and taste, and I did the same with Edeya. I mean her smell. When I realized I was doing it, I thought it was fucking weird, and it made me laugh.

Its not weird! I was doing the same! Her scowl melted into a rich laugh, and Victor loved the sound of it. Now go before I drag you inside and make you late.

Victor nodded, gave her one more quick kiss, and then walked out the gate onto the sidewalk. He knew he could make it in time if he walked, but he didnt want to be there without any time to spare, so he started jogging, and the magical sidewalk boosted his speed proportionately. With his gaze focused on the brilliant towers and the rainbow walkways of the god-like beings at their pinnacles, the sides of his vision began to blur as he flew through the city.

He felt good; he hadnt been lying to his friends. He decided the way to describe him was profoundly full of anticipation, excited about the many potentials unfolding in his future. He laughed and shook his head, Fuck that! Im stoked! That was the truth of it: He was stoked as hell, ready to kick some ass, and happy to know that he wouldnt have to kill anyone. If some of the other competitors wanted to mess with him, hed just beat the shit out of them until their Lifeguard talismans bailed them out.

Fuck yeah! he yelled into the wind as he charged through the streets, almost ripping Lifedrinker from her harness and screaming for his ancestors to watch him, but he stopped himself with a wild laugh. It wasnt quite time for that. When he arrived at the World Hall, it was just as busy as ever; Sojourn wasnt a city that slept much. He only had to look around for a moment, though, before Dar found him. The great, dark, stone-like man stomped toward him, seemingly out of nowhere.

His voice rumbled and cracked through the air, Good, Victor. You look vibrant and ready for the challenge.

Victor nodded. Im ready.

Dar smiled, his weird, stony flesh bending inexplicably. His fiery eyes blazed, and he said, Don your armor and gird yourself, apprentice. There are twenty-seven entrants, the highest number in a century, and four are tier-nine.

Book 7: Chapter 35: Competition

As soon as Victor put on his armor, Dar started walking, compelling him to hurry after him. Their brisk pace didnt stop Victor from asking questions as they went, Why so many? Did you say tier nine?

Dar guided him into a side passage, still significant in dimension but ten times smaller than the main World Hall. I suspect my boasting and wagering on the outcome has piqued some interest among my rivals. He glanced at Victor, one blazing eye making contact with his. Tier nine, aye. This challenge dungeon is open to all iron-rankers. Id say the majority of the entrants will be tier seven or higher.

Victor didnt respond. He didnt see a point to it he was going in, regardless. Hed learned from fighting Karnice that levels werent the only measure of a person that mattered. Dar took a side passage, an actual hallway this time, not a great hall, and Victor followed him, admiring the wild murals painted on the smooth plaster walls and ceilings forest scenes with naked fairy-like creatures, gigantic buildings perched on cliffs, exploding mountains, and soaring dragons. The artwork was, for lack of a better word, epic. Another question came to mind, and he asked, There will be monsters and stuff, right? You think Ill see enough action to gain a level or two?

Ah, yes, I would hope. I should warn you, though, that the Lifesaver talisman comes with a cost should it activate, saving you from death, the System will hook its greedy claws into you, drawing out ten percent of your accumulated Energy. Its greedy, but it wants to keep its subjects engaged in the pursuit of power, so it will award some of that Energy to the others still lingering in the dungeon.

I take it you dont mean the Energy in my Core.

Dar chuckled. No, sadly, in your case, being level sixty, the System would drain you enough to take away six levels.

And anyone still in the dungeon gets a share? Even if they had nothing to do with my, uh, life-threatening situation?

Correct. That being the case, if you last to the end, you will likely see great gains in the dungeon.

Victor squeezed his hands into fists until his knuckles popped satisfyingly. All right. Sounds fair.

Dars chuckle sounded again, like stones clacking together as they fell from a wheelbarrow. I knew you had the right sort of spirit. Were going to work well together, Victor.

Do we all start in the same spot?

No! The dungeon is structured like a tower, and youll all start at the bottom, but its vast and has dozens of starting positions. The level is designed in such a way that each starting position is equidistant from the stairway up. Dar paused, breaking his stride as he scratched his head. If I recall, theres only one way up from the first level, so even if you start in a room by yourself, be prepared to encounter others as you ascend.

Victor nodded. And you and the others will be watching? That reminds me my friends were wondering if theres any way for them to watch. Are there public, uh, viewing screens or something?

Naturally! Many establishments in the city have access to the viewing stones. Ah! I should explain that. Each of you will have an egg-shaped stone following you, floating in the air behind and above you. People with the correct access can view you and your exploits through that stone.

Huh. Like a drone, I guess.

A drone? In a sense, I suppose the word makes sense, though these viewing stones are not controlled by anyone. Still, they aren't particularly intelligent, and you could compare them to an insect serving a hive.

Uh . . . right. Victor didn't want to explain what he'd meant by the word. Dar walked a bit further and stopped before large, bronze doors held ajar by soldiers in dull red plate armor, their visors obscuring their features. Victor might have assumed they were human if not for their four arms and segmented, chitin-covered tails protruding from their lower backs. Inside the chamber beyond the door, a single transport pad sat on a big, marble floor in a domed chamber decorated with murals very much like those Victor had seen earlier.

More than a hundred people stood around in the chamber, though everyone clung to the stone walkway at the platform's edge. Dar gestured and said, This is where you'll all teleport into the dungeon. It occupies a pocket dimension very close to Sojourn, as do all the dungeons purchased through the System stone.

Do you get to them all from the World Hall?

No, some are accessed through portals in parks, special buildings, or even in the limited real estate not occupied by the city. He and Victor had stepped to the side of the door and were standing apart from the other groups of people. Dar looked at Victor and nodded. Your armor is good for an iron-ranker. That helmet is high-indestructible, and I can see the wyrm-scale was crafted by a master. He turned and slowly scanned the room, and Victor followed his gaze.

The people gathered in the hall were incredibly diverse. Most were bipedal or humanoid, as Victor thought of them, but he saw people with multiple sets of legs and others with non-serpent-like in their locomotion. Perhaps a third of the people gathered had wings of some sort, and they all varied in size from a single-eyed, brutish-looking man half again as tall as Victor to a tiny rabbit-like individual who couldn't have weighed more than twenty pounds.

Dar looked at Victor again, and his face didn't betray what he was thinking as he said, There are some very dangerous foes in this room, but I don't see many with racial advancements on par with yours. That's an edge for you. Even those in the epic tier don't have such potent bloodlines. They'll underestimate you at their peril.

Because of my level?

Exactly.

Victor folded his arms and continued to stare at the people around the room. It was hard to pick out which were contestants and which were there to send off their friends, loved ones, or, as in Dar's case, their students. Victor found the idea of calling himself a student sort of funny; he hadn't learned anything much from the man yet, but he supposed that would come. He'd only known him for a week. Any rules? he asked, figuring he should try to get more out of the master.

Oh, excellent question! Once inside the dungeon, any dimensional containers on your person will become inaccessible.

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

Shit. Seriously?

Aye. Too many folks carry too many artifacts in their storage rings. This rule keeps things a little fairer. Looking around, though, I can see many of the entrants have strapped all manner of containers on their bodies. Hmm. Do you have a satchel or pack you can fill with food? Im not sure how long youll be in there, but you may get hungry or thirsty.

Jesus, Dar! Now, you tell me?

I dont require sustenance as you do. He frowned. Not that you should require much with your bloodline so advanced. Have you never fasted?

Uh, yeah. Now that you mention it, Ive gone quite a few days without food or water, and that was when my bloodline was only advanced or so.

Aye. I imagine you mostly eat out of habit and pleasure these days. I wouldnt be concerned. Ive never known this challenge to take longer than a week. Youll likely come across food and water in the tower anyway. He snapped his fingers and said, Which reminds me: If you find a storage item in the dungeon, youll be allowed to access it as much as youd like.

What about loot? I mean, if one of the others, Victor jerked his chin at the crowded room, dies. Can I take their stuff?

If the System fails to rescue them with the Lifesaver, then yes, their corpses and all items upon them are fair game.

Victor opened his mouth, intent on grilling Ranish Dar until the last second, but then a gong sounded, and a bodiless voice announced, Teleportation will commence in three minutes. All entrants must now step onto the circle.

Dar clapped him on the shoulder. Good luck, Victor. Dont disappoint me. For the first time that day, he spoke without any levity in his voice, and Victor wondered what Dar would do if he got eliminated right away. He might lose six levels, but it also might be a quick way out of the master Spirit Casters service. He almost laughed at the stupid thoughtno way hed throw a match even if there werent any penalty. He nodded at Dar, gave him a thumbs up, and strode onto the circle, watching the others as they, too, made their way onto it.

He saw that Dar was right; the people going into the dungeon were easy to pick out now that he knew to look for packs and satchels. Almost all of them had them, and one guy, who looked part snail, part lizard, part man, had no fewer than four packs and satchels hanging from his sizeable neck and shoulders, each bulging at the seams. Victor thought about digging out some healing potions and a few drinks and snacks and bundling them into an extra shirt or cloakhe was sure he had somethingbut decided against it. The main reason being that he didnt want to look like an idiot in front of all of his competition. Even he had to admit the sentiment was foolish, but he couldnt help it.

As he stood there, he noticed the weight of some of the competitors auras. Hed been keeping his aura entirely in check, but he began to wonder if he should let it loose. Should he give them a taste of his power, or should he keep them guessing? The auras he felt werent particularly potent, and he was sure his would drive them back and press far more heavily on the people around. What if he

was wrong, though, and there were others standing on the pedestal who had more potent auras, only waiting to see who would give a hint of their strength?

He kept remembering when Tes had taught him how to control it, saying that people in civilized, high-energy worlds would judge him harshly if he didn't have that control. He decided it was worse not knowing someone's strength than having a good measure, so he kept a firm grip on it. His decision was reinforced when he heard a tall man with rams horns mutter to someone nearby, Some weak wills on display.

Again, the gong sounded, and the weird, bodiless voice announced, Teleportation will commence in one minute. At the announcement, a circular aperture opened in the center of the ceiling and, with a faint humming sound, pale blue, oval objects, almost exactly the size of a chicken's egg, floated down through the air, one for each person standing on the platform.

Thanks to Dar, Victor knew what they were, but one of the contestants nearby, someone behind him, asked in a deep, scratchy voice, What the scourge are these, then?

A lisping, feminine voice replied, Them's how our exploits get displayed for all them folk in the city.

Victor stood far taller than most of the contestants, so when he looked around, turning in a slow circle, he could see everyone. Some wore armor, while others wore silky robes, and quite a few were dressed in very normal-looking clothes. One woman even had on an outfit that reminded him of the Legion uniform Valla used to wear. He saw weapons of all sorts, from quarter staves to bows to hammers to a man who gripped the hilts of two short, curved swords, each glowing faintly with magenta Energy. While no one looked exactly human, quite a few came close. Many such looked like human-animal hybrids, and he wondered if stories on Earth of werewolves or fox-people had their origins with such folk.

As he looked around, he immediately spotted at least one of the tier-nine individuals. He wasn't sure how he knew other than the sense of danger he felt when he saw the flickering flames that seemed to sheath his body, the dancing fires behind his cold, blue eyes, and the mean, thin-lipped half-smile he wore as everyone near him tried to make space. As Victor stood there, wondering if he was right, if he was one of the big competitors as he'd subconsciously labeled the tier nines, he snapped his fingers and said, Shit! He'd almost forgotten about his little magical scope, and he barely located and dug it out of his storage ring before the gong chimed and the voice announced that they had ten seconds.

In a near-panic, he dug around in his storage rings for a leather pouch, bag, or satchel that he could tie to his belt. He'd barely located a mundane belt pouch and tucked the scope into it as, with a flash of white light and nausea-inducing lurch, the portal hall faded away, and he found himself stumbling onto a slightly canted stone platform. The lighting had changed; bright daylight filtered down to him through the leaves of high trees, and wild animal calls sounded in the distance. Not far away, he heard the babbling of a stream or small river, and, just to his left, the diminutive rabbit person he'd seen earlier squealed in surprise and leaped a dozen yards down a gravel-strewn flight of stone steps, taking flight into a stand of berry-covered saplings before Victor could so much as say hello.

Victor shrugged and tied the pouch with his scope onto his belt, then reached up and pulled Lifedrinker out of her harness. All right, chica. Let's see what this

place is all about. If this is a tower, its gotta be big to have trees and sunlight in it, yeah?

He descended the steps where the rabbit person had fled, switching his Sovereign Will boost to vitality and agility as he went. He figured hed like to move quickly if someone got the jump on him, and, failing that, hed like to be as sturdy as possible. Hed only made it two steps, though, before a gong sounded, seemingly out of the sky, and several System announcements appeared in his vision:

*****All entrants are present; this competitive dungeon instance is now locked.*****

*****A Lifesaver Talisman will appear at your feet; wear it at your discretion. If you are saved by this device, you will be stripped of ten percent of your overall accumulated levels, and a portion of that Energy will be awarded to the remaining entrants.*****

*****The denizens of this dungeon have treasures that may be won through combat or subterfuge. Additionally, each entrant progressing to a new floor will be awarded a personal System-generated reward chest. The value of such rewards will be divided by the number of entrants in the dungeon.*****

*****Good Luck, Victor.*****

Victor chuckled. He had to assume the final message was tailored to everyone. He doubted the System would single him out like that, especially to wish him luck. He noticed a little cloud of blue smoke at his feet, and when he bent down to wave it away, he found a golden chain affixed to a tiny, dime-sized medallion with no markings. He shrugged and hung it over his head, tucking it under his vest. As he did so, he thought about how hed arrived on the platform at the same time as the little rabbit person. What if hed killed him? None of them had Lifesavers at that point. It seemed kind of sloppy to him but not at all at odds with his view of the often-callous System.

So, he said, giving voice to his thoughts, using Lifedrinker as an excuse, the more people in here, the shittier the rewards. Typical System BS. He hopped down the steps, noticed a faint dirt trail, and started down it, brushing aside the thin branches covered with juicy-looking, red berries that grew close. They looked delicious, but he knew better than to start eating stuff he found in a dungeon.

True, this was only the third pocket dimension hed ever been in, and only one of those others had been a dungeon, but hed learned not to trust things managed by the System. Especially if were in some kind of competition, he muttered. He pushed his way through the grove, and when he came out, he saw a long green slope below him. From that vantage, he could see a lot more of the landscape, confirming that he was, indeed, in some sort of structure despite the open-feeling air and magical sunlight.

Down the slope, he saw high white walls in disrepair and past them, more and more walls and weird, crumbling old structures that might once have been towers or buildings. In the great distance, through a haze that seemed almost like mist or fog, he could see walls rising to a firmament-like ceiling thousands of feet above. At the center of the distant, cloud-obscured stone ceiling, he saw a great spiral stairway descending. Yeah, this place is nuts. Nobody could make a room this big. His distant gaze was interrupted by a flash of something bright and a squeal of pain or surprise.

Victor jerked his eyes toward the source of the flash and saw an eruption of bright yellow fire, and then, before he could decide to charge toward or away from it, a System message appeared:

*****Ekus Vi-dronip has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty-six entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

Victor stepped back into the grove of berry trees and crouched down, watching the landscape between the narrow trunks. Sure enough, like a sun blooming to life near the top of the central stair, a ball of Energy appeared and then exploded, streaking down toward the ground in dozens of fragments, one of which came straight toward him.

He braced himself, but the infusion wasn't enough to make him lose himself in the euphoria. It was a lot, but nothing like he'd gotten from some of his battles back in the Free Marches. While he absorbed it, he tried to track some of the other Energy balls, and he was sure he saw two of them flash down at the foot of the grassy slope just a bit past the big crumbling wall.

Two, huh? So those guys took out the rabbit? Or was the rabbit the one who took someone out? He doubted it. If the rabbit person had been aggressive, why would he or she have run at the sight of Victor? He gripped Lifedrinker's haft and, with a grin that said a lot about how much fun he was already having, he started jogging down the slope. Let's find out, eh, chica?

Book 7: Chapter 36: Heavy Feet

Victor loped down the grassy slope toward the tall, crumbling wall, aiming for a gap near a thorny, nearly leafless hedge. The grass gave way to dirt and chips of stone that looked to be remnants of ancient mortar and fallen blocks. He slowed as he approached the wall, not wanting to sound like a bull let loose in a garden. He quietly padded to the gap in the wall and edged around it, slowly taking in the scene beyond, inch by inch.

Dust and gravel coated an ancient flagstone floor, surrounded by high stone walls, enclosing a space about fifteen yards across. He saw an opening in the wall to his right, and he darted over the stone floor to that archway, pausing to peer into the next room. Just like the roofless room he was standing in, the one beyond the archway was empty save for chunks of rubble and dusty debris on the ground.

Victor stepped into the space, aiming for another opening in the wall across the room and to his left, but he paused, peering more closely at the floor. Are those tracks? he whispered to Lifedrinker, crouching and creeping toward the scuff marks on the stone. They certainly looked like tracks to him, and he could see they led toward the opening he'd been aiming for. He hurried, nimbly stepping between chips of stone, to the wall and peered through.

The area revealed by the opening was larger than the two he'd just explored. It had grassy, overgrown floor sections and a slope that led down to a central depression where it looked as though the ground had caved in millennia ago. Down in that depression, Victor saw wisps of smoke rising off scorched grass and the slag of something that looked almost like molten stone. He immediately concluded that this was the site of Ekus Vi-dronip's demise.

He scanned the area and couldn't see any sign of the aggressors. Other than the one he lurked in, two exits led from the room: one through the far wall and another to the left. Still holding Lifedrinker ready, he moved in a stealthy crouch and approached the closer, left-hand exit.

He'd just reached the opening when he heard voices. A feminine one, low and kind of smoky, said, Agreed. Well part, but the next time we meet, we shant hold back.

A deep, masculine voice rumbled a chuckle and said, You act as though you do me a favor. I show you this one mercy because you alerted me and stayed your hand when I slew the beastkin.

You didnt slay him . . .

I would have if the System hadnt come to the rescue.

A rescue were all afforded in this place . . .

The masculine voice scoffed in exasperation. Are you trying to ignite hostilities?

No . . .

At that point, Victor, unable to contain himself, itching for a confrontation, and feeling annoyed by the tone of the snippet of conversation hed listened to, stepped through the opening and loudly proclaimed, Well, you attacked that poor rabbit for no reason? Not very nice.

The woman hed interrupted reminded him so much of VictoriaCatalina! He cursed the name in his mindthat he almost attacked her outright. She was pale to the point of near-transparency, had long dark hair that hung behind her as though caught in a constant breeze, and wore layers of thin, silky robes that were both revealing and obscuring at the same time. She bore a short, twisted, black staff that looked freshly cut from a dead tree, and when she saw Victor, she took two graceful steps back.

The man was another matterVictor had seen him before. He was the one with the fiery blue eyes and the cloak of constant flames that sheathed his body. He looked human, for the most part, though he had a bearing that was hard to picture on someone from Earth, a kind of presence that screamed nobility and power, and when he turned his gaze to Victor, there wasnt an ounce of alarm in his eyes.

Well, he said, smirking, as his flames grew brighter and danced more eagerly along his shoulders, how nice of you to save me the chase. Without another word or even a flicker of movement to signal the danger, a column of fire, like a flame geyser, erupted from his body, crackled and ripped into the air, and then reversed course, dropping like an avalanche of liquid fire toward Victor.

Victor didnt hesitate; he squatted and jumped back, performing a rather impressive backflip. Even in his usual, non-enraged state, he was resistant to heat and fire thanks to his racial advancements and his feats, namely Flame Touched and Mountains Resilience. Nevertheless, despite his more than eighty percent resistance and his brilliant backward flip out of the center of the fire strike, he felt the heat of those flames and, for the first time in a while, cried out in alarm and pain as his exposed flesh burned. It wasnt enough to kill or even slow him down, but it was plenty to enrage him. Like floodgates opening, his Core poured out a torrent of rage-attuned Energy into his pathways, and he pushed it into the pattern for Iron Berserk.

He'd gotten out of the fire casters line of sight, but even as he expanded in size and his rapid regeneration began to heal his burns, a sound like thunder combined with a tornado made him look to the sky, and there he saw half a dozen fiery projectiles streaking down toward him, growing larger and larger as they approached.

Fucking hell! he shouted in his deep, basso titan voice. He dove for the far corner of the room, and hell was brought to life around him as something like a meteor shower pounded down in the ancient ruins. Fire, shattered stone, hot gasses, uprooted soil turned molten, and the roar of a cataclysm assailed Victor as he flopped and bounced through the stone walls. Eventually, he came to rest in a pile of rubble dozens of yards from where hed first been struck.

He was bruised, battered, and singed, but more than anything, Victor felt fury. So, this fire-loving magician had decided to lead with some sort of alpha strike? Hed opened up the sky and called down the fury of a mountain upon him. On him? Did he not know who he was messing with? Ill teach him, Victor growled, feeling his spirit Core roil with rage, feeling the echoing growl deep in his magma-attuned breath Core. Burn me? Throw stones at me? His voice was like thunder.

Victor clenched his fist around Lifedrinkers haft, still lying on the stone floor, face down, with piled rubble on his back, his pants all but burned to shreds, his skin blackened from soot but fully healed beneath it. He could hear distant words, the Pyromancer speaking, perhaps saying something to the other. Victors mind was too thick with fury to make sense.

His magma-attuned Energy was seeping into his pathways, weaving with his rage, entwining it, dulling the clarifying effects of his Iron Berserk. He wanted to smash and rip, to show the world who he was. How could he be thrown aside like this? How could he let those faceless, nameless observers watch him be so humiliated?

As the rage mounted, his body began to glow with the heat of magma. He pumped his lungs like bellows, and his eyes sparked alight with the mountains fiery heart; black smoke plumed out from beneath his bed of broken stone and rubble. Victor allowed the pattern for Volcanic Fury to build in his pathways, and then he channeled all that hot, deadly rage and magma Energy into it, overwriting his Iron Berserk.

The world brightened in sepia tones, and Victor knew only hunger. Hunger for blood, for justice, for glory and destruction. Deep in his angry heart, he knew there was one nearby who deserved his ire. As his body began to burn, as his rage pulsed away from him like waves of radioactive fire, he surged to his feet, throwing thousands of pounds of stone off him like so much dust.

He towered over the ruins, his head and shoulders clearing the walls, affording him a view of nearby spaces enclosed by walls. He turned, looking at the trail of charred, broken walls, and was dimly aware that hed passed that way. He took a step, and a ball of fire streaked at him from an ancient, half-crumbled archway.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Victor lifted a hand and let the fireball strike it, the flames washing over him like a warm breeze. He strode forward, and when he saw the red-robed, fire-sheathed man whod thrown it, his fury took on a palpable presence, slamming out, assaulting the psyche of any who witnessed it. He leaned forward and screamed his wrath.

As his terrible fury roared forth, shaking stones loose from the walls, vibrating the dust and gravel as a passing train might, he opened his breath Core and let loose a spray of white-hot magma that spattered a cone-shaped area in front of him, liberally coating the man twenty-yards in front of him.

Victor's breath Core wasn't high level, wasn't up to the challenge of a high-tier brawl, but his Volcanic Fury doubled its efficacy, and the splash of magma sent the Pyromancer reeling.

While the man did something to mitigate the horrible heat of the molten stone that had drenched him, Victor charged forward, lifted Lifedrinker in one hand, and brought her white-hot, smoking edge down in an air-splitting chop. Somehow, the Pyromancer summoned a torrent of fiery Energy, and with a pulse that rivaled Victor's fury, it burst out of him, scorching the world black in a hundred-yard radius.

The spell blasted the magma off the mage, and it had a palpable weight that caught Lifedrinker in its momentum, slowing her descent and pushing Victor back a handful of yards. Still, the fire didn't harm him, nor did it bother Lifedrinker. When it was over, the Pyromancer stood, a victorious expression on his face that crumbled when he saw Victor still looming over him, completely untouched by his cataclysmic flames.

The setback had done nothing but further infuriate Victor. His every muscle, every sinew, every inch of heavy, dense bone, wanted to turn that man to paste. Again, he lifted Lifedrinker, and again, he stepped forward, bringing her down like a falling star. The Pyromancer lifted his arms, formed them into an X, and brilliant white fire erupted from them, creating a partial dome that covered the wizard.

The appearance of the fiery shield didn't daunt or give Victor pause; he smashed Lifedrinker into it with abandon, putting all his tremendous weight and strength behind the blow. A shockwave erupted from the impact like a bomb going off, ripping through ruins, knocking down walls, and throwing up a cloud of dust and debris that could be seen far and wide.

The concussive, thunderous sound caused by the strike would have been deafening to anyone nearby, but Victor hardly noticed it; he was too engrossed in his rage, too hungry for destruction. When the burst of white fire and light faded, he looked down with bloodthirsty, dark thoughts of slaughter, only to find that Lifedrinker was buried in the earth beneath a split stone, and the only remnant of the Pyromancer was a dismembered arm.

Weird, annoying squiggles filled his vision, and he growled, ignoring them, looking around for something to kill. He stood amidst devastation all around were blackened stones and piles of rubble. Everywhere he turned, his view was obscured by smoke.

When he saw nothing to fight, he straightened and started walking, intent on finding something to kill. As the immediacy of combat faded, as his rage was forced to cool slightly, he became aware of Lifedrinker, and though he had no room for worry or concern in his rage-filled magma heart, he felt bothered by her discomfort. Something was wrong with the axe. Still, Victor couldn't be bothered with sentimentality. He stalked the ruins, looking for a fight, until, with a surprising burst of euphoria, he was transfixed by an infusion of Energy that lifted him off the ground, dispelling his fury and leaving him senseless for several long minutes.

Victor knew he was back to himself when he realized there were System messages in front of his eyes. He looked around, saw he was in a section of ruins indistinguishable from any others he'd passed through, and sat down on a huge, fallen stone. He lifted Lifedrinker, saw the cracks in her living-wood handle, and gently stroked her. Im sorry, chica

.

She vibrated in his hand, and he heard her thoughts: I will heal, though my heart aches for the feast we were denied. Something pulled him away before I could take my fill! You were glorious, my brave, vengeful warrior! Promise me well find that one and take what's ours!

Ill . . . I dont know if well meet him in a place where we can fight again. Well see. Victor turned to the System messages and ran through them.

*****Gyanna Rose has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty-five entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

*****Arcus Volpur has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty-four entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 61 Herald of the Mountains Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.*****

Victor sat there, thinking about the messages and about what had happened with the Pyromancer Arcus Volpur, he was pretty sure. The other name seemed more feminine, and he figured it belonged to the woman hed seen speaking with Volpur. Of course, he could be wrong. Gyanna could be a masculine name, or whatever culture they came from could have completely different ideas about naming. Still, he felt like he was right. Arcus was the man whod called down some kind of meteor strike on him, and if Victor hadnt been so nearly immune to fire, he might have been in serious trouble.

He thought about how hed approached the two casters as they bickered. Had he been expecting them to banter with him? Why had he been surprised by that immediate attack? The obvious strategy for the most significant gains in this competition was to take out as many entrants as possible.

There were still twenty-three others in there with him, many of whom may be just as dangerous or more so than Arcus. Many may have affinities that Victor couldnt so easily shrug off. He needed to be more careful. Sure, his Volcanic Fury was a hell of a trump card, but he hadnt wanted to play it so soon. He also didnt want to rely on it; hed almost broken Lifedrinker, and while hed been mad with the volcanos wrath, he hadnt even cared.

Had he taken Gyanna Rose out, or had she just been collateral damage? Victor couldnt even remember. The whole battle, beyond the point where hed been smashed by the meteor strike, was a blur of fragmented images in his mind.

He stood up and looked around. The dungeon seemed to have a day-and-night cycle, and the sky was noticeably dimmer above the walls surrounding him. Where are all the monsters? he muttered, finding it strange that hed wandered for a while without encountering anything. Or had he? He was fairly sure but couldnt be certain, not with his spotty memory.

I need to be smarter, beautiful, he said, once again caressing Lifedrinkers haft, watching as the cracks in the beautiful, dark, star-speckled wood slowly knitted back together. I need to expect everyone to be hostile. Just as he said the words, System messages scrolled in front of his eyes:

*****Zandastreva has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty-three entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

*****Borna Hullstrava has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty-two entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

*****Kim Jyster has been slain! Twenty-one entrants remain.*****

Holy shit, Victor said, standing up and holding Lifedrinker close. He looked to the sky, watching the globe of Energy form and waiting for it to break apart, hoping to see if any portions were sent to other participants nearby. So, one of them died, and it sounds like the System doesn't share that Energy with everyone. Whoever killed Kim Jyster is getting the full amount, I guess.

Lifedrinker throbbed in his grip, her only response eagerness. The globe of Energy in the center of the sky burst apart, and, to Victor's surprise and dismay, several of the balls of Energy shot upward toward the ceiling where the central stair led to the second floor. Many of the other globes streaked toward the center of the first floor, and, as far as Victor could tell, only one came his way, while others streaked to various far-flung corners of the level.

Seeing that so many participants were closer to the stairs than he and several were already either on the stairs or the second level, Victor felt a deep, painful disappointment in himself. Was he really so far behind?

I need to quit messing around and get serious, he muttered just as his ball of Energy hit him, and this time, he really felt it. It was so strong that he thought he might level, but he was still level sixty-one when the euphoria passed. Close, though. All right, chica, let's get moving. Time to make up some ground.

#

Dar reclined in his usual booth, watching the view portal that filled the entire wall of Harbinger Row, his favorite drinking establishment in the upper spires. A section along the bottom of the wall displayed a small view of each of the remaining contestants, while the larger section was dedicated to those currently embroiled in the most action. At that moment, an avian woman with distinct griffin bloodline markings was battling a hydra on the second level. Whos that? he rumbled. Yons girl?

His friend and sometimes rival, Loro the Grim, stirred from his reverie and looked at the screen. Aye, he whispered in his scratchy undead voice. Shes closing in on her test of steel. He looked at Dar from the depths of his dark cowl and asked, Are you disappointed? In your prodigy, I mean?

Hmm? No, I think not. Hes still in, isnt he? A bit . . . heavy-footed so far, but I think hell warm up to the contest. Hes been at war for the last year, and before that, he might as well have been. What he lacks in nuance, he makes up for in determination and, well, sturdiness. You saw what happened when Arcus dumped his Energy pool on him. Elder Gods! Crovius is going to be apoplectic. Can you imagine? His prime student was eliminated in the first few minutes! Not

to mention Lady Rose! Her daughter ripped to safety as an afterthought. She simply got too close to the struggle!

Yes. Some heavy pockets will grow noticeably lighter thanks to your boy. When Loro finished speaking, he took a breath as though to say more, but he seemed to hesitate.

What is it? Dar pressed.

Did you give your apprentice a means of communicating?

Dar was genuinely surprised by the question. What? That would breach the code of conduct.

Aye, but Ive heard rumors. I hope Im wrong, but Ive heard whispers from an Artificer friend about unscrupulous members of his Class providing high-end, quite easily hidden communication devices. Hopefully, word of your lads ability to shrug off fire damage doesnt get around.

Dar shrugged and leaned back, reaching for his potent liquor. You heard him talking to himself. Hell start being a bit more clever. Im not worried.

It is nice that he narrates his thoughts for the viewing public. Clea reports that hes one of the favorites amongst the public down in the city.

Clea? One of your students?

Yes, thats right. My bloodline gift allows us to share thoughts.

Youve mentioned it. Cant say Im keen on the idea. Id rather its just me up here. Dar chuckled and tapped his thick, stony knuckle against his forehead.

Something that takes getting used to, but Ive grown quite fond of some of my disciples minds.

Dar didnt respond; He just nodded and sipped his drink. Hed known Loro for centuries, and he liked the man well enough, but there were things about the undead that he simply couldnt condone, one of which was the many ways they enthralled lesser undead, promising them power but feeding it to them on such a slow drip that they were paid a thousand-times in service for what they gave in knowledge. Still, that was not a problem for Ranish Dar to solve, though Victor certainly seemed to have a vendetta against some of Loros kind. He chuckled at the thought. It might be an amusing venture to observe.

Book 7: Chapter 37: Ambush

Victor used the stairs, still visible in the twilight of the dungeons night cycle, as a guide, hurrying toward the center of the first level as quickly as he could. The ruined walls seemed to extend all the way to that distant point, and it felt almost like traversing a maze, though an easy one he never felt lost, and when he came to a dead-end, he simply hopped the wall in the direction he wanted to travel. When he drew close enough to the central stairway to see the individual steps in the distance without any haze obscuring his view, he paused and summoned his coyotes.

Okay, hermanos, spread out, have a look around, and let me know if you see any other pendejos lurking around. As his coyotes, yipping and calling to each other, slipped away through the gaps in the stone wall, Victor continued making his way toward the dungeon's center.

He was always sort of aware of his coyotes. He couldn't see what they saw but could tell if they found something or sensed danger. He was still a little surprised that he hadn't encountered any denizens of the dungeon, concluding that the people who'd designed the place, or at least chosen options from the System, had intended for the first level to serve as a staging ground. He had to assume there would be more to encounter if he could climb higher.

When he'd covered another few hundred yards toward the center, and the rooms surrounded by high, crumbling walls grew ever smaller and closer together, one of his coyotes alerted on a presence. Victor mentally urged his other scouts to return and started stalking toward the excited pack member. He knew roughly what direction to go and could sense how far away he was, but he still had to find his way through the broken walls. He could climb overtop, of course, shortening his path by making it more direct, but that close to the center of the level, he was afraid others would see him as his bulky body rose above the ruins.

So, he prowled through the ruins, growing ever closer to his coyote as it, in turn, stalked the presence. Victor had the impression of more than one target. After a few minutes, his other coyotes came to him. They were empowered by inspiration-attuned Energy, and he constantly had to remind them to quit yipping. After a few minutes, he sent them home to the Spirit Plane; at least he felt he could be confident that the one who'd found some prey was being quiet as it hunted. Next time, he whispered to Lifedrinker, remind me to use fear Energy; those boys are always better at sneaking.

When he entered the ruined chamber where his coyote waited, he quietly thanked his little brother and sent him back home. Then, Victor crept up to the gap in the wall and strained his ears, hoping for a clue as to what the scouting canine had found. It wasn't long before a feminine voice came to him, I think we're close. Just another few rooms, and we'll be at the stair.

And likely our doom as one of the needy brutes is sure to be waiting to strike us down. This voice was masculine, though very young, if Victor was guessing.

Which young monster worries you? Arcus is out. Zandastreva is out. I suppose we still have Arona to worry about.

Whoever beat Arcus is sure to be a dangerous one to encounter . . .

Whose to say that wasn't Arona?

The man, or boy, ignored the question. I saw Valeska Thornrend in the chamber. She's known to have a cold heart . . .

Are we just going to list all the names? The woman sounded exasperated, and Victor had a feeling she had more to say, but suddenly her tone changed, and she called out, Who lurks yonder? We don't seek a fight!

Victor froze, wondering if he was the target of her words, figuring he probably was because what did he know about sneaking? The people in the dungeon were all high-tier, at least as far as he was concerned, and he honestly had no idea what sorts of skills and abilities such people might employ. There were probably some Classes that gave people heightened awareness.

He contemplated retreating, leaping over a few walls and putting some distance between the two others. They sounded like underdogs, though, and from what he'd overheard, they didn't seem to be spoiling for a fight, even if he didn't believe her direct declaration to that effect. He decided to try his luck; if they were afraid of Arcus, and Victor had beaten Arcus, it stood to reason that he

shouldnt cower from this encounter. He cleared his throat and said, Ill be willing to talk if you dont try anything.

Victor, on a sudden whim, cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. As he swelled with positivity, the world looked brighter, and his problems seemed more distant. He stood tall, holding Lifedrinker on his shoulder with one hand, and stepped into the crumbled archway to look into the room where hed heard the other two. They stood close together, one, a wispy, elfin woman with wavy gray hair, angular silver eyes, and a fierce expression, the other a short, boyish fellow with a bit too much pudg and soft, dewy eyes. The woman held a bow, an arrow nocked but not drawn back, and the boy held a thick, red wand made of smooth glass. Victor could see and feel the Energy built up in the wand, and he knew the kid was on the verge of unleashing a spell.

Stop there! the woman said in a sharp voice.

Victor smiled and leaned a shoulder against the wall, some ancient mortar crumbling with the pressure. Im not the kind of guy who attacks people for no reason.

Ah, but we all have reason in this place, no? the kid said, his voice surprisingly firm.

Victor shrugged. Well, it takes more than a bit of Energy to provoke me into a fight. Lets put it that way.

I dont know you, stranger, the woman said, stepping to the side and separating herself from her companion. Are you new to Sojourn?

I guess so. Im Victor.

The youth lifted his wand and, with a flourish, bowed elaborately. I am Cam Lightly, and this fine lady is Sora Deval.

Youre a large fellow, and I can feel the aura youre creating; its. . . lovely, Sora said, gently lifting the arrow from her bow.

Ah, you feel the inspiration? That means I dont consider you an enemy. Victor grinned further and then straightened up. Can I come a little closer?

Something tells me youd do so even if we said no. Cam sounded a little petulant, but Victor could feel the Energy pull back from his wand as he began to relax. He stepped toward them, kicking some loose gravel to the side as he approached. Drawing near, he gestured to his pants, mostly tatters from mid-thigh down.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Sorry for my appearance. I got a little scorched earlier. When he was just a few feet from the others and loomed over their much smaller frames, he gestured toward the stairway in the distance. I heard you two talking as I approached. You think some of the others will be waiting to ambush people at the stairs?

I think so, Cam nodded, peering up at Victor and stepping back.

Who burned you? Sora asked, ignoring Cams response.

Oh, one of the other entrants. You guys didnt see the meteor shower over that way? Victor jerked his thumb in the general direction of his earlier battle.

Arcus! Cam said, eyes widening. You battled Arcus?

Victor just grinned and shrugged. Anyway, I figure if we all approach the stairs together, theres a better chance we might survive an ambush. How many do you think would do that? Lay a trap, I mean. Do you think the others get along well enough to help each other in that way?

Are you offering us your protection, good sir? Sora lifted a sharp gray eyebrow, something like amusement in her tone.

Um, not exactly, but Id fight with you if we all got jumped. Look, Im not trying to force the matter, and Ive wasted enough time in this place, so I can go ahead alone if . . .

No, no! Cam waved his wand frantically. Wed love to accompany you with a gentlemans agreement.

Gentlefolk, Sora corrected.

Sure, right, whatever. What say you, Victor? Well aid each other until such time that its a hindrance on one or all of us, and then well part ways amicably.

Sounds just right. Victor swapped Lifedrinker to his left hand, causing Cam and Sora to flinch, then reached out with his right hand, ready to shake on the deal. Cam looked at it for a heartbeat, apparently weighing the risk, then shot out his soft, pale hand, grabbing a portion of Victors palm. He smiled and backed away, and Victor held his hand out to Sora. She wore an odd expression, sort of puzzled and amused, then grabbed Victors much larger hand in thin fingers that felt like iron bars.

She might be small, Victor realized, but she was damn sturdy. For the second time, he reminded himself that he couldnt judge people by appearances in this placeCam might look like a pudgy kid, but, according to Ranish Dar, everyone in there was level seventy or higher. Victor could only guess what that soft, almost cherubic face might be hiding.

Were close, Sora said, gesturing with her bow toward a gap in the wall. A few more wall segments, and well be there.

My mentor, Duvius Black, will tan my hide for suggesting this, Cam said, wincing at some imagined punishment, but I think I should go into the clearing first. If a trap there lies, surely theyll spring it on me, thus revealing their fangs for you two to pluck.

And you? Victor asked, frowning.

I shall utilize my ability to slip free from harm.

He has a chance affinity, Sora said as though it explained everything.

Chance? Victor tried to connect the dots. Was he talking about luck? Randomness? Both?

Lets just say I have a few abilities that, while on lengthy timers, make harming me a rather confounding enterprise. He smiled and bowed again, his red glass wand flickering with faint sparkles. Well? Is my plan suitable?

Sora nodded firmly. I have no arguments.

Sure. Victor shrugged. If this guy wanted to spring the trap for them, he wouldn't argue. As they walked, Victor felt several soft pulses of Energy emanating from Sora, and when he looked at her, trying to spot a clue as to what she was doing, she caught his eyes and hurriedly explained.

I'm not doing anything untoward! I'm scrying the area nearby; it's how I noticed you lurking earlier. For the record, it will also obscure our presence from others.

Lurking? Victor chuckled. I guess I was. Anyway, your ability isn't perfect. I listened to you for a while before you noticed me.

Likely your passive resistance . . . she muttered but cut her words short, holding a finger to her lips. She looked from Cam's wide eyes to Victor's puzzled, questioning glance and mouthed, Two, pointing past the next gap in the stone wall.

Victor nodded, pulling Lifedrinker off his shoulder and holding her ready. Cam, rather blithely, waved to the two of them and began to stroll for the opening, looking very much the part of a careless youth out for a stroll. Victor saw his red wand sparkle faintly and felt a surge of strange, almost pleasant Energy, and then the young-looking man practically skipped through the crumbled archway. When Sora darted forward, aiming for the side of the arch, Victor followed suit, taking up the other side, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever happened. Peering from the shadows, hoping Sora's magic did the job of keeping them hidden, he watched as Cam entered an enormous, rubble-strewn clearing.

Piles of stone blocks, clearly once part of the ruins, were scattered all over the clearing, but beyond them, beyond a hundred yards of crab-grass-covered rocky soil, the pristine white marble spiral staircase rose into the sky. Cal veritably skipped into the clearing, whistling a tune that wouldn't have sounded out of place at a Renaissance fair. He'd made it a quarter of the way into the clearing, edging to the left to skirt a high pile of rubble, when, with a peel of thunder that rattled the wall where Victor leaned, a bolt of magenta lightning ripped the sky and exploded into the little fellow.

Victor blinked several times, trying to get the brilliant imprint out of his vision. When he finally focused on the spot where Cam had been, he saw only scorched grass and blackened stone. He looked left to right, and then he saw him, standing a dozen yards away from where the lightning had struck, tilting his head in confusion. In a singsong voice, the little guy called out, Why would someone blast the soil in such a way? What'd that poor patch of grass do to hurt anyone?

Stones clattered in the distance, and Victor squinted to see a metallic glint as a humanoid figure moved around the side of a nearby pile of rubble, trying, he supposed, to get Cam back in their sights. Victor felt a surge of Energy and looked to see Sora drawing her bow, taking aim with a shimmering, mirror-polished arrow.

Victor wanted to jump into action, but he held steady, waiting. Sora had said two people were lurking in the clearing, and he wanted to get his eyes on the second one before he made a move. Sora's bowstring thrummed, and he watched as the glittering arrow streaked toward the pile of rubble, not directly at the person Victor had glimpsed. Just before it looked like it would smash into a large, toppled block, it burst like a shattering mirror, and when the flashes of light settled, there were half a dozen copies of Sora standing on the pile of rubble. More impressive than the copies was that they all performed different actions.

Two drew their bows, aiming arrows at the shadow-obscured figure edging toward Cam. One of the mirror copies began picking up hunks of rubble, throwing them this way and that. Another began to howl strange words, summoning a storm of sparkling magic. Before he could continue staring, waiting to see what they do next, a new actor stepped onto the proverbial stage fifty yards away, past where Cam currently stood, still shouting taunts in his sing-song voice, a hulking green man with a leathery shell not unlike a turtle, exploded out from behind a great toppled monolith. He bore a heavy-looking hammer in each hand and moved like he'd used a charge ability. The soil churned under his feet, a cloud of debris in his wake, and Victor predicted he'd crash into Cam in less than a second.

That's my cue, he grunted, launching himself out of the archway, bumping Sora as he passed, knocking her sprawling. Victor didn't notice his inadvertent rudeness; he was in the zone, focused on the big warrior, already visualizing how he'd deliver Lifedrinker's first blow. He didn't have eyes for it, but if he'd been watching, he'd have seen the shadowy attacker near the central pile of rubble blasting Sora's doubles into oblivion, one after the other, with metallic missiles that crackled through the air like lightning-charged rail-gun rounds. As Victor ran, he cast Iron Berserk, and as his legs extended and his strength and speed increased, he turned the long-distance sprint into a short one.

Even so, the shelled-backed brute reached Cam first, his charge demolishing the ground between them. Victor watched, cringing, but, just as before with the lightning strike, Cam was suddenly elsewhere, standing halfway between the dazed turtle-man and the battle the other unknown assailant was waging against Sora's doubles. Meanwhile, Victor closed the gap, and just as he was only four titan-sized strides away, he cast Energy Charge, fueling the ability with fear-attuned Energy. In a streak of smoky shadow, he blasted over the ground and collided with his opponent. The big, shelled warrior wasn't a slouch; he saw Victor coming and somehow turned just in time, exposing his hard, leathery armor to his charge.

Victor didn't care. He lowered his shoulder and swung Lifedrinker with abandon. He had no doubt she was up to the challenge; she bore a shard of his spirit she regularly kept her imbued with inspiration-attuned Energy. He exploded into the turtle-man, and Lifedrinker, screaming her excitement and fury, buried herself halfway to the haft in the thick material. The concussive release of Energy as he collided with his target echoed through the ruins like thunder. Victor felt a tremendous torrent of fear-attuned Energy drain from his Core as his ability shielded him from harm.

Meanwhile, his target exploded away from him, blasted by the force of his impact. Victor made the split-second decision to release Lifedrinker as the guy was pulled away; she screamed her hunger at him, and he knew she'd struck a vein; he thought he'd let her do some draining while the turtle-man bounced and flopped over the stony ground.

He glanced at the other ambusher and saw him sprinting for the stairs, a rain of glittering arrows falling in his wake, exploding against the ground like mortars. A flicker in the corner of his vision alerted him to Cam casting a spell with his glass wand, and then, like an optical illusion, the youthful wizard flickered through the air until he'd closed the distance with the runner. He shouted something in his falsetto singsong, and then . . . the ambusher tripped, sliding through a patch of dirt and lying still just long enough for three of Sora's arrows to strike direct hits.

Victor turned back to his foe and saw the big, leathery, hairless green man struggling to his feet. Lifedrinker stood proudly from his shell as the hammer-

wielding warrior started walking toward him, limping slightly. Victor was easily five feet taller than the bulky man and wasn't too worried about fighting him with his bare hands for a while. That's right, chica! he growled, Drink up that ugly suckers Energy. He jogged toward him, slapping his chest. Come on!

The man really did look like a turtle up close. He had no hair on his face, a smooth, flat nose, and a mouth that looked almost like a beak. Still, he scowled and grunted, Big, huh? I've killed bigger! Then, to Victor's shock and delight, he surged with a very familiar feeling Energy. His eyes began to blaze with red fury, and his muscles seemed to double in mass, bulging like they'd burst out of his skin. He lifted both his hammers and screamed, Lets fight!

Book 7: Chapter 38: Collision Course

Despite his obvious berserk nature, the shelled warrior didn't grow with his rage, aside from his bulging and swelling muscles. Still, his bruises and scuffs disappeared as his fury fueled his regeneration, and he moved with a sudden alacrity that put Victor momentarily on the defensive. He darted forward, whipping his sledge-like weapons through the air, aiming to shatter Victor's bones with each frenzied attack. Victor, for his part, began to laugh with the glee of good, clean combat, darting back, slipping blows, and slapping the smaller warrior's arms aside as he ducked close.

While Victor enjoyed the contest, ducking, dodging, shoving, and grappling, he could see the green-skinned warrior was getting more and more enraged, his eyes blazing, his skin burning with palpable hate. He may have advanced his Berserk ability to a tier similar to Victor's, but he certainly hadn't unlocked Iron Berserk. Victor still felt rage when under the effects of his ability, but he was also rational and able to take joy in combat; his opponent was clearly feeling no joy.

After Victor ducked a wild overhand blow, sidestepping and shoving the back of the smaller warrior's shell, the turtle-like man stumbled forward and tried to perform a shoulder roll. Unfortunately, Lifedrinker interfered, using her impact with the stony ground to drive herself deeper into the leathery flesh where her razor-sharp, smoldering blade had already begun to draw great torrents of hot, red Energy into her hungry metal. The green warrior roared in pain and frustration, aborting his somersault to flop to his belly and drive himself up with a powerful thrust of his muscle-bound arms. He veritably dove at Victor, whipping his hammers like a whirlwind.

Victor stepped into the charge, lowered his center of gravity with a deep squat, gripped the green warrior behind his bulky, swollen thighs, and drove himself up and back, flinging him through the air with a tremendous roar. When Victor watched his opponent sail, arms flailing, feet kicking fruitlessly, he almost lost his rage in his amusement. He laughed and leaned forward to slap his knees as the hammer-wielding warrior smashed to the ground with a reverberating thud that jolted the ground enough to lift a cloud of dust all over the clearing. At nearly the same time, a System message flashed in front of Victor's eyes.

*****Vek Dydallion has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Twenty entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

At first, the message confused Victor because he could see the turtle-man already struggling to his feet. For a second, he thought the System had made a mistake, but then he glanced back toward the central stair and saw his two companions standing together with no sign of the combatant they'd been chasing.

The gray-haired woman, Sora, lifted her bow and started striding toward the downed berserker, but Victor waved her off and shouted, No. She and Cam exchanged looks, and the soft-looking wizard shrugged, immediately turning to jog toward the stairs leading up. Sora looked at Victor for a long moment, then waved a hand and hurried after him.

Victor turned back to his opponent, stoking the rage in his pathways with a fresh infusion from his Core. His companions were, apparently, willing to let him fight alone, but they weren't going to wait around. He was all right with that. The turtle warrior had regained his feet, and he was looking at Victor with murder in his eyes. He lowered himself to a squat, his legs spread wide, and Victor could feel the hot rage building in him, even from forty yards distant. Part of him knew he should try to interrupt whatever he was doing, but another part was eager to see what it would be. He'd never fought a berserker before, never seen someone using a rage affinity, at least not so purely as this man was.

He lowered himself into a fighting stance, slowly moving forward, watching with hungry eyes, waiting to see what the warrior would do. The turtle-man was beginning to shimmer with heat and power, and the air around him looked ready to explode as hot waves of Energy wafted away from him. The ground began to tremble, pebbles danced on the ancient flagstones, and hairline cracks started propagating away from the warrior's feet, spreading outward like a spider's web. Whatever he was building up to was going to be awesome, and Victor peeled his eyes, eager to see it. Come on! he roared, Show me!

The turtle warrior screamed something inarticulate. His hammers suddenly blazed like twin, molten stars, and the ground erupted under his feet. Victor, staring at the cloud of dust and broken stone, almost didn't see the warrior ripping toward him, tearing the earth in his passage, streaking like a comet, hammers held high, ready to crash into him on impact. He was moving very close to the extremity of Victor's perception, almost too fast for him to track, but not quite. If Victor hadn't been boosting his agility, and if he hadn't been further enhanced by Iron Berserk, he surely would have been devastated by the charge. He was boosted, though, and he had a fraction of a second to react.

Some warriors might have dodged to the side. Others might have jumped. Still others would have braced for the impact, hoping to use their opponent's momentum to slip the majority of the force. Victor's mind never contemplated those actions; he immediately channeled a torrent of glory-attuned Energy into his pathways and cast Energy Charge, answering the turtle-man's charge with one of his own. He ripped over the ground, a brilliant sparkling gold missile of meat and metal. He didn't wield a weapon but lowered his head and let his massively dense Juggernaut Helm lead the impact.

The green warrior was beyond fear or caution, he stoked his rage to apoplectic levels, and even if he'd been able to react in time, he likely wouldn't have turned aside or aborted his charge. They met in a full, head-on collision that resulted in such an explosion of physical force and discharged Energy that the entire dungeon level shook. Victor felt his glory-attuned Energy drain like water down a whirlpool, the shielding portion of the spell valiantly trying to protect him from the destructive forces. The turtle-man must have had a similar function with his charge ability because the two of them hung together for a pregnant second as their Energies bled out, erupting in a nova-like mixture between them.

Victor grinned hungrily while his opponent snapped his beak and scowled. Then, the turtle's red, glowing Energy flickered out, and his flesh rippled with force as the explosion took him. He flew

back like hed been hit full in the chest by a streaking comet. The concussion continued wracking Victor, and his glory-attuned Energy burned out a second after the turtles.

He, too, was thrown back, hot gasses, burning Energies, and shockwaves of force flinging him head over heels. Victor bounced and tumbled, his bones cracking, his skin ripping, but only briefly he had a surging store of rage-attuned Energy, and his Iron Berserk drew on it, healing him almost as quickly as he took each new injury. When he finally slid to a stop, dozens of yards from the impact point, he was quick to clamber to his feet.

As hed suspected, his opponent either didnt have multiple affinities or couldnt use them while enraged, much like Victor under the effects of Volcanic Fury. The turtle-man lay crumpled at the end of a deep, long furrow in the ground, heaps of upturned flagstones and churned-up soil piled along the track of his passage. Victor started toward him, noting the eager, hungry, keening song Lifedrinker was emitting, either directly into his head or into the sudden silence left in the wake of their collisionit wasnt clear to him which.

He walked into the trench, followed it to its end, and the battered, broken man who lay there, his arms and legs bent and bloody, the leathery skin of his shell half peeled away, and his face a mass of scrapes and purple bruises. He was on his side, and Victor could see Lifedrinker pulsing with stolen red Energy, still digging and throbbing, trying to get something more out of the broken man. Even so, the shattered warrior lifted a bent, bloody arm, formed half a fist with his crooked fingers, and muttered, Drobna, from a mouth full of blood and bits of broken beak.

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Victors rage was subsiding; he knew he could extend it by pulling more Energy out of his Core, but he let it fade, and as he rapidly contracted back to his normal size, he made a fist and pressed his knuckles against the sturdy, battered, nearly dead warriors. Victor. A soft silvery glow encompassed Drobna, and as he dissipated into a pearly fog, the System sent out another message:

*****Drobna Wyrms-shell has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Nineteen entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

Victor stooped to snatch up Lifedrinker, noting her satisfied glow and the thick rivers of angry, red Energy marking her silvery axe head. Nice work, beautiful. He had no doubt that Drobna would have had another round in him if not for her. The axe hummed in his hands, and as he slung her onto his shoulder, looking up at the sky to track the incoming Energy infusion, Victor could feel her pleasure; shed enjoyed tormenting his foe while he wrestled around with him.

He watched the Energy ball form in the sky, watched it explode into nineteen different golden missiles, and braced himself to receive the one streaking straight toward him. Two others shot for the base of the stairs, several others went up the top, and quite a few streaked away to distant areas of the first level. When the Energy struck him, Victor was instantly lifted, poleaxed by the tremendous influx. He was glad the System had waited for him and Drobna to finish their fight before awarding the Energy from the guy Cam and Sora had taken out. Still, the combined award was a lot, enough that he fell to his knees after the infusion while the System informed him of another level gained.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 62 Herald of the Mountains Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.*****

Thats fast, he grunted. He supposed it made sense; five entrants had been taken out of the contest since his last level. That meant all those awards were being split with fewer and fewer people. What would happen if everyone kept getting knocked out? What if he were the last one standing? It seemed certain hed stand to gain quite a few more levels in this contest, and he was beginning to understand why so many people were willing to risk so much for a shot. Thanks to his gains, hed already started to mitigate the risk of getting rescued.

Victor stood, hopped out of the trench Drobna had created, and started toward the stairs, just fifty yards or so distant. He chuckled as he walked, noting the clean-blasted groundhis impact with the berserker had sent a shockwave out that had blown all the rubble and gravel to the edges of the clearing. He slowly turned in a circle and realized theyd done more than that. The impact had toppled many of the nearby walls. He craned his neck as he approached the smooth, white marble stairway, trying to trace it to the second level but losing track as it faded into the misty clouds.

Well fought, Victor, a youthful, exuberant voice called from the stairs.

Cam, Victor chuckled, lifting his hand to his eyes, shading them so he could squint into the shadows of the spiral steps. He spotted the youths tousled blond hair peering over the rail about twenty yards up. Thought you two would be up to level two by now.

Nah, Sora said, stepping out from behind the stairs. She held her bow in a relaxed grip with no arrow in sight, putting Victors thoughts of betrayal to rest. We just wanted to get out of the way and, well, position ourselves to run if you lost.

As if he would! Cam laughed.

Was it a struggle, Victor? Sora lifted one of her silvery gray eyebrows.

It was a good brawla good clean fight. Nothing against Drobna, but he wasnt ready for me. Victor shrugged and started up the steps.

Is anyone? Cam hopped down a few steps to get closer, awaiting an answer.

In here? Victor shrugged. No idea. Im new around town. He looked at Cam, then down to Sora, who still leaned against the railing at the bottom of the stairs. So, whats this? We traveling together some more?

Sora nodded. Wed like our gentlefolks agreement to stay in place if youre willing.

Sure. Victor smiled, inhaling deeply through his nose and sighing, feeling far too relaxed and generally gooda side effect of the Energy infusion, he was sure. Wonder how many are above us. I saw a few Energy balls go that way, but I figure if we stay together, maybe theyll think twice about jumping us. Lets clear some levels, yeah?

Yeah! Cam cried, pumping his red glass wand in the air.

#

God, hes a monster! Darren cried, his eyes nearly bugging out of his head while the crowd around them erupted in similar shouts and cheers. Valla glanced sharply at him, initially thinking it was an

insult but then realizing it was a sort of compliment. Lesh slapped his strange protgs shoulder, laughing as he slammed down another pint of harsh, fortified ale.

Valla turned back to the screen, looking over the heads of half a hundred other patrons who crowded the floor of the drinking establishment, sitting around low tables strewn with empty cups, pitchers of beer, and stacks of chips, dice, and other gambling implements. The viewing house was a wild, rough establishment, and Lesh had already proclaimed his love for it several times.

Lam seemed right at home, too, but Edeya was happy to be sandwiched between her and Valla, secure in the middle of the bench. Lesh had already drunk more than Valla had seen anyone drink in one sitting, and that included Victor when he was actively trying to get drunk. Darren was a bit red-faced, his words a little slurred, but he seemed to be having a great time watching the screen. Of course, it helped that Victor had been center stage a few times, his view filling the big screen while he got himself into fights. The latest one, with the shelled warrior named Drobna, had driven the crowd wild.

Valla had enjoyed it, but only because Victor had been laughing. Shed never seen him lose a fight when he was doing that. Well, she reconsidered, had she ever seen him lose? She supposed it had come close a few times when hed fought Rellia, back before she even knew him, shed thought he was a dead man. Naturally, hed surprised her and everyone else that night. Then there was the reaver army, the night-brute prince, the warlord, the Ridonne, his various arena battles, the ancient wyrm, his . . . Valla shook her head, refocusing on the present, content to admit that hed been in a lot of close calls.

Hes not a monster, she said, finally deciding to correct the record.

I didnt mean . . .

No, I know what you meant, but someone should speak for him. Victor has a big, good heart. It might prove his undoing, but hell never be pleased to be considered a monster.

Undershtood, Lady Valla, Darren slurred.

Well, that charge . . . Lam shook her head, snorting. Those two nearly knocked the stairs out of the sky. Hah! I wonder what would have happened if they had broken them, cutting off the second level. Forfeit?

Lesh cleared his throat, slamming his glass down and gesturing to a serving boy. Id pay all my wealth to see that! The Systems in charge of that dungeon, after all.

The, um, the dungeon Darren and I are going to, Edeya shifted while she spoke, sitting up straighter between the two larger women, it wont be competitive, right? I mean, other people wont be in at the same time, right?

No! Lam smiled, leaning against the booth's rear wall so she could look more easily at Edeyas face. Thats why you had to sign up for a time slot they only allow one party in each instance at a time, and you only get thirty-six hours in there.

Some of them have much longer permit expirations, Darren said, slapping his hand on the guidebook on the table before him. Theres a tower dungeon for tier-twos that has week-long passes.

Edeya nodded and started to say something, but Valla heard Victor's voice coming from the viewscreen, and she hushed them, pointing. They all got quiet, listening as Victor spoke to his two new friends, agreeing to stay together for the time being. Then they started climbing the steps, and the proprietor switched the view to another entrant—a black and gold-feathered avian woman who was digging through the lair of a great multi-headed, worm-like creature she'd slain.

I'm glad he made some friends in there, Edeya said.

I think he'll want to be friends with that berserker, too! Lesh laughed.

Edeya nodded. They touched fists! Victor loves that.

Valla sighed and stretched, wondering what sort of toilets she might find in the establishment. I'm tired of watching and waiting while others do things, she said, surprising herself. I'm eager for our dungeon, Lesh. She glanced at Lam. You're still invited, Captain. Lam certainly held higher ranks than captain these days, but the old Legion title brought back many memories for the two of them, and Lam didn't seem to mind.

Well, Captain, Lam said, returning the favor, I might take you up on it. I was thinking I should stay out and wait in case Edeya and Darren needed something, but . . . She trailed off for a second, looking into Edeya's eyes. Watching Victor has brought back something of an old hunger.

Good! Edeya smiled. You should go with them! Valla had a hard time telling if she was being sincere or just brave, but Lam smiled, nodding.

I'll think about it.

Lesh pounded his empty glass on the table, waving his huge, thick arm in the air. Come over here! he said under his breath. These folk are ignoring me!

Valla, ironically, ignored him, still looking at Lam. Don't think too long. Less than two days until our entry slot.

No, I won't. I'll let you know tonight. Look! Lam pointed to the screen. They're back on Victor's party. Are they approaching some kind of lair?

Book 7: Chapter 39: Lair

The stairs worked with the same kind of magic Victor had seen in other places. Climbing a few steps seemed to activate it, and then, without any warning, he stumbled onto a landing. He lifted his axe, looking around, startled. His caution was unwarranted; he was in a small, pale marble room with a single door on the far wall, closed and barred from the inside. Other than the stairs leading down, the only other object in the room was a marble chest the size of a shoebox sitting in the center. Victor turned, wondering where his companions were, but they didn't arrive, and he guessed the dungeon had used its transportation magic to separate them. Hopefully, just so we can open our chests in peace, he muttered.

Speaking aloud reminded him that he was being observed, so he glanced up, looking for the floating stone egg recording his every move, but it wasn't there, further reinforcing the idea that the dungeon wanted them to have a private, safe moment in which to claim their rewards. Victor slung Lifedrinker into her harness and then walked over to the chest. He squatted before it and noted it was molded to the marble floor—he wouldn't be moving or taking this chest.

With a shrug, he lifted the lid. Motes of golden Energy sparkled out of the chest in a showy display, and when Victor blinked, clearing his eyes, he was left staring at two objects. One was a small, black pouch that looked to be made of silk, and the other was a heavy leather, left-handed glove with a wide wrist cuff.

The hell is this? Victor grunted, not exactly impressed. He picked up the pouch and confirmed that it felt like silk and also that it was empty. Hed been around long enough to guess there must be more to it, so he carefully trickled a tiny thread of inspiration-attuned Energy into it. Suddenly, his mind expanded with the knowledge of the pouchs contentsit was empty but contained a vast dimensional space. Victor nodded and tied the pouch to his belt. It seemed the dungeon was giving him a container since all of his were off-limits. With that mystery solved, he reached in and picked up the leather glove.

The leather was supple and fine, but the knuckles were stitched with an extra layer of much stiffer stuff. Still, it was just leather. Victor didnt even notice a particularly strong Energy aura coming off it. Frowning, he trickled some inspiration-attuned Energy into it, and a System description appeared in his vision:

*****Gauntlet of Sojourn This is a set item. Collect five pieces of the set and bring them to the Sojourn City Stone to imbue them with curated set bonuses.*****

Victor turned the gauntlet in his hand a few times, wondering if he was missing something, but found nothing really notable about it. It didnt seem like anything special to him, but he supposed it might change drastically after you collected a set and had the items imbued. Whatever that means. He stood up, put the glove into his new storage pouch, and walked over to the door. He paused long enough to pull Lifedrinker out of her harness, and then he unbarred the exit and walked through. His vision flickered for an instant, the only clue that hed been transported, and then he stumbled into a gray stone chamber and almost bowled Cam over.

Oof! Cam said, stumbling back. He caught himself by reaching out to rest a hand on the stone wall.

Sorry! Victor grunted. I just stepped through the door, and the dungeon dumped me on top of you.

Not a problem. I, too, just arrived. Did you get a chest?

Victor didnt see any point in lying. Yeah. You?

Oh yes! Twenty-five thousand death-attuned Energy beads.

Death? That useful to you?

Cam shrugged, pursing his pouty pink lips. Only as money. Covers half my entry fee, if nothing else.

You paid fifty thousand beads to get in here?

A hundred, my friend. A hundred, unattuned. What, you didnt?

Victor opened his mouth to reply, but then the air shimmered, and Sora appeared, stumbling toward him. Victor held out his hand, catching her. Gods! That was careless! I almost fell atop you, she said, grasping his wrist with her slender fingers. He could feel the points of her nails, and she quickly let go. I didnt scratch you, did I?

Victor turned his wrist left and right, displaying his unmarred flesh. Nah. Ive got thick skin.

Well? Cam asked, his tone almost petulant. Victor turned to him with a scowl, but the young mans eyes were trained on Sora.

Well, what? She snapped.

What did you get in your chest? I was made a touch richer.

Sora sighed and shrugged. Just a bolt of something called Evensong Silk. It seems rather fine, but Im not sure Ill find a use. Ill likely just sell it.

She looked at Victor, and so did Cam, and he knew they wanted him to say what the System had awarded him. Their hesitance to ask outright probably stemmed from the same reason he didnt really want to say they hadnt built any trust for each other yet. So far, theyd gotten into one fight as partners, and it had been mutually beneficial to cooperate. So, Victor shrugged and said, Pretty much the samesome leather. He almost grinned at his duplicity; he wasnt technically lying.

Sora nodded and looked around the room. More like a dungeon on this level, eh?

Cam slapped the cold stone wall near the closed wooden door. Seems so, based upon these dank stone walls. He reached for the rough iron latch on the door but paused, turning to look at Victor and Sora. Since the stairs deposited us together, likely because the dungeon assumes weve teamed up, we can assume there are multiple entry points to this level. We may run into others, or we may not, but Im certain there will be dungeon denizens starting on this floor. Im not the first student Duvius Black has sponsored in this contest, and he told me as much.

Sora laughed, shaking her head. This is what happens when you spend all of your time studying and playing Vongboard. Anyone whos watched previous competitions knows as much, Cam.

Oh. Yes, I suppose that makes sense. Shall we? He jiggled the door handle.

Youre going first? Victor asked.

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Traps have a tendency to miss me. He flashed a bright smile, pulled the handle, and stepped through. Victor glanced at Sora, and she just shrugged, shaking her head so her long, nearly white hair bobbed back and forth.

One day, hell regret relying on whatever skill that is. She eyed Victor for a moment, then added, Perhaps you should guard our rear flank. She held her bow in her left hand, and when she touched the string with her other hand, Victor was surprised to see a dark metal arrow appear under her fingers. Its razor-edged tip dripped something to the stone that sizzled.

How do you do that? I thought dimensional containers were locked . . .

Its a function of my magical bow. I purchased an exemption so that I could pull the arrows from its storage.

Purchased an exemption, huh? Victor shook his head. It was starting to become evident to him that not every participant in the dungeon was on equal footing, even putting aside the level disparities. Sora winked and lithely followed Cam through the door. Victor brought up the rear, walking into a long marble passage dimly lit by regularly placed amber gemstones embedded in the ceiling. He could already count six branching passages in the long stretch before them.

Cam had walked ahead about twenty yards to the first intersection and was carefully peering around the corners. When Sora and Victor caught up to him, he sighed and whined, How are we supposed to find our way through this maze? Do we even know what were looking for?

Victor answered, his voice more a growl than hed intended, Stairs. Something to kill.

Suggestions? Cam leaned against the wall, but not casually; it was more like he needed the support, as though his feet were killing him.

I could scout . . . Sora started to say, but Victor shook his head, channeling dark, fear-attuned Energy into his pathways. He summoned his coyotes, and this time, when they appeared, crawling out of a pool of shadows by his feet, they were eerily silent, their smoky purple eyes peering beneath dark, shadowy brows as they scrutinized Victors companions.

Cam yelped and leaned back. Each of the five stalking canines was large enough to grab ahold of his leg and drag him off if they wanted to. Sora stepped back, too, but she seemed to recognize that Victors companions werent being hostile so much as curious. He could see she wanted to reach out a hand toward the closest one, but she resisted the temptation.

Before he said anything, Victor silently impressed his will upon his companions, and, on nearly silent, padding feet, they darted off, separating at the various junctions to explore the side corridors. Then, he looked to Sora and explained, Ill know if they find something interesting.

Amazing! Cam said. Here, I thought you were just a brute, a powerful one, but a brute, nonetheless. When Victor didnt speak but glowered at the man, he stammered, I mean that with the utmost respect for raw, brute power . . .

Sora chuckled and slapped Cams shoulder. Hush, Cam! Youre making things worse. She looked at Victor. Do we just wait here?

We can. Or we can go ahead and explore that passage on the left up there. I didnt have enough coyotes to cover every option.

Coyotes? Cam smiled. What a lovely name for your hounds. Theyre a special breed, indeed!

Quit trying to put honey on a burn, Cam. Sora clicked her tongue and gave the youngster a shove, and he hurried ahead, bypassing another junction but stopping at the third. Victor watched him peering around the corners, but when he and Sora approached, he got a sensation from one of his coyotesprey and danger.

I think one of my companions found a monster. He paused, thought for a moment, and shrugged. Or a person.

Do we go to it? Cam asked. I see nothing but a long corridor down this way.

Sora nodded, looking at Victor. Better to take the sure shot than pray for another hare.

All right. Follow me. Victor turned and jogged back to the last junction. He could feel his coyote to the left, so he turned that way and hurried forward. He was reasonably sure hed know if his companion had spotted or triggered any traps, so he didnt move too cautiously. They came to a four-way junction, and he could feel his coyote to the left, but still further ahead, so he wasnt sure if he should turn. He paused and willed the coyote to return. Wait. Hes coming to guide us.

What a skill! Are they summoned beasts? How clever are they?

They're some sort of spirit . . . Sora started to say, but Victor ignored them. His coyote was already there, silently darting out of the shadows on the left-hand passage.

Good boy! Show me, he whispered, then, holding Lifedrinker ready, he jogged after the eager scout. He could hear Sora and Cam following. Victor wasn't reducing his size and had to lean forward to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. For that reason, when he moved, he looked predatory and aggressive.

As he followed his companion, he channeled hot, rage-attuned Energy into his arms and Lifedrinker, and he recast his Inspiration of the Quinametzin, washing himself and his companions in a warm, encouraging light that pushed away the shadows. When his coyote came to a right-hand junction and stopped, pointing with his nose like only a canine can do, Victor slowed and glanced back.

He saw the egg-shaped spying stone dart back, having moved close to him as he was running. He scowled at it, something deep in his blood annoyed at being spied on. Further back, he saw Cam and Sora. Cam gave him a thumbs-up when he saw him looking, and Sora nodded. Victor turned, stalked to the corner, and leaning forward like a tiger ready to pounce, he peered around it.

A short hallway opened into an immense cavern, and near its center was an enormous, pink-skinned creature that looked like part elephant, part eel, and part octopus. It was shifting through piles of sludge-like refuse, and Victor could smell the rot and decay from where he stood despite a faint current of air tickling his ears as it wafted into the larger room. At that thought, Victor's eyes widened; could the thing smell him?

It didn't seem to. He watched its enormous body on its trunk-like legs shifting left and right while its great, circular maw munched the piled sludge. The tentacle-like appendages surrounding its head reached out, pulling things into its mouth, where it squeezed shut, grinding the stuff into a paste that it could swallow. Victor felt bile roiling in his gut, threatening to rise up as he watched the process. He ducked back, looked over his shoulder, and waved the others forward. When they came to the corner, he held a finger to his lips and motioned for them to peek around the corner.

Sludge Gargantuopod, Cam hissed.

Shit! Sora softly cursed, earning a smile and a respectful nod from Victor.

Do we kill it? he whispered hoarsely.

Can we? Cam shook his head. They regenerate very rapidly, and, no offense, big man, but they're strong and huge and . . .

Let me rephrase, Victor interrupted. Is it worth killing?

Oh, Gods, yes, Cam nodded. If we can, there's sure to be great loot . . .

So, it regenerates. Anything to combat that?

Sora nodded, I'll use fire arrows. That'll help.

I can try to confuse it. If I can trick its mind into thinking it's uninjured . . . Cam trailed off, shaking his head. My mind affinity is my weakest. No promises.

Do your best. I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Victor cut the Energy feeding his coyotes as he spoke, sending them back to the Spirit Plane. He had another companion he meant to call up for this battle.

Its going to spew toxic gases, Cam said, snapping his fingers as though hed just remembered the fact.

Im pretty sturdy. Ill summon a banner that should help you two; hopefully, itll push the gasses away.

Sora nodded. I have some air affinity.

Victor couldnt help the grin stretching his face, and he knew he was baring his teeth at his two companions while they huddled there. He probably looked insane, but he couldnt help ithe loved fighting, and that thing in the next room looked like it would put up a good brawl. More than that, he was eager to see what kind of treasure would prompt Cam to label it great loot. He nodded, twisting his white-knuckled grip on Lifedrinkers haft. So? Ready?

Cam slapped his thick red glass wand against his palm. Not in the least, but Ill do my best.

Im ready, Sora said, her brow narrowed fiercely.

All right. Victor looked at Lifedrinkers shiny axe head. The rivulets of rage Energy shed siphoned away from Drobna Wyrms-shell were all but gone, absorbed into her metal. What about you, beautiful? Ready for another drink? In response, her metal brightened and then burst into molten fire, black smoke billowing up to coalesce along the dungeon ceiling.

Cam recoiled; hed been just inches from the axe while they hunkered together. Victor laughed, lifted her, and began stalking toward the giant monster, opening his Core to flood his pathways with hot, rage-attuned Energy. Lets kill this big hijo de puta!

He broke into a jog, and as he ran, he cast Iron Berserk, then Banner of the Champion. He exploded with mass, taking advantage of the larger space. His banner blazed, pushing the gross, hazy, stagnant air away from him. Victor paused halfway between the tunnel opening and the giant monster grazing amid the piles of refuse and began to build his pattern for Wild Totem again. As he did so, the elephant-sized Sludge Gargantuopod whirled on him, taking note of his presence. Victor couldnt see any eyes on the things head, just a sphincter-like maw that twisted open and closed on rows and rows of stubby, razor-sharp teeth, many of which were adorned with bits of rotting flesh and refuse.

As Victor completed his spell, the creature inhaled a massive torrent of air and exhaled it in a monstrous roar that rode the wind of an acrid, green gas. The wave of caustic air billowed toward him, but Victor didnt flinch away. In fact, he stepped toward it, unable to resist roaring his own answer to the challenge.

His voice echoed off the chamber's stone walls, and his banners light pushed back the bulk of the gas, but some of it touched him. It was acidic and smelled like chlorine, but Victor refused to shrink away. He was Quinametzin. He was the Herald of the Mountains Wrath. Gasses couldnt bother him. Poison couldnt take root in his lungs or blood.

Come on, pendejo! He roared, Ill burn your pinch gas up in my lungs! To illustrate his lack of hyperbole, Victor opened his breath Core, allowing some hot

magma-attuned Energy to fill his lungs. As he laughed, black smoke and flames licked his lips. He lifted Lifedrinker high as a third roar rocked the chamber, and Victors nightmare bear, nearly as large as the monster before him, exploded out of a pool of shadows on the far side of the chamber and leaped on the Sludge Gargantuopods back.

Lets go, hermano! Victor cried, charging for the monster as it whirled to face the new threat posed by Victors massive bear. As he closed the distance, a hail of fiery arrows streaked past him, punching into the things thick pink hide, and then the fight was on.

Book 7: Chapter 40: Gargantuopod

In his titanic form, Victor figured he weighed close to a couple of thousand pounds, especially with his helmet on, which added to his mass considerably. Even so, when he slammed Lifedrinker into the gargantuopods rear-left flank, despite her white-hot axe head and the imbuelement of his spirit, she barely penetrated its hide, and the great creature hardly flinched. When hed first seen the monster alone in its lair, Victor had estimated it at about the size of an elephant. Standing behind it, Lifedrinker furiously trying to dig into its flesh, he altered that opinion; it had to be quite a lot larger because his head barely cleared its belly.

Sora's fiery arrows were sputtering, the flames failing to ignite the monsters calloused pink hide. And, as the behemoth shifted, trying to throw Victors bear aside, its hip crashed into him, sending him sprawling. He felt like a truck had just run into him. He came to rest against a pile of rubbish that stank of decomposition and shit and immediately struggled to his feet, eager to be away from the smell. The way the thing had rebuffed his attack was infuriating, and Victor could feel his rage Core surge with renewed intensity, pumping more and more of the hot, smoldering power into his pathways. Still, he couldnt help pausing to stare at the furious melee between his bear and the monstrosity.

The bear, much larger and more primordial than any bear to walk the Earth in Victors lifetime, was drenched in blood, his thick dark coat torn in a dozen places by the gargantuopods sucking, twisting maw. He roared savagely, his eyes ablaze with a fury akin to Victors, and he swiped his great claws with terrible force against the monsters head, slicing through its groping tentacles and leaving long, bleeding gashes in the more tender flesh of its open mouth.

Victor felt his heart surge with pride, and he almost started to cheer on his big, furry brother, but then, almost as quickly as theyd appeared, the gashes closed up. The monsters tentacles wrapped around the bears right forelimb and tugged it into its maw. It swirled shut like a tooth-lined sphincter, and with a horrible wrenching of its neck, left then right, it peeled the fur and flesh from the bears limb.

You mother fucker! Victor screamed, horrified as he saw his brave companion stumble back, his mutilated leg flailing in the air as he fell to his side. Victor opened the floodgates on his Core, filling his pathways with fear-attuned Energy, and cast Energy Charge, aiming for the side of the monstrous creature, determined to knock it away from the bear. In a ripple of roiling shadows, he flew toward the gargantuopod, and his collision with its exposed flank was akin to

charging a brick wall. Even so, Victor hadn't met a brick wall he couldn't do some damage to.

When he slammed into the mound of thick, pink flesh, it rippled like a mud puddle might if you dropped a boulder into it. Moreover, the enormous, stony ribs under the surface cracked like saplings in a landslide. As Victor's Core drained itself of fear-attuned Energy to protect him, the colossal monster slid a dozen feet from him, writhing and thrashing as its gore-filled maw yodeled out a weird, undulating scream-roar of pain.

Victor had the wherewithal to release his bear, ending its suffering and sending it home to the Spirit Plane. Then, he leaped at the monster, targeting its damaged side. He launched into a frenzy of attacks, hacking Lifedrinker in tremendous two-handed blows, left then right, almost like he was trying to cut through a gargantuan fallen tree.

While he dug bloody furrows in the flesh, exposing splintered bones, the monster roared and thrashed, trying to get to its feet while simultaneously twisting to lash its hook-ended tentacles at Victor. He ignored them as they wrapped around his left leg and arm—they might as well have been clinging cobwebs; they were utterly unable to budge his rigid, titanic frame as he lost himself in the furious frenzy of his assault. More fiery arrows punched into the monster's hide. There were fewer of them this time, but they seemed to burn more fiercely, and Victor was dimly aware that portions of the creature's thick, pink hide were beginning to char and turn black.

Lifedrinker took two hits to penetrate the hide, and Victor was swinging in such a frenzy that she must have scored a half dozen bone-deep cuts, burning and charring the flesh on her way through, before the monster finally surged back to its feet and whirled so violently to face Victor that he had to thrust out a boot to keep it from snatching him up in its gaping mouth.

He slid back, driven by his foot on the edge of its sucking maw, and had a brief, heart-fluttering panic as his foot started to slide into the orifice. As it came loose, he stomped into the ground and, still gripping her in two hands, hacked Lifedrinker with all his might into the lower rim of the monster's lunging, sputtering mouth.

She bit between the rows of dagger-like teeth, and her smoldering axe head sank to the haft, fully buried. Victor roared his approval as Lifedrinker writhed and pulled, digging like a parasite into the folds of the softer flesh. He released her and leaped back, avoiding another lunge, and watched with sadistic pleasure as the monster's maw swirled shut on the axe.

Her haft stuck out of the puckered opening like a toothpick, but only for an instant as the creature opened wide again, coughing gouts of blood, saliva, and gore. Its remaining tentacles grabbed at the axe, wrapping around the haft, trying to draw it out, but Lifedrinker had dug deep, and the worm-like appendages didn't seem to have much leverage pulling away as opposed to pulling things in.

While it struggled, in a panic to get the hungry axe out, Victor noticed Cam darting around the edges of the chamber, planting thin, metallic rods into the ground. He hoped the weird, youthful caster had a trick up his sleeve to help finish the gargantuopod off. His rage was still high, simmering like recently boiled water in his veins, but he'd let off a lot of steam in his frenzied assault. Seeing Lifedrinker take root, driving the great monster mad as she dug into the softer flesh of its inner mouth, also served to cool his boiling blood. With his banner burning brightly, pushing away the toxic air, he turned to regard his other companion.

Sora stood atop a distant refuse pile, her bow held high, watching Victor, the monster, and Cam. He frowned at her, annoyed that all he'd seen her do thus far was release a few volleys of magical arrows. Was she up to something? Were she and Cam scheming to get him to wear himself out fighting the great monster? Did they intend to double-cross him?

Sora saw him looking her way and nodded. Then he saw the air around her begin to shimmer with blistering Energy. It coalesced like a fine orange mist and then streamed to the point of the arrow she held nocked to her bow. With the fluid grace of a master archer, she drew it back and released the string.

The arrow streaked through the air like a bolt of light, and Victor jerked his head around to watch its impact. The monstrous gargantuopod was on its hind legs, swaying back and forth, maw wide open as it struggled with all six of its tentacles to dig Lifedrinker out of its flesh. Sora's blazing arrow buried itself deep in the creature's goo-filled throat, flaring and smoking like a chemical fire. Green and black gas billowed from the monster's mouth as it howled and jerked its head left and right in a pain-filled frenzy.

Victor knew Lifedrinker was doing good work, draining away the things Energy, likely interrupting some of its abilities. Even so, he wished he had another weapon, something large enough to continue his punishment of the monster.

Rather than dig through the piles of refuse and debris in the lair, hoping to find something to pummel the monster with, he inhaled deeply, stoking the flames of his magma-attuned breath Core. The gargantuopod had given up all pretense of an offensive and was rolling on the ground, shaking the cavern floor, throwing up mounds of rotting meat and slimy detritus as it struggled with Lifedrinker's deep bite and the flaring arrow still burning a pit in its insides.

As his breath Core swelled and his lungs filled to bursting, Victor stomped forward. Risking a fate similar to his bears, he reached out and snatched ahold of the monster's maw as it puckered open. He found grips on the round, smooth sides of the sharp grinding teeth in fingers of steel, digging in, straining with every ounce of his prodigious strength. At the same time, he stepped on the bottom rim of the sphincter mouth, holding the great maw gaping wide around him.

When he felt himself losing, when the weird muscles that contracted that grinding orifice began to pull him in, Victor switched his Sovereign Will boost to strength and roared, pushing and stretching the maw wide. Then, he emptied his breath Core, blowing out every ounce of his magma-attuned Energy in a stream of liquid, orange-glowing fiery rock, dumping gallons and gallons of it into the things throat and down into its belly.

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The horrible damage his magma did to the things insides was enough to send it into apoplectic convulsions, and even Victor's terrible grip wasn't able to keep hold. The monster bucked and flopped, and Victor was thrown, head over heels, backward as it rolled around on the ground, desperately seeking a release from its agony but unable to reach the fire destroying its insides.

Victor clambered back to his feet, and he was stunned to see a System message flash before his eyes:

*****Cam Lightly has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Eighteen entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.*****

Blinking, Victor looked around the room but couldn't spot the young magician. When his gaze returned to the monster, still convulsing, spewing black and green gases from an orifice that had to be its anus, Victor saw one of the silver rods Cam had planted jutting out of its rigid, pink flesh. Did the damn thing roll over him?

To his surprise, Sora responded from just behind him, No, I shot him. Victor whirled on her, hands up in a fighting stance, but she smiled and shook her head. I didn't break the trust; he was trying to betray you. Those flags he was planting were meant to mesmerize you as you fought with the monster. She looked back to the giant creature and coughed, unable to easily breathe in the green and black fumes despite Victor's banner. Is it going to die?

Victor looked down at the woman, tiny to him in his titanic form, and contemplated grabbing her and flinging her toward the dying beast. The impulse came on the heels of a frustrated thought about how he couldn't trust anyone in that place. She could be lying. She could have seen an opportunity to eliminate a weaker opponent.

Scowling, growling faintly, some smoke drifting out of his nostrils, he stepped back to keep her in view while observing the monstrous creature. It was thrashing much more feebly now, lying on its side, exposed ribs heaving up and down as it struggled to breathe through its ruined throat and esophagus. It'll die, he said with finality. Lifedrinker won't let it recover.

Lifedrinker? Sora held a sleeve over her face, coughing again.

My axe. She's deep in its maw.

Ah! Sora looked up from her sleeve, her eyes bloodshot from the fumes. When she saw Victor's scowling countenance, she took a step back, releasing her bow with one hand and letting it hang by her side. I swear, Victor. Cam and I are friends in the city. He will be furious with me, but I told him not to try his scheme. He ignored me.

Victor kept one eye on the dying monster and shrugged. So you shot him? I thought he was hard to surprise.

Yes, but his talent doesn't help so much against people he deems friendly. If you doubt me, collect his flags after that thing dies. See what their purpose is.

Victor did doubt her, and he did intend to examine the silver rods, but no matter what they were, it wouldn't reinforce his trust in the archer; for all Victor knew, she could have encouraged Cam with the intent to betray him from the beginning. The cloud of noxious gas and smoke around the monster had grown so thick that he was having trouble seeing it. Wait here if you want, he grunted, then strode into the caustic haze.

The gargantuopod was barely moving, its breaths shallow and rapid, and he could see Lifedrinker's haft jutting out of its open, smoking pit of a mouth. He wanted to be close as the axe finished her feast; he didn't feel good without her in his hand.

Standing beside the monster's head, the thing seemed pitiful, even though its gaping jaw was probably ten yards wide. Come on, hombre, he said, wishing it had an eye he could look into. Give it up. Time to move on. In a coincidence that

sent shivers down his spine, the thing took a deep shuddering breath, wheezed it out in a cloud of black smoke, and fell still.

Before the System could blast him with a torrent of Energy, Victor grabbed Lifedrinkers haft and gave her a tug. She slipped free almost effortlessly. She throbbed in his hand, waves of satisfaction rolling into him as he noticed the thick veins of shimmering green Energy that stretched through her silvery metal and into her living wood haft. He wondered if shed evolve again soon, perhaps after processing this latest feast.

A soft breeze tickled his neck, and when he turned, he saw Sora standing where hed left her, eyes closed, hands outstretched, her hair whipping in a breeze she seemed to be creating. Thats when a ball of golden Energy struck her in the chest and, at nearly the same time, another hit Victor. The influx was significant, enough to lift him off the ground and fully replenish his Core. Euphoria washed over him, his anger melted away, and Victor dropped to his knees, panting like hed just sprinted a mile.

When he looked up, he saw Sora lying on her back in a similar state. As he clambered to his knees, then his feet, he turned to look at the dead gargantuopod and saw great balls of rainbow-hued Energy drifting up from the corpse, forming a big, shimmering blob. Shit, here we go again, he muttered.

Hed only seen the rainbow-tinted globes of Energy a time or two before, and he knew it would hit him like a runaway train. He was leery of being made insensate by the influx, still suspicious of Sora as he was, but he knew shed be just as impacted. That said, he stood close to the monsters corpse, Lifedrinker in his hand. He figured that if he were closer, the Energy would hit him first, which meant hed recover first.

Sora was still lying on her back when the shimmering cloud of Energy split into two streams, and one slammed into his back between his shoulder blades. Victor started to yell, not in anger but in victory, lifting his arms high, Lifedrinker in one fist as the enormous wave of power washed over him, lifting him into the air. Hed been hit with surges like this beforehis greatest post-battle rush had to have been the reaver army hed defeated single-handedly, but this was up there in the top five. Even as his conscious mind began to depart, drifting on waves of euphoria, he felt sure hed gain another level.

When the Energy released him, and he fell to the ground, he caught himself on the knuckles of his free hand before he tumbled to the filthy floor. Standing, he looked past the System message waiting for him until he caught sight of Sora sitting on the ground, her bow resting on her knees. She regarded him placidly and nodded at his instant scrutiny. That was quite a reward you just received. Mine wasnt so large.

Victor sighed, stretching his neck until it popped. He should have guessed shed recover more quickly if the System decided shed contributed less to the kill. Remembering the battle, though, he frowned. I thought that arrow you shot into its throat was pretty damn effective.

As she inhaled, gathering her words, he read the System message:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 63 Herald of the Mountains Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.*****

He looked at his attribute panel on his status page, wondering how things were shaping up after three levels in his new Class:

Strength:

406

Vitality:

526 (579)

Dexterity:

190

Agility:

213

Intelligence:

172

Will:

589

While he stared at the numbers, inwardly amused by how much theyd changed since hed first stepped foot into the Wagon Wheel and Yrella and Vullu had taught him how to look at his status, Sora said, Im sure I hurt it, and I got a lot of Energy, but that fiery kiss of death was what did the creature in. I dont know how its possible for a giant to breathe fire like a dragon, but color me impressed. She rose to her feet with effortless grace and gestured with her bow to something behind him. We received a chest.

Titan, Victor grunted absently while he turned. Sure enough, resting on the filthy, blood and gore-spattered stone floor was a large, ornate, silver-inlaid marble chest.

Excuse me? Sora stood beside him, no longer tiny but still quite a lot smaller than he was.

Im Quinametzin. Titan. Not a giant.

Theres a difference?

Victor jerked his thumb at the crumpled corpse of the gargantuopod. Titans can kill shit like that. He pointed to the chest. How we doing this?

Sora lithely hopped past the chest and mounted the corpse, like climbing a hill for her, to pull the silver rod from its side. Do you want to inspect this? Id prefer to think you believe me and that I neednt fear you will smite me down out of suspicion.

Victor shrugged. I made a deal with you. A, uh, gentlefolks agreement. Remember? Im not going to hurt you unless you betray me or unless we agree to split up. As for that thing, whats it going to matter? You could have tricked that little guy into placing them for all I know.

Sora frowned, and her brow narrowed. She was clearly angry at the implication, but it seemed she couldnt formulate an argument that would counter Victors

logic. Instead, she tossed the flag to the ground with a ping and brushed her hands together, wiping off some unseen debris. I hope I can earn your trust, Victor. I appreciate your honesty.

You dont want that? Victor pointed to the rod where it had rolled into a sticky mess of rotted flesh.

Theyre useless to me. They require a mind affinity, and the set is incomplete; he still had more to place. She walked to the chest and stood beside it. It was large enough that he figured she could get inside if she curled up. As for the treasure, Ill defer the first choice of the loot to you. Then we can take turns. Maybe theres one item in here, or maybe there are twenty. I have no idea what to expect after slaying a monster of this caliber.

Victor realized he was still gripping Lifedrinkers haft in white knuckles. He lifted her and looked at her blade; she was unusually quiet, and he wondered if it had something to do with the thick rivers of Energy she was processing. He held her over his shoulder, and his harness snatched her, pulling her close against his back.

He turned in a slow circle, looking around the great chamber. It was big enough to house a couple of full-court basketball games with room left over for the fans. The haze had cleared from the ground level, but near the high stone ceiling, a cloud of black and green vapors still clung. He saw the stone tunnel where theyd entered the chamber and, on the far wall, not too far from where the monster's corpse lay, was another exit.

Victor nodded, and as he stepped toward the chest, he called forth his coyotes, infusing them with inspiration-attuned Energy. Naturally, they came into the world yipping and whining, and Victor laughed. Hey, hermanos, go watch those tunnels and make sure nobody surprises me and my friend here. They yipped and split up, darting through the refuse-strewn cavern. Victor looked at Sora, and when he grinned, she returned the smile. All right, lets see what kind of loot that big boy had for us.