

## Victor BK7: Ch41

Book 7: Chapter 41: Skulls and Doppelgangers

Loro gestured to the doors, indicating a commotion, and Ranish Dar turned his gaze that way. He recognized the man coming through, Duvius Black, with his signature midnight robes and feline features covered with silken black hair, impossible to miss. Someone must have said something snide because the Magician was hissing, his robes puffing up along his back as his hair stood on end. The man looked ready to fight to the death. Somethings got him quite ruffled, Loro chuckled.

Dar nodded. You saw what happened to his student. Im sure one of those drunkards said something a touch too biting.

You reckon hes here to confront you? Loro sipped his strange milk-white liquor, his pale features and dark eyes giving no hints of amusement to match his light-hearted tone.

Confront me? It was my student who was nearly sabotaged. More likely, hes here to save face, to try to deny the Elven girls accusations. Dar looked at the viewing screen, watching as some students still on the first level traded blows. He was beginning to root for the young beastkin boy when, sure enough, Duvius Black stepped up to the table.

Ranish! he purred, his voice smooth and calm, as though he hadnt just been in a screaming match with those men near the door.

Duvius. Its been a while, hasnt it? Why, more than a decade since we traded words, Id think.

Has it been so long? My, the years just slip away like sand through our fingers, do they not? He shifted to the side, standing beside the bench on Loros side of the table. The undead Death Caster chuckled and slid further into the booth, nodding his hairless head at the seat.

Please, sit down.

Why thank you . . . Duvius trailed off, clicking his tongue. Im so sorry, but Ive misplaced your name, good sir.

Ranish had no doubt that Duvius knew exactly who Loro was, but he humored him in his little power play: Duvius, this is Loro the Grim, an old friend of mine.

A pleasure! he said, sliding into the seat. As he settled, he compulsively ran his long, pink tongue along his short-haired forearm. He quickly folded his hands on his lap beneath the table when he caught himself.

The pleasure is mine, Mr. Black. Ive heard much about you. Loros thin lips pulled back in a smile, revealing teeth that hinted at his ancestors love of meat.

Duvius nodded, then focused his large, feline eyes on Ranishs smoldering, fiery ones. Thats quite a young monster youve thrown into the sandpit with our students.

Pardon me? My young, under-leveled student is a monster? Need we rehash the words of that white-haired Fae-blood? She made it clear to all who watched what your boy was up to.

Duvius leaned forward, his black lips curling back, lifting his whiskers to reveal impressive canines. Now, Ranish, thats exactly why Im here! Cam is beside himself with grief; hes lost eight levels, and those were tough levels to come by. Still, even in his wallowing sorrow, he denies what the girl said.

He has no reason to lie to me! We all know the stakes, and were all reasonable enough to recognize a clever gambit, even if it didnt pay.

Ah, let me guess, Loro said, unconcerned about offending the man hed just met. She encouraged him, said shed help, then, when the moment was right, it was she who did the betraying?

Exactly! Duvius slammed a furry fist on the table. Either he was too dense to register Loros teasing, or he chose to ignore it, giving the Death Caster a chance to back off. He glanced at the wall displaying the various images from the view stones. How many remain? There were eighteen when I left my club.

Loro was quick to answer, Fifteen now. I reckon Ranishs boy must be about to gain another level.

Did you see what he and that little bitch pulled from their chest?

No; the System blocked the feed from the view stones. Ranish pointed to the far end of the wall where two blacked-out rectangles hung near the edge. They must still be in there.

A gargantuopod! Duvius tsked. My student deserved a piece of that price. He will challenge that Fae girl after this. You watch!

That doesnt seem wise, considering what hes just lost. I suppose if she gets rescued, she might be an easier target. Ranish shrugged.

Fah! Duviuss eyes narrowed, and he jerked his head to the side, hissing like only a feline can. Its infuriating!

Did you have a lot riding on your student?

You know how rare a chance affinity is! Im still stunned she landed that shot.

He must have been very focused on his flagsa complicated ritual to perform amid a battle betwixt titans, Loro chuckled.

Dar held up a finger. Only one titan and a behemoth.

Loro shrugged. Is it such an important distinction? Behemoth-type monsters are often on par with a titans strength.

Not that one. Dar smiled, enjoying his gloating a bit too much. Hed already made a fortune on Victors showing.

Youre awfully smug, Dar. Duvius seemed to have tired of playing nice. Id be watchful, were I you. When Dar scowled, he held up his hands, palms out, No, no. I make no threats. I simply say that your student isnt making friends there. Ive already heard word that Arcus Volpur will seek vengeance. Even after his early defeat, hes still nearly ninth-tier.

You think my student needs to fear a man he soundly thrashed despite giving him the advantage of first strike? Despite himself, Ranish Dar couldnt help closing his massive, stony hands into fists atop the table. He didnt like threats, even indirect ones.

Perhaps not, though Volpur is a dastard; he might seek to hurt him in other ways. Tell me, does your student have a family?

Dar leaned forward, and his eyes flared, heating the air around their booth. He does not, so feel free to spread that word. Moreover, any who seek to battle or harm him in this city without the proper formalities will find themselves on the wrong end of my wrath.

Dar! Duvius held a hand to his chest, a look of dismay plastered on his face. Do you think I would do any such thing? Im no fool; I simply repeat the whispered rumors propagating the high streets.

Dar sat back, his frown like an upturned scythe blade on his stony countenance. Im weary of your warnings, Duvius. Leave me and my friend in peace, would you?

Oh, he cleared his throat and glanced from Dar to Loro. Of course. I simply wanted to congratulate you on your new protg. Tell me, is he entertaining other offers? Surely you cannot devote too much of your precious attention to a single student . . .

He is not. Dar folded his arms over his chest, his brows angled inward, a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

Very well, Duvius sighed, sliding out of the bench. Im sure well speak again soon. With those cryptic words, he turned and strode out of the club.

Stolen story; please report.

What a strange visit, Loro said, his humor bubbling into each word.

Im glad youre amused.

Do you think theres any truth to . . .

Dar waved a hand, dismissing the topic. He pointed to the wall where Victors rectangular viewing portal once again projected an image of the large man. Well have plenty of time for speculation. Im hungry, and Victors spy has resumed coverage.

#

While Victor and Sora stood before the chest, preparing to open it, the System announced the rescue of three more entrants, bringing the remainder to fifteen. Again, they were struck by a massive Energy influx, but, to Victors surprise, he didnt gain a level. When he mentioned as much, Sora chuckled and said shed only gained one level since entering the place. What level are you, he asked bluntly as she reached for the chests clasp.

She paused, her fingers just brushing the silvery latch, and looked at him with narrowed eyes. I suppose its not such a great secret. If we survive this place, you could find plenty in Sojourn who know Im just a hair over level eighty. She resumed her movement and lifted the lid of the chest, releasing a cloud of sparkling golden mist. And you, Victor?

He shrugged. Just a bit past sixty. He figured it was only fair to answer, considering it had been his question. As she looked askance at him, obvious doubt in her eyes, Victor stepped forward and looked into the chest. Man, your buddy wasnt lying. Theres a lot of loot in here.

My buddy? Oh, Cam. No, Im sure he was right. The gargantuopod was a worthy challenge. She joined him, looking down into the box. There were quite a few different objects within Victor saw something that looked like an empty crystal bottle, a dark, vaguely humanoid skull with two horns, a ring, a cloak, and a crystal that looked almost like a prism hed seen in a teachers classroom when

he was younger. Half the space in the box was taken up by a bulging leather sack. Shall we identify them before you make your first choice?

Yeah. Victor jostled the big sack, and the familiar sound of beads clinking against each other came to his ears. Cash.

Cash? She frowned and then nodded. Beads. Currency. I get it. She lifted out the bottle, and Victor saw her concentrate briefly while trickling some Energy into it. The breath of a legendary masterone-time use. Inhale the contents to be inspired by a great master in a time of need. She set the bottle on the chests lid. And Victor picked up the skull. He trickled some Energy into it and read the System-generated description:

**\*\*\*Whispering Skull: This artifact is tied to the undying spirit of a once-great magic user. Ask it questions, but be prepared to deal with the spirits cryptic language and penchant for trickery.\*\*\***

Victor immediately set the skull next to the bottle, not at all interested in it. He had enough trouble figuring out who was lying to him without adding an undead skull to the mix. Nevertheless, he described it to Sora, and she seemed intrigued. She lifted out the ring and a moment later said, Voidstone Ringonce per day, this artifact will absorb and nullify any one spell cast toward the wearer.

Victor rubbed his chin. Not bad. He watched her set it down, then picked up the prism, slowly turning it in his fingers so it caught the dim light and split it into rainbows against his palm. He could feel Sora staring at him, so he trickled some Energy into it:

**\*\*\*Prism of the Doppelganger: If a single being carries this prism for a year, that being may use it to summon a temporary duplicate of themself. This doppelganger will share their desires, thoughts, and abilities, but will disappear after one hour, not to be resummoned until another year has passed.\*\*\***

At first, Victor frowned. He didnt like the idea of an item he could only use once a year, but then he thought about how powerful it was, imagining how easy most of his previous battles would have been if hed had a twin brother as strong as he was, who wanted exactly what he did. He carefully set the prism next to the skull as he described it to Sora.

Quite an item. I can see why it requires so much time to charge. She stared longingly at the prism for several seconds, then reached in to pick up the cloak. A few seconds later, she said, Mantle of Dreamweaving. Its a cloak that allows you to enter and manipulate the dreams of others, depending on the strength of their will.

Victor frowned, shaking his head. Sounds kind of shitty. If I found out someone was messing with my dreams . . . He trailed off, sighing and shaking his head. While hed been imagining creative ways to pummel someone whod interfered with his sleep, Sora untied the bag of beads and plucked one out. Dual attunedfire and earth. Id estimate ten thousand, but it could be more; that bag might have a dimensional enchantment.

Right. So, were taking turns? When Sora nodded, Victor picked up the prism and slipped it into his new storage pouch.

She nodded. I wouldve done the same. Victor watched her hand hesitate between the cloak and the bottle of masters breath, but she settled on the cloak.

Victor rubbed his chin, contemplating. Had she been hovering between the cloak and the bottle to make him think the bottle was the next best item, or had she genuinely been tempted by it? Victor had no idea what a legendary masters inspiration would be like, but he supposed it might get him out of a jam someday. The Voidstone ring was pretty great, too, though. Once per day, it could save him from a surprise magical attack. Once per day, it could mess up an opponents first move. He knew he didnt want the skull. Sighing, unsure if he was making the right choice, he grabbed the ring and immediately sent some Energy into it, bonding with the item before slipping it onto his finger.

Sora smirked and picked up the bottle. Im surprised you didnt take this. It may prove invaluable when we reach the end of the iron ranks.

Yeah. It might. Victor shrugged, then reached into the chest and lifted the sack of beads. You can have that pinch skull. He tried to put the sack into his magical pouch, but it wouldnt go, which brought a wide grin to his face. Sending some Energy into the bag, his mind became aware of a sizeable dimensional space and a hefty mound of Energy beads within it. Sora didnt seem to notice; she was busy turning her new skull in her hands. She had thin lips on her angular face, and her frown of concentration was almost comical as she said, Skull, tell us the best route to the stairs.

A voice as dry as dust began to emanate from the ancient, blackened skull, "Ah, seeker of paths untrodden and stairs unseen, listen well: Where shadows dance at the edge of sight, and the echoes of footsteps are your guiding light, follow the gaze of the stone-lined throat, but heed this warning I do bring: The truest path often lies hidden beneath layers of deceit and sin. Seek not with eyes but with your mind's might, for only the wise can pierce the night."

What the fu . . . Victor started to say but broke off as laughter took over. I knew that thing would be useless. Sora tried several more times to get a straight answer out of the skull, but Victor kept laughing as each subsequent response was more obscure than the one before. While she messed with it, he tied his sack of Energy beads to his belt and then walked over to the gigantic corpse of the gargantuopod. He reached over his shoulder to loosen Lifedrinker from her harness and clambered atop the beast, using Lifedrinker like a climbing pick.

What are you doing? Sora called, her annoying skull hanging from a leather cord at her belt.

Im going to get its heart. With that, Victor began the long, dirty process of hacking through the monsters ribs; unfortunately, it had collapsed on the side hed already cut through. While he worked, building up a sweat, Sora walked closer and called up to him.

Why?

I can use it for something, Victor grunted. Lucky for him, Lifedrinker was up to the task, and after a while, hed chopped through several ribs and managed to dig around in the bloody, hot meat until he found the things enormous heart. It resisted him; the arteries were tough and thick, and it didnt want to come out. The entire time he grunted and jerked on the thing, trying to pull it free, Victor wished he could go through his rings for a nice, long, sharp knife. Eventually, in a fit of frustration, he cast Iron Berserk again, and then, with surging strength and much larger fingers, he popped the

recalcitrant organ out of the carcass and held it aloft in two hands, hoisting it over his head with a savage grin.

He had half a mind to eat it on the spot but managed to control his desire. There was no telling what would happen to him, and he didn't want to be left helpless while his body went through some kind of evolution. With a tremendous push of his will, he slipped the big organ into his storage pouch and pulled his rage-attuned Energy back into his Core, ending his Berserk. When he hopped down from the body, Sora was sitting on a relatively clean section of the ground, talking to the skull. I'm afraid it's mad, she sighed, watching Victor try to rub the blood off his hands using the tatters of his leather pants. I hope that heart was worth all that effort.

Me too. Victor turned to the great corpse and cast Honor the Spirits, smiling as a ghostly bonfire burst into being, consuming the carcass in a matter of seconds.

Sora stumbled back, surprised, then glared at Victor. What did you just do?

Sent my ancestors that big damn corpse. He shrugged. Who knows what they can do with it. He pointed to the corridor leading away from the chamber, now clearly visible with the corpse out of the way. Let's see where that goes.

#

Darren slammed his mug on the table and practically howled with excitement. Did you see that? He breathed fire into its throat! He cooked it from the inside! He wasn't the only one in hysterics. The entire bar was breaking into pandemonium. People were standing on benches, sloshing drinks in the air as they cheered, waving for bet-takers to come to their table, breaking into songs and chants, and generally acting as though they'd done the killing instead of Victor. Darren could see why; it had been an amazing spectacle, and when it started, most of the people in the bar thought Victor and his friends would lose.

Everything had changed when Victor doubled in size and slammed into the monster with such force that he'd sent it sliding. Who could do that? The thing had to weigh thousands of tons. Darren laughed, drinking more of his beer and remembering how he'd thought his little tanks would be able to stand up to people like him. He looked around the table and saw the pride in Valla's eyes, the joy on Edeya's face, and the solemn, knowing gaze Lesh gave him. Lam had excused herself to go to the restroom halfway through the fight, and Darren had a sneaking suspicion she'd been nervous for Victor.

That's why I follow that man, Lesh said, his deep, rumbling voice having a little trouble with the consonants she must have drunk two gallons of liquor by now.

Were you worried, Edeya asked, looking earnestly up at Valla.

Me? I was only worried that he'd be betrayed by those two companions of his. It seems the woman may be too clever to tempt Victor's wrath. She looked at the wall and frowned as the image shifted to show another pair of adventurers bickering about which path to take. Why do they change it? Wouldn't seeing their rewards be more interesting than this?

The view window turned black when they looked at the chest, Lesh said. The System may be granting them privacy. He leaned back in his seat and reached down to pull a pocket watch out of his belt. He peered blearily at it, then looked from Darren to Edeya. You two should rest. It may be hours before Victor sees more action, and the night grows old.

We have a whole day before our dungeon shlot, Lesh, Edeya said, folding her arms over her chest. Shed had plenty to drink.

Do as you please, but Darren will retire. He looked at Darren and raised a scaly eyebrow.

Um, right. Yes, Elder Lesh. Darren sighed and began to slide to the end of his bench.

Oh, fine! Edeya groused. Ill go back with you.

Suddenly, Lam was there, leaning on the table beside Valla. Ill walk with them. You and Lesh can stay and keep watching. Use the Farscribe book if something happens. Otherwise, Ill come back in the morning.

Thank you, Lam. I will. Did you see the battle?

Oh, yes. I was returning from the privy and saw him finish that thing off. She shook her head, grinning wryly. Remind me to buy that man some soothing tea for his throat. She looked at Darren and Edeya. Ready?

Darren nodded, and Edeya smiled brightly with red cheeks. Yesh!

He followed the two women out of the bar; Lam was a good deal taller than he, so she cut through the crowds, looking over the patrons heads for the best route. Once they were outside in the chilly evening air, he took a deep breath and sighed happily. What a fun time!

Lam laughed and led the way past the many groups of loitering patrons. Thats because you were rooting for Victor. If youd been friends with one of those others, you might not have had so much fun.

Well, most of these people dont know any of them, Edeya said, waving her arm in an arc, indicating all the various strangers lingering around, talking and carousing. And they had plenty of fun!

Good point! Lam put her arm over the smaller womans shoulders and, to Darrens surprise and immense joy, paused for him to catch up so she could drape her other arm over his shoulders. Ill keep you close, or Leshll have my hide.

Ah, ahem, yes. Darren nodded, his cheeks flushing. Wouldnt want Elder Lesh angry.

Oh my! Edeya laughed. Is he mocking his mentor? Im telling Lesh!

No! Darren cried. No, I wasnt mocking . . .

Hush, Lam laughed. Shes teasing.

Darren tried to regulate his breathing, allowing himself to relax as Lam guided them along. Theyd only cleared a building or two and were approaching a corner when a smooth, masculine voice called out from behind them. Excuse me! I say, excuse me, but did I hear correctly? Are you three friends with that gigantic warrior in the challenge dungeon?

Book 7: Chapter 42: Tension

**\*\*\*Savannah Dores has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Eleven entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

Victor glanced at Sora, and she nodded, closing the door behind them. Theyd just found what they believed to be a set of stairs leading up to the third dungeon level and were preparing to climb them

when the message appeared. It was the second one since theyd left the gargantuopods lair, and Victor was sure it would level him. He could feel the tension in his body and Core; it felt like even a hint of Energy would push him over the edge. They were in a round stone chamber with one exit and a spiral staircase leading up to shadowy heights.

Sora sat down with her back to the door, her bow in her lap. It might be a few minutes; it seems the System tries to wait for battles to halt before throwing the Energy at us.

Yeah. Victor sat down on the steps facing her. You think well get another chest when we go up?

Thats my understanding. Each level awards a chest, and the value of the prizes is supposed to increase as the number of participants dwindles. She smiled, shrugging. Should be quite a bit better than the last one. A few people have been knocked out since.

Mmhmm. Victor nodded absently as he stroked Lifedrinkers haft. Shed been very quiet since the gargantuopod, and he could still see the faint lines of shimmering green Energy in her silvery metal. He didnt know exactly how it worked, but it seemed like she was slowly digesting what shed taken.

Your axe is made of Heart Silver? Soras intonation made a question out of the statement.

Yeah. Well, she started with just a Heart Silver core, but it's expanded as shes . . . evolved is the word for it, I guess.

A wonderful weapon, to be sure. She must have drained much from the gargantuopod. Im sure it helped our fire to slay it. When Victor didnt respond, not wanting to chatter about his axe or her secrets, Sora tried another topic, You called yourself a titan, yes? Are there many of your kind on your homeworld?

Victor looked at her with narrowed eyes. Hed grown leery of strangers trying to dig information out of him. So many unscrupulous people had tried to use knowledge of his abilities against him that he was mistrustful. The problem with his thinking, though, was that the questions felt innocent enough; she could simply be trying to make conversation, perhaps trying to bolster their tenuous alliance.

Rather than answer her, he decided to turn the tables to see how she handled some personal probing. Hmm, how about you tell me about yourself? On my homeworld, people who look like you are often called elves. Is that right? He didnt mention that hed only seen them in fiction.

Elves? Well, I have a Fae bloodline and, as a result, have devoured many a text on the subject of the Fae. They have subgroups of people, and yes, Ive read the terms elf, elfin, and even elvish. However, my people are called the Ramash, and most dont share my pointy ears, strange coloring, and large eyes. I hail from a world somewhat distant from Sojourn; I had to traverse another hub to reach this place.

Victor nodded, more interested than hed expected to be in her answer. Hed made a lot of assumptions about her about most of the people in the dungeon. For some reason, hed held himself apart as though he werent benefiting from a wealthy patron like most of the other entrants.

He was starting to see that he often gave himself more credit than he deserved, that he considered his efforts to get where he was somehow out of the norm. In his mind, the other dungeon goers were akin to spoiled rich kids, pampered on an easy world and handed opportunities that hed had to work for. Had he, though? It sounded like hed had an easier time getting to Sojourn than Sora. He decided



to be more open-minded and to try to learn more about the people he encountered. Howd you get to know Cam?

In another dungeon. We were both signed up for the same time slot, and the coordinators put us together. I still consider him a friend, and Im dreading the outcome of my betrayal. She looked down, and Victor saw real emotion in her eyes, real hurt. Hed been so suspicious of her earlier that he hadnt considered the weight of her actions if she were telling the truth; shed gone against a friend to keep from betraying Victors trust. As he completed the thought, another voice in his head scoffedshed betrayed a friend to keep from getting smashed by him. Just because she wasnt stupid didnt mean she was loyal to him.

I dont know exactly what Cam was going to do, but you made the right choice. I dont tolerate betrayal well. At least in here, your friend had the Lifesaver, and your attack wasnt enough to kill him outright. I couldnt make promises to that effect if I lost myself in rage.

So you dont always have control?

Again, Soras question rubbed Victor the wrong way, as if she was fishing. He glanced up to the air at the center of the spiral stair and saw the two spy stones floating around up there. There was no telling who was listening to their conversation. He was about to change the subject again when, out of nowhere, glittering balls of bright golden Energy slammed into each of their chests. Victor grunted as the euphoria swept over him, and when he came back to his senses, he had a System message waiting for him:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 64 Herald of the Mountains Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.\*\*\***

He waved the message away and looked at Sora. She was staring into space, her eyes moving left to right as though reading something. She did it for a long while, and Victor figured shed gotten more notifications than a simple level; maybe shed gained a new skill or spell or some other kind of upgrade. With a grunt, he stood up and slung Lifedrinker back over his shoulder. Ready to head up?

Sora shook her head and blinked rapidly, hopping gracefully to her feet. Aye. If were separated again, Ill wait outside the award chamber.

Yep, same here. Victor turned and started up the stairs. Sure enough, after just a few steps, he found himself stepping into a room almost identical to the one at the end of the first level. The only difference he could perceive was that the chest was made of wood and inlaid with dark, metallic runes. He stepped toward it, looking over his shoulder to ensure he was alone, that the floating spy stone was gone, and that Sora hadnt been sent to the same award room. The stair leading down was empty and quiet, so he turned back to the chest.

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It was about the same size as the last one, only about twenty inches by twelve and something like ten inches deep. When he reached down to lift the clasp, it made a kind of ringing sound as it rubbed against the metal of the latch, and when Victor lifted the lid, sparkling golden fog billowed out, accompanied by a distinct chime. Fancy, he chuckled, waving the haze away so he could see the contents.

When his eyes found his award, Victor frowned and reached in to lift out a pair of sturdy-looking, dark leather boots. As soon as he saw them, he knew they were part of the same set as the gauntlet he'd gotten in the first chest. Two boots. Does that count as two parts of the set? To answer his question, Victor channeled a little Energy into the left boot to read what the System had to tell him:

**\*\*\*Boots of Sojourn these boots count as one item in a set. Collect five pieces of the set and bring them to the Sojourn City Stone to imbue them with curated set bonuses.\*\*\***

Victor's scowl deepened as he set the boot down and peered inside the chest again. It was utterly empty. Seems like bullshit, he grumbled and sent the pair into his storage bag. He stood up, ready to head out, but then he felt Lifedrinker begin to vibrate on his back, and, with a nerve-grating, elongated crackling sound, he felt a sudden increase in her weight pulling against his harness.

Victor's mind flew down panic-laced pathways: Had the Energy Lifedrinker absorbed harmed her somehow? Was she trying to tell him something? Had some invisible fiend tried to pull her off his back? With his thoughts whirling, he reached up to grab her haft and found it much more of a handful than before.

Sudden understanding dawned on him, and Victor's worry turned to excitement as he lifted her free of her harness and pulled her around to grasp in both hands. He lifted her high before his face, staring at her beautiful shape. Lifedrinker's star-dappled, living wood haft had grown by more than a foot, and her brilliant silver axe head had to have increased its mass by fifty percent. The blade was larger and heavier, with wicked swoops at the ends of the crescent. She glinted with her own inner light, and when Victor held her close to inspect the shimmering glow, he saw that her edge was so fine as to be nearly transparent. *Qu rico, beautiful!*

Pride and satisfaction emanated through her haft into his hands, and Lifedrinker veritably hummed with excitement. *Let us hunt!* she cried, filling his mind with images of wolves chasing down prey. Victor chuckled and slung her back over his shoulder. Her new size felt right, a good deal more substantial and a more proper fit for his own growth. As he stepped forward to open the door, his disappointing treasure was forgotten in the warm pride he felt for Lifedrinker's advancement.

#

Darren felt Lam stiffen as the stranger called out his question. When she turned, he stepped back as she slowly lifted her arm from around his shoulders, nudging him and Edeya behind her. *What's that, stranger? Were you speaking to me?* Lam's voice was crisp and sharp, her earlier slurring utterly banished by either adrenaline or the strength of her will. Darren peeked around her faintly fluttering dragonfly wings, peering through the cascades of golden Energy motes at the man who'd stopped them.

He was tall and had that palpable vibrancy that spoke of many racial advancements. It was a feeling Darren often felt when near Valla and Victor and, to a lesser extent, Lam and Lesh. Even Edeya felt similar, though the depth of her power was clearly much shallower.

Before he got too sidetracked, wondering about racial advancements, Darren continued his inspection of the man. His skin looked almost golden, and, half-extended behind him, were broad, powerful wings adorned with crimson feathers. The wings tilted forward and hugged his shoulders like a great cloak. He was terribly handsome, with big, golden, almond-shaped eyes, full, pleasant lips that spread in a gentle smile, and feathery red hair that matched his wings.

While Darren felt comforted by the pleasant aspect of the man, he saw Lam bristle, and suddenly a shimmering, silvery warhammer was in her hand. Ridonne, she said, veritably spitting the word.

Ah! I wasnt mistaken, then! I thought sure those were Ghelli wings, but I wasnt aware of any Ghelli in Sojourn. Have they changed the access policy in Tharcray?

Not likely. We came by other means. Lam didnt lower her hammer, and the enormous, sledge-like head began to hum, vibrating the air in discernable waves of force.

Dear me! Im not sure what fills you with such angst, dear Ghelli, but I offer no threat. I was simply intrigued by the sight of you and your companion there, and when I walked near, I heard you mention the giant warrior. Curiosity is the only motive for my approach!

When Lam didnt respond immediately, and her hammer remained in her hand, he cleared his throat and folded his arms, cocking his head at her. Youre aware of the laws in Sojourn, yes? Id hate for us both to get into some trouble if you start swinging that thing. Tell me, why the hostility? I havent been home in decades and was hoping for a bit of news.

His mention of Sojourns laws seemed to get through whatever was clouding Lams mind, and she slowly inhaled, lowering the hammer but keeping it in her hand. Darren had a good idea why shed reacted the way she had. Hed heard plenty about the Ridonne and, of course, had heard all about how theyd attacked Victors army before he reached the Untamed Marches. If this particular Ridonne had been in Sojourn for decades, though, then surely, she couldnt hold that against him.

Before Lam could prove Darren right or wrong, Edeya stepped out from behind her and snarled, Weve seen what kind of honor to expect from the Ridonne.

My, my! Id hate to bear the brunt of that anger. What makes such a lovely lass spit such venom? The Ridonne stepped closer, lowering his arms but clasping his hands before him in an unthreatening posture. My dear, Ive never seen a Ghelli with your coloring! Such striking shades of azure! Whatever my kin did to you back home, please dont hold me accountable. Who was it? Ravasha? Trenia? Mordo-dak? Ive so many ill-mannered kin that I could probably list names all night. Is there aught that I can do to make amends? Ive so wanted to speak to someone from home without the tedium of checking in with my family! Couldnt I entice you to a dinner or . . . Oh! I have it! Wont you come to Warin-daks victory ball?

That took some of the steam out of Edeya, and she looked up at Lam in confusion, waiting to see if shed made more sense of the tall strangers words. Warin Dak? Lam asked, obviously trying to dredge through her memory for the name. Darren could see why the man before them spoke it like everyone should be acquainted with his meaning.

Oh, ancestors! The Ridonne chuckled, shaking his head. Im so out of practice. My name is Chal-dak, and Warin is my cousin. Hell likely win in the challenge dungeon, and Im sure hell throw quite a feast.

What? Lams eyes opened wide. Theres a Ridonne in there? She looked at Edeya, then down at Darren. I didnt see one on any of the spy windows . . .

Ah! I see the confusion! Warin-dak didnt awaken the, um, more pleasant side of the bloodline. Hes more bedecked with horns, and his coloring leans more toward crimson and less toward golden. Moreover, he fancies himself a wizard and wears heavy robes with a hooded cowl . . .

Oh! The one who killed the three others while they battled those troll things, Edeya said. Darren knew precisely who she was talking about; theyd watched the battle on the big viewing window just before Victor and his two friends began exploring the second level. Three adventurers had been fighting a pack of brutish horned giants with green, pox-ridden flesh when a fourth had arrived, blasting them all with terrible bolts of red Energy. It looked like something out of a science fiction movie to Darrendeath beams that melted through flesh and stone alike.

They didnt die . . . Chal-dak began to say, but Lam spoke at the same time.

Eliminated . . . She shook her head as they both stopped short, not wanting to speak over each other. When Chal-dak remained silent, she said, I wouldnt plan a victory party just yet.

Aha! Our conversation comes full circle! Might I enquire again? You know the giant warrior?

It was Lams turn to fold her arms over her chest and smile knowingly at the Ridonne. I do know him, and though hed be angry if I spoke much about him to a stranger, I would say he has no love for the Ridonne.

Ah! Such a shame. I dont suppose youll expand on the source of hisand youranimosity?

Again, it was Edeya who spoke up, her voice fierce, her brow narrowed in a scowl. Should we start with how you and your kind have kept the rest of Fanwath ignorant and subservient, locking away the world travel options for you and yours?

Oh? I suppose I cant be surprised that you dont know the Systems mandate, handed down when Fanwath was new. As far as I know, its not something they teach outside our academy.

Lam frowned. Mandate? Academy?

You see! There are things for us to talk about! Theres much I could explain. Wont you come to our party after the challenge dungeon?

Lam sighed, clearly ready to end the conversation. I wont commit to anything, and, as I said, you shouldnt invest too much in a victory party. In any case, we have other obligations in the near future.

Well. I do hope you manage to find the time. Even if Warin-dak fails to secure the top position, well celebrate his homecoming. Here, he flicked his fingers out, and a glittering, golden card appeared between his pointer and middle finger. He extended it to Lam, My calling card. Simply feed it a touch of Energy, and you can send me a message. Conversely, I can leave a message for you. Ill send you the address of our estate in Sojourn and any forthcoming details about the victoryor

notgala. Darren knew he shouldn't, but he found himself liking the man. He was smooth and charming despite the hostility Lam and Edeya had been showing him.

Lam took the card, sent it into one of her dimensional containers, and nodded. We must be moving on. Obligations.

It was my pleasure, Lady . . . He lifted an eyebrow expectantly, obviously hoping to learn Lams name.

Lam.

Ah! He smiled, his eyes glittering with pleasure. No surname? Well, Lam the Ghelli from Fanwathlll have to be content with that. I do hope to hear from you soon. With that, he bowed with a flourish, spun on his heel, and strode confidently away, back toward the drinking establishment.

What a cocky asshole! Edeya growled.

Lam groaned. Roots, Edeya! You've been around Victor too much.

Book 7: Chapter 43: For Glory

So? Get anything you want to talk about? Sora was waiting for Victor when he stepped out of the award room onto a vine-covered stone platform that appeared to be in the middle of a jungle. He looked at her and noted she was wearing a silky, dark-gray cloak with a luxurious-looking, rust-colored lining. Rather than answering her, he shrugged and pointed at her new garment.

Got yourself a new cloak?

Aye. Its not doing anything for me at the moment, but its one of those new Sojourn set pieces. She shrugged and smiled, pulling the cloaks sides close over her chest. Its comfortable!

Victor seized the opportunity to fish for some information. Set pieces? You say they're new?

She nodded, rubbing the silky fabric of her hood against her cheek. Yes. The lords of the city recently unlocked the option in the System Stone. Supposedly, these items are rare drops in any of the city dungeons. They all have different potentialyou cant enchant the ones from the low-tier dungeons as much as ones like this. She gestured around her, indicating the dungeon. When they announced it, they listed off a bunch of features I cant remember, but I think you can upgrade them with rare materials and add all sorts of enchantments at the city stone. Some of the artisans in town were up in arms about the whole thing.

Victor frowned as he considered the statement. They think the sets will take business away?

Mhmm. Sora turned to face the narrow path into the jungle. Of course, the lords said the drops were too rare to have much of an impact. Its not like they care what some iron-rank crafters think; they all have powerful artisan friends who are above the likes of us. She pointed down the trail. I heard roaring a minute before you came out, but it seemed distant. Shall we explore?

Sure. Victor unslung Lifedrinker and started after her. While she crept forward, presumably using her abilities to sense for presences and traps, Victor followed quietly, boosting his agility and dexterity with Sovereign Will. He wanted to cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin but wasn't sure if the aura, which would negatively impact enemies, might give them away to lurking beasts or other dungeon entrants. As that thought crossed his mind, he quietly asked, Is there a time limit on this

dungeon? I think my mentor mentioned something like that, but Ive forgotten. This whole thing kind of came up suddenly for me.

Sora paused and turned to speak softly over her shoulder, No set time limit. Well be in here until only one person is standing or someone clears the boss of the top level.

And how many levels are there?

She shrugged. Between five and ten. I think its random, or the Lords of Sojourn select the number in secret. Victor contemplated her words while he followed her further into the jungle. Other than the two of them, only nine others were still in the dungeon, and he had no idea how many were ahead, beyond the third floor. Hed already picked up a few levels and gained a couple of pieces of, apparently, rare loot. Wouldnt it be wise to ride things out, kill some monsters on this floor, maybe go up another, and avoid people until one of the high-ranking local heroes finished the dungeon? After that, they could all make it out with their gains. Something about the idea of coasting, lurking on the sidelines, while someone else took the glory of victory didnt sit well with him.

Victor paused, concentrated, and then summoned his fear-attuned coyotes again. As they sprang out of pools of shadow, slinking silently along the sides of the path, he said, Okay, hermanos. Find the stairs up. Pronto!

The five mastiff-sized coyotes darted away without a sound, one bolting past Sora on the path, the others charging into the jungle. Sora turned to look at him quizzically.

A new plan?

Yeah. Well quit messing around and start climbing this sucker like we mean it. He glanced over his shoulder at the thin line of hazy sky through the trees. Sure enough, amid the nearby branches, the spy stones floated, ever watching. Lets give em something to watch.

Shouldnt we be cautious? I know some tier-nines made it up to the second level long before we did.

Couldnt have been that long before. Victor frowned at her. You can be cautious, but Im about to start moving. Stay with me if you want. As he spoke, Victor cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, then Iron Berserk, relaxing his hold on his aura. If people were lying in wait, hed let them feel what they had coming.

At first, as he surged in size and began to radiate heat and fury, Sora stepped away but kept her face neutral, having seen his titan form before. Then, when he cast his inspiration spell, her brow uncreased, a slight smile played over her lips, and she leaned toward him. Thats when Victor unleashed his aura, and though she didnt stumble or fall, she certainly stepped back again, and her eyes opened with alarm.

Dead Gods! she hissed. Are war and conquest all youve known? Ive never felt such an aura from an iron ranker, even from the blowhards down at the martial yard! Victor ignored the question, inhaling deeply, tasting the Energy in the air, and sucking it into his lungs. He tried to pull some magma-related Energy out, but all he tasted was verdant and thick with life. He exhaled and nodded.

As soon as one of my brothers finds a hint, Ill start running. Stay close if youre coming.

Of course, I'm coming! Sora was more than small to Victor now, her voice tiny with the rage roaring in his ears. He turned his attention outward, listening and feeling through his coyotes, but the determination in her words caught his attention, and he looked down at her with red, glowering eyes.

Good. Glory awaits. He just uttered the words when one of his scouts alerted him; something was happening off to his left through the jungle battle!

A fight! he roared, dashing into the clinging, thick undergrowth, bowling over saplings and snapping branches as he shouldered through. Lifedrinker began to buzz and hum in his hands. Her silvery head shone with Energy that deepened from white-hot to smoldering orange as she began to trail a plume of black smoke over Victor's shoulder.

He leaped thornbushes, smashed through thick ferns, and, as some of the trees actively tried to ensnare him, ripped vines and branches from trunks as he exploded through the jungle, leaving a broad, easy-to-navigate wake for Sora. He was breathing heavily, his lungs pumping like a steam engine, his Breath Core flaring with smoldering magma as the excitement of battle spun his glory-seeking Quinametzin pride into a frenzy. At some point, he switched his Sovereign Will boost to strength and vitality, readying himself for anything.

He could feel his coyote approaching and sense flares of Energy tickling his widespread aura. He was determined to smash any resistance he met, but he was inspired and a clever fighter. Victor knew enough to slow his rampaging, headlong rush as he drew near to his scout. He slid to a halt before a thick stand of wide-boled trees and their hanging vines, crouching next to his coyote. He rested a hand on his shoulders, his fingers and thumb on either side of the animal's rib cage. He felt the warmth of pride seep out of the canine into him, and Victor grinned as he followed the animal's dark-eyed stare with his smoldering, furious one.

A clearing opened up beyond the trees, and three figures battled on its grassy ground. Victor saw an avian woman tall and lanky, with black and gold feathers, a sharp beak, and predatory, hawkish golden eyes. She wore layered leather armor, wielded an enormously long whip, and seemed to be defending against the other two.

If you encounter this narrative on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

One was a man who had to be twelve feet tall, wearing shining silver and red-enameled full-plate armor and wielding a tremendous two-handed sword. The other was a woman who looked like she might have been a relative of Sora's. She was slight, wore green tights, a gleaming silver breastplate, and carried a deadly-looking crossbow. She tucked it close as she rolled and leaped, avoiding the avian woman's whip.

A tiny whisper came to him, and Victor glanced down to see Sora crouched near his coyote. The bird woman is Strista Kono. She's ninth tier. The man is Dovalion Boarheart, also tier-nine, and the Fae blood is Lyla Rose's wife.

Victor nodded as he touched his dimensional belt pouch, summoning the spy scope he'd stowed away in there. The thing was tiny in his hand, but he held it between his thumb and finger and peered through it, noting the auras of the three in the clearing. The avian woman, Strista, was

yellow, deepening toward orange. The giant man in his thick head-to-toe armor was yellow, and the woman with the crossbow was dark blue.

Victor grinned, tucked his scope away, then looked at Sora. Thanks. Stay hidden. Dont let anyone sneak up on me, he rumbled, then stood up and pushed through the trees. Part of his brain asked him what he was doing, but he pushed it down. Hed decided to act, to try to win this stupid dungeon challenge, which meant he needed to crack some skulls.

As soon as he stepped into the clearing, toppling one of the trees with a creaking, popping crash, the three stopped fighting. Facing each other warily, they all regarded him with hostility. You intrude, stranger, the hawk-faced woman screeched.

Victors Iron Berserk let him keep his mind clear enough to contemplate the statement. He thought about a response, about making an offer to these three, but a large part of him wanted to leap into battle, uncaring about sides or numbers. He had to fight his urges for a heartbeat, and, in that time, he took a few steps forward, and he saw the reaction as his aura fell upon the three. Each one flinched, though the Fae woman with the crossbow nearly fell. He knew they werent exactly friends, so he decided to see how deep their animosity ran. Ill take you all one by one or three together. What will you prefer?

Lyla and her husband stood to Victors left and Strista to his right. Victor saw the giant warrior, Dovalion, tilt his metal-covered face to the hawk-woman, and they both nodded almost imperceptibly. I say die, then, fool! the huge warrior cried, lifting his sword. It burst into flame, white-hot but clean-burningnot a shred of smoke rose from the flaring metal.

Victor felt his cheeks rise as his smile widened, and he began to laugh with the joy of impending combat. Then, a whirlwind erupted at his feet, and a tremendous, cyclone-force wind lifted him off his feet, hoisting him into the air. As he spun, he saw Strista lifting her arms, crackling blue Energy dancing along her dark feathers, and he knew shed summoned the wind. Pain lanced through his left thigh, glute, and lower back as he was hammered with powerful crossbow bolts.

Victor arched his back, trying to find some sort of control over his movements, straining as he reached back to yank one of the thick bolts from his leg. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of Lyla reloading her crossbow and a gleaming streak as Dovalion charged him, his burning greatsword held high.

Victor dropped the bolt, noting how green fluid pumped from its tip, sizzling on the grass. He wondered if it was poison, which made his mad laugh all the louder. Just then, Dovalion crashed into him, his great, burning sword cleaving into his unarmored thigh and sending him careening through the air to crash and tumble into the underbrush at the clearings edge.

Victor didnt like being controlled and made helpless. His pathways were so full of frustrated rage that he veritably burned with it. More than frustration, he was in pain; Dovalions sword had bitten deeply, grinding against his bone. He wondered if hed been more solidly braced, not floating in the air, if the greatsword would have cut through his leg entirely.

When his tumbling fall came to a stop, he pressed his hand to the wound, watching great torrents of hot blood spewing through his fingers. Still, it slowed almost immediately, his immense vitality and the healing nature of his Berserk already working to stitch the wound closed. He yanked the other bolts out with soft grunts, dropped them to the ground, and stood.



Victor had been in enough fights to know he'd bitten off a massive mouthful, maybe more than he could chew, but he couldn't help the joy in his chest at the prospect of finally being challenged. How long had it been since he'd bled like that? He could feel the pressure against his aura as Dovalion gave chase, stomping over the clearing toward the wrecked foliage where Victor had fallen. With a grunt, he leaped to his feet and, surprisingly adroitly, darted around the edge of the clearing, putting some distance between himself and the metal-clad warrior. As he crouched low, stalking around the edge, he called his companions to him.

He could hear the hawk woman screeching at the others, telling them he was moving. He heard cracks of thunder and saw trees and branches explode into flaming, smoking splinters not far from him, but the noise and wreckage gave him further cover as he continued to flank the winged, whip-wielding caster. When he felt his coyotes growing close, he'd nearly circled the entire clearing and could still hear Dovalion grunting, crashing around, hacking his sword in wide, burning arcs, slicing through trees and undergrowth. The jungle didn't love the destruction; black, acrid smoke rose from the burning plants, and Victor's feral grin widened as he heard the enormous, armored warrior coughing.

Victor was big, and if he hadn't been in a dungeon filled with giant, magical trees, it might have been harder to sneak around, but he wasn't so sure. It felt natural for him, darting through the vines, broad-leafed plants, and ferns. The ground was spongy and somehow familiar to his feet, and he was almost surprised by how quickly he left Dovalion and Strista's lightning bolts behind.

Couldn't they feel his aura? Couldn't they track his Energy? On the heels of the idea, another followed—his aura was overwhelming them. They felt it, but it was confounding them, dulling their senses and wearing down their wills. That was the price of fighting inside a stronger enemy's aura. As he lurked behind a massive tree, peering around at the clearing, his smile gleamed in the shadows.

He saw the Fae, Lyla, crouching near the center of the clearing, turning in a slow circle, eyes narrowed. Her back was to him, but he knew her sharp senses would feel him if he kept watching. Rather than hide again and wait, he urged his coyotes to attack her, and then he bolted forward, scanning for Strista.

His dark, shadow-clad brothers burst out of the jungle, streaking toward the archer. One exploded in a blast of blue lightning, and Lyla pumped another with three rapid-fire crossbow bolts, sending it back to the Spirit Plane as it melted into a pool of shadow. Then, the other three were on her, and she had to dart and weave, using her impressively graceful movements to avoid being mauled and ripped to shreds by the three savage canines.

Meanwhile, Victor burst into the clearing and saw Strista to his left, near the edge where Dovalion still lumbered about, hacking through trees. She was facing Lyla, lifting her hands, ready to blast another coyote, when Victor cast a fear-fueled Energy Charge, streaking through the clearing in a ball of roiling shadow. She saw him at the last second and pumped her huge black wings, but it was too late; Victor collided with her right flank, and she wasn't built to take a charge from a titan. In an explosion of black feathers, Victor sent her flying, tumbling out of control into the jungle, where she smashed through half a dozen trees. The air rained feathers.

**\*\*\*Strista Kono has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Ten entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

Victor lifted his head, arched his back, and screamed his triumph to the dungeon. He could hear Dovalion crashing through the burning undergrowth toward him, but Victor whirled on Lyla and saw shed put down two more of his coyotes, but the last one had her by the ankle, pulling her over the grass. She had bleeding wounds on her shoulders and arms and had dropped her crossbow. Victor's heart swelled with pride when he saw how dearly his companions had made her pay for their lives. He stomped over to her bow and lifted Lifedrinker to hack it. No! she cried, giving up her struggle against his coyote. She lives!

Victor frowned, stooped to pick up the bow, then stalked toward her. He wasn't exactly feeling merciful, but he knew how he'd feel if someone destroyed Lifedrinker. He wasn't that kind of asshole. His coyote had stopped dragging her but had her bloody ankle in a death grip, growling and snarling. He heard Dovalion's stomping steps as he broke back into the clearing. Victor was right beside the bloodied, desperate woman, though, and, lifting Lifedrinker high, he stepped around behind her so he could see Dovalion, too.

The warrior's armor was smeared with soot, but his sword still burned, and his posture said he was ready to charge Victor at any second. Wait, Victor growled. He clicked his tongue, and the coyote released Lyla's foot. As she gasped in relief, he dropped her bow onto her lap and said, Use the Lifesaver. You're done.

Lyla looked from Victor to Dovalion, her face streaked in bloody smudges, her eyes filling with frustrated tears, but she reached into her leather vest and pulled the medallion out. She and the helmeted warrior stared at each other for several long, silent seconds. Then Lyla sent Energy into the Lifesaver, and, in a cloud of hazy blue smoke, she disappeared.

**\*\*\*Lyla Rose has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Nine entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

Thank you for your small mercy, Dovalion said, bowing at the waist. Victor saw a gray shadow flitting around the edge of the clearing behind the knight. Sora? He regarded the man for several seconds. He was easily as large and bulky as the Degh back on Zaafor. He had to have some kind of giant bloodline.

Sora, stay out of it. Make sure no one else sneaks up, he shouted. Then he gathered up his rage-attuned Energy, sending it into his Core and canceling his Iron Berserk. As he fell back to his usual size, Victor called forth his glory-attuned Energy and summoned his Banner of the Champion. Golden light flared behind him, shadows fell away, and Victor felt the glorious pride of a spectacle, of being the center of everyone's rapt attention. He looked up at the sky, saw the floating spy stones, and lifted Lifedrinker. Ancestors! he roared. Witness me!

#

What is that young fool doing? Loro asked, scooting further toward the edge of the booth, his dark, undead eyes staring at the view window. Why would he cancel his berserking titan form? Is he out of Energy?

Ranish Dar sighed, shaking his head. No, my friend. I'm sure he's not. He's putting on a show in some misguided attempt to earn favor or honor or . . . glory. Ah, that's it. He has a glory affinity, and I'm afraid, coupled with his titan ancestry, this is something I should have probably anticipated.

Do you think the Fae girl will betray him? What others are still on the third floor? Loro and Dar both scanned the other windows. Three showed the same scene: Victor's, Soras, and Dovalions. Of the other six, none showed any jungle scenery. It seems he might be lucky this time.

Luck? Was it luck that sent Strista home with a single blow? Was it luck that made Lyla Rose, the Black Thorn, surrender? Dar frowned and shrugged. Perhaps there's some luck involved, but Victor is as pure a warrior as I've ever seen. Even Dovalion there has spent decades crafting, meditating, and raising a family. How many entrants do you think have a skillset so purely focused on conquest? Victor's Core, his Class choices, his bloodline, and his life experiences are all focused on battle. Few of the other entrants understand what that means. Few could imagine what kind of spirit is forged from the constant exposure to death's cold embrace. He may have dropped his berserk form, but, my friend, he did so because he saw no glory in the utter domination of another warrior.

#### Book 7: Chapter 44: Dungeon Friends

Dovalion straightened from his bow and stepped forward, his white-hot, flaming greatsword held up and tilted slightly back in a high guard. His voice came out of his fully enclosed helmet, echoing strangely, like a man speaking from inside a well, "So, you have a hidden ally?"

Victor ignored him, grinning. Lifedrinker held loosely before him. She was eager, tugging toward the giant warrior, hungry to test her edge against his thick plate armor. Victor often fought Lesh without Iron Berserk, so he wasn't daunted by the man's size. The armor-clad man wasn't much larger than Victor, after all, and Victor was stronger than he looked, which said a lot. He quietly circled the tall warrior, his posture more like a wrestler's than a proper duelist's. He kept his center of gravity low, his shoulders and arms loose, leaning slightly forward in a hungry, predatory posture.

"I see you've dropped your rage. I salute your control. A test of skill, then?" Dovalion did something quick with his hands, and the great sword whipped through the air before him, arcing in a circle, the white flames flaring as he spun it. It was a quick movement, one meant to showcase his talent, and when his sword stopped moving, it was once again in a high guard, ready to strike or react to Victor.

For his part, Victor felt he'd been patient enough. He darted forward, thrusting out Lifedrinker, feinting a crushing blow toward the giant's face. Dovalion tilted his blade to parry, but Victor yanked the axe back at the last second, darted past the warrior's flank, and performed a quick, lightning hack at his torso. Dovalion was fast and nimble, but he was hampered by his thick armor, at least enough so that he failed to dodge the blow. Lifedrinker sparked and flared as she tried to dig through the heavy plate on his stomach and side, but, as far as Victor could tell, she only bit about halfway through.

"A fine axe, sir, but my armor is a relic from an ancient world, crafted from the ore of a fallen-ung!" He choked off his impromptu lesson regarding his family heirloom as Victor launched himself into an attack, swinging Lifedrinker in a

series of swooping, lightning hacks, driving the giant back, scraping and denting the armor in a shower of molten sparks. Lifedrinker's frustration was palpable as she flared and glowed, using every bit of the edge Victor's inspiration-attuned spirit fragment gave her.

Dovalion turned one of his heavy shoulder plates into the attack and swung his blazing sword in a great circular cleave. Victor was loathe to let up the pressure of his assault, and he decided to keep swinging, moving with the cleave, hoping to mitigate the damage. The blazing greatsword struck him in the ribs, sparking against his wyrm-scale, the edge finding purchase as it slid between two scales, ripping through the heavy wyrm-hide backing, then splitting Victor's skin and sliding along his ribs. Dovalion channeled some Energy, whipping the sword through the arc of his cleave faster than should have been possible and transitioning into an overhead chop that Victor barely avoided by diving to the side and rolling. When he bounded to his feet, he was grinning like a madman.

"First blood, sirrah!" Dovalion's hollow voice announced as he spun his flaming sword in another flourish, tracking Victor's predatory circling movements. Victor grunted in response, his wound already forgotten, despite the sheeting blood running down his side beneath his armor to dribble onto the grass. He may not be berserk, but his vitality was high, his body was strong, and he wasn't worried about a cut on his flank. Grunting in frustration, annoyed that Lifedrinker couldn't pierce the man's formidable armor without his berserk strength behind her, Victor determined to continue the dance, to find a gap in that armor or, failing that, beat on it long enough that it started to affect the man beneath.

So, he darted forward again, his great thighs bulging with the force of his dash. He wove his axe, his partner, through a series of hacks, feints, frenetic combinations, and parries. For every two or three swings of Lifedrinker, Dovalion only answered with one with his greatsword, choosing to use his bracers, pauldrons, and even helmet to deflect many of the blows. He was skilled with that mighty sword, but he fought a very different style of combat than Victor or, if he were honest, anyone he'd ever sparred with. He was like a juggernaut, wading through Victor's mighty blows, trusting his armor and sturdy frame to absorb the damage while he waited to deliver decisive hacks and thrusts with that deadly, burning sword.

Victor began to amass cuts on his arms that smoked as the sword boiled his blood but failed to ignite his flesh. His wyrm-scale armor deflected indirect hits but parted beneath cleaves or stabs. Still, it held well enough for Victor to roll away from those hits, taking only minor wounds. Part of Victor grew increasingly irritated, yearning to unleash more of his abilities. His mind was distracted, debating with itself. If he didn't want to cast Iron Berserk, fine, then why not unleash his Aspect of Terror? If not that, then how would Dovalion fare against the Inevitable Huntsman? Why not some Energy Charges? Dovalion was burning Energy to speed his movements; wouldn't that, at least, be fair? Perhaps some coyotes or his bear would enjoy mixing things up with the giant warrior.

Victor gritted his teeth and growled through his internal debate, trying to focus on his axe work. He wanted to give his ancestors a show. He wanted to keep his other, darker aspects a secret for now. More than any of that, though, he wanted to enjoy a good, hard fight, one where he didn't have to pull any punches. As Dovalion surged with golden Energy and some of the crumpled dents in his

armor popped out and smoothed over, Victor frowned and gave in just a little, casting Inspiration of the Quinametzin. As the white-gold light of inspiration merged with the golden, sparkling glory of his banner, Victor smiled and laughed.

As he ducked, weaved, parried, and hacked, he began to see patterns in Dovalion's movements. He was skilled, sure, but he was just a man, and he relied on his armor a great deal. Victor knew he would have won the fight a dozen times over if not for that man's skilled use of his nigh-indestructible metal shell. He wondered if he could call forth the Paragon of the Axe. Would that give his hacks enough bite to cleave that metal? He was reasonably sure it would, but the problem was that Dovalion didn't use his weapon like a master. He didn't push Victor's axe work to the limits.

As he dodged back, avoiding another cleave, Victor shook his head. That was an excuse. Hadn't he seen glimpses of the ghostly Paragon edge when he'd fought the reaver army? He'd been pushed to his limits, but not because those reavers were exceptionally skilled with their weapons. No, Victor had let his mind relax, he'd stopped worrying about nonsense, and he'd embraced the battle. With that thought, Victor endeavored to cease all further thinking. He inhaled deeply and felt the magma in his chest surge but savored the warmth rather than thinking about using it. As he exhaled with a clear mind, he went to work.

#

"Bah!" Lesh growled, thumping his massive fist on the thick wooden table, jostling the empty cups and mugs. "Why does he toy with that man?"

Valla looked away from the battle depicted through the magical window and offered him a pained smile. "He . . . I don't know, Lesh. He gets strange ideas in his head. You saw him fight the reavers. You saw . . ."

"Aye. I've seen enough. Some point of pride won't let him use his berserking rage." Lesh clenched and unclenched his fist. "If he doesn't, though, he might lose. Look at the wounds he's amassed. He has the wrong weapon to fight a man with armor like that!"

"Look closer." Valla nodded toward the view window. "His wounds are all but closed, and he's not taken one in a while. Can't you see a difference? Perhaps he'd been distracted, or perhaps he was getting a feel for this armored warrior, but don't you see how he dances around him?"

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Lesh narrowed his eyes and stared for a while, watching the fight. Valla saw understanding start to dawn as the dragonkin watched. She knew she was right. She could see the metal-clad giant burning Energy more and more frequently, trying to speed his greatsword's cleaves, repairing his armor as it more and more rapidly amassed dents and blackened score marks from Lifedrinker's hungry, burning edge. Even as his burning greatsword moved in nearly invisible blurs, Victor was never there to feel its fiery edge. Was he reacting too fast? Was he thinking ahead, aware of what the

warrior would do before he did it? Valla didn't know, but she felt her heart swelling with pride. The crowd hadn't realized it yet, but Victor was making a fool of the giant.

"He doesn't burn Energy," Lesh said after staring for a long while. His tone had gone from frustrated to amused or, perhaps, amazed. "He'll wear the giant down? How long can they battle like this?"

Valla didn't answer as she watched Victor glide around the warrior's flank, hack Lifedrinker against his side and back in three lightning chops, then roll away as the greatsword split the air where he'd been standing like a thunderbolt. The spy stones projected sound as well as images, and the grunts and heavy breaths of the metal-bound warrior were starting to grow loud and strained. Conversely, Victor looked fresh and hadn't stopped smiling in a long while.

"Old Gods!" a stooped, white-haired, bear-like man hissed at a nearby table. "They've been fighting for nigh-on twenty minutes!" he thumped a younger, black-haired individual on the back. "You'll learn about this in your training, Goja! Even a couple of minutes is exhausting!" Valla smiled, looking around the public house. The tables had grown silent as they watched the deadly dance playing out.

Earlier, when Victor had dropped his rage and reduced his size, the bet-takers had gone wild, crying out new odds, and there'd been a frenzy of noise and activity as money changed hands and people speculated about there being something wrong with Victor: Was he out of Energy? Was Dovalion working some magic to cancel his Berserk? Would he run? Then, as the fight drew out, with both men trading blows, things had begun to get quiet, and now she was confident she'd hear a whisper in the place. Everyone's eyes were glued to the contest. Valla almost chuckled at the irony of her thoughts when several people gasped, and a loud, strident voice cried out, "Look!"

She followed the man's pointing claw and saw what had gotten the crowd talking again—a ghostly extra edge had begun to flicker in the air around Lifedrinker. Valla took a breath and held it while she watched Victor swing his axe, watched as that shimmering glass-like edge moved with the smoldering metal one, and split Dovalion's armor with a terrible ringing eruption of gasses and flaring Energy.

#

Victor knew it when the Paragon of the Axe appeared; he could feel it. His movements took on a new level of perfection. It was the difference between a student who knew the keys of the piano and how to read music and put the notes together and a master playing from inspiration and intuition. He'd stopped diving and rolling around, and now he shifted just a hair, this way and that, letting Dovalion's blade carve the air inches from his flesh and armor. He moved with the giant, Lifedrinker like a rudder in a storm, guiding Victor away from the monstrous swings with a tap against the fiery blade.

When Victor felt the Paragon, when he felt the ghostly specter of the perfect axe, he stepped back, parried, and when Dovalion was extended, he hacked Lifedrinker against the hard, magical armor of the giant's right arm. The ghostly edge wreathing Lifedrinker's fiery axe head split that metal like a steel chisel through a soda can. As a can might spew its carbonated contents, the armor vented gas, heat, and Energy as though it had been under pressure. Dovalion cried out, stumbling forward as his

right arm fell to the bloody grass. He fought to hold onto his swinging sword with his left hand, but the momentum and weight of it were too much, and its fiery tip sank into the soil. He kept his hand on the hilt, but he slumped as steam and blood spewed from the truncated armor of his right arm.

All his life, Victor had trained to finish. He'd never been taught to stop when his opponent was on his heels. It didn't even cross his mind to stop; this wasn't wrestling, but Victor aimed for the equivalent of a pin, not a draw. He was on Dovalion in an instant, gliding like a leopard over the grass. He held Lifedrinker high, her blade wreathed with the ghostly edge of the Paragon, as he swung her like a falling star at the spot where Dovalion's neck met his shoulder. She bit into the metal, and he heard that awful, splitting sound again. Then, Dovalion was gone; there was nothing but a cloud of blue smoke where he'd stood.

**\*\*\*Dovalion Boarheart has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Eight entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

Victor grunted in frustration as Lifedrinker hacked through the smoke. He'd won, and he'd done it cleanly, but the victory felt hollow. He felt robbed. He stood there, letting the smoke of Dovalion's rescue drift into nothing, contemplating the battle and his win. He lifted Lifedrinker and looked at her smoldering blade, seeing no sign of the Paragon. He'd lost the battle trance that had summoned it. Footsteps alerted him to Sora's approach, and he turned to regard her.

"An amazing battle, Victor. I can't believe you took all three of them." She held her bow loosely in one hand by her side. Victor nodded, offering her a half smile. His frustration was fading, and he knew they'd be hit with some Energy at any moment.

"Thanks for watching my back." He had no idea if she'd done so. For all he knew, she'd been training her arrows on him, waiting for the perfect moment to betray him. He supposed he could probably count on her loyalty now; she'd have to be stupid to want to earn him as an enemy, and she seemed bright enough.

"It was nothing. Honestly, I was dumbstruck while you faced Strista and the other two; I couldn't believe you walked out there like that."

Victor chuckled and started to respond, but then swirling, potent balls of Energy streaked through the jungle canopy and struck both of them in the chest. It was a massive infusion, enough to blast all thought from Victor's mind as weird rainbows and strange alien vistas passed before his mind's eye. He saw purple plains, heaving, swelling red-frothed seas, and bizarre, gigantic, naked, fur-covered people. Some had two eyes, and some had one, and more than a few wore great racks of horns like crowns. They toiled to climb a steep, rocky mountainside.

Victor tried to make sense of the vision, but then the euphoric rush of Energy faded, and he saw his surroundings again. Sora was sprawled out on the grass before him, and a System message obscured his view:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 65 Herald of the Mountain's Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Roots of the Mountain – Basic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Roots of the Mountain – Basic: A mountain weathers all storms. A mountain isn't moved. The mountain moves the earth. With this spell active, only the force of a true cataclysm can uproot or shift you. Energy Cost: 100 per second of active use. Cooldown: Minimal.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! Your Imbue Spirit – Basic has become Imbue Spirit – Improved.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Imbue Spirit – Improved: You are able to imbue an object or individual with a shard of your own spirit, granting some of your own power and will to the recipient. At the improved level, the granted boons are larger. This effect will last until you recall your spirit shard. Energy Cost: Variable. Cooldown: Long\*\*\***

“Badass,” Victor said softly, sitting up in the grass.

Sora blinked rapidly and looked at him. “That was quite a lot of Energy. There are some very unhappy iron rankers sitting around Sojourn watching us right now.”

“Yep.” Victor stood up, grunting as he did so. He hung Lifedrinker in her harness, then stood there, rubbing the soot and blood on his arms as though he had any chance of getting clean without a bath. The Energy had fully healed him; not even a scab remained of the many cuts Dovalion had given him. While Sora scanned the edges of the clearing, Victor summoned his coyotes, this time using inspiration-attuned Energy. They yapped, yipped, and whined as they circled him, and Victor laughed. “Go find the stairs going up, hermanos.”

“Why are they sometimes evil and dark and sometimes bright and full of exuberance?”

Victor looked at her and narrowed his eyes. She was ever asking questions. When she looked back at him without a touch of animosity, he shrugged, relenting. “Sometimes I want them to be quiet hunters, and sometimes I want them to be clever scouts.”

“I’m sorry to ask so much. I know how it feels when strangers want to know your business. May I ask you one more, though?”

Victor’s lips curled into a smile as he tried out the annoying line he’d heard from so many coaches over the years, “You just did.”

She groaned and apparently decided just to forge ahead. “Why didn’t you keep your giant size when you fought Dovalion? I mean, I know you’re quite large as you are, but you were . . . much larger before.”

“I don’t know. I wanted a good fight, and I knew my ancestors would have more fun watching a battle like that.”

“They’re watching?” Sora looked around, squinting with suspicion.

“Not always. If I want them to watch, I have to give them something worthwhile to see.” Victor could feel his coyotes covering ground, could feel their excitement



as they hunted for the goal he'd given them. So far, they hadn't run into anything to worry about, so he sat down in the grass.

"But," Sora winced, shrugging as if to apologize for asking yet another question, "why do you want them to watch?"

"How will I earn their favor if they don't see the glory I achieve? I have to earn my place among them, you know. I don't want to show up like a weakling with no great story to tell, begging to carry water. I want to show up and be celebrated. I want to earn a good place among them, and I want other titans to cry my name when they go into battle."

"Ah!" Sora sat down in front of him, leaning closer. "So, you have a clan to make proud? Titans who follow you? Children?"

Victor sighed and leaned back, waiting for word from one of his scouts. He closed his eyes and let the heat from the incongruous dungeon jungle bring a sheen of sweat to his golden-brown skin. It felt good—right. Somehow, he missed the jungle even though he'd never visited one in his life. "Enough questions, Sora. We're dungeon friends; if we stay friends afterward, we can learn more about each other."

Book 7: Chapter 45: Alliances

After only fifteen or twenty minutes of waiting, one of Victor's coyotes alerted on something, and to Victor, it felt like the triumphant pride of success—it had found the object of their hunt. So, he charged through the jungle, Sora hot on his heels, and on the way, he stumbled into a clearing filled with weird, half-flower, half-leopard creatures.

They launched themselves at him with wild abandon, biting, clawing, and grasping with thorn-tipped vines. The dungeon animals were tenacious and numerous but fell quickly to Lifedrinker's smoldering cleaves and Sora's fiery arrows. Once they'd received some Energy for their quick victory, the two allies resumed their charge through the jungle.

Victor savored the heat and moisture. He loved how his feet seemed to know exactly where to step, how he slipped through vines, snagging thorns, and clinging undergrowth almost effortlessly. This was the environment of his ancestors. The sweltering sun, the damp air, and the rich green foliage all combined into something oddly familiar and comforting. When he passed between the boles of two large, moss-covered trees and saw a vine-shrouded stone opening in a cliff face, he almost felt disappointed; if his coyote was right, the end of the jungle level was just ahead.

**\*\*\*Tyra Vexmore has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Seven entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

"Another!" Sora panted, leaning to rest her hands on her knees. She was drenched in sweat, and her silver-gray hair looked wild from the rough, fast passage through the jungle.

"You know that one?"

"Only by reputation. Very stealthy—a Shadow Caster."

“Huh,” Victor nodded. “Yet someone spotted her.”

**\*\*\*Warin-dak has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Six entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

“What the fu . . .” Victor trailed off, staring at the announcement. It sounded like a Shadeni name. “Or Ridonne,” he breathed softly, his mind racing with the implications. He shouldn’t be surprised, he supposed—the Ridonne had had access to Sojourn for nearly four centuries. Wouldn’t it make sense for some of them to be there? Even so, it was a wake-up call. Sojourn might be a big city, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t run into some enemies. The idea brought to mind Valla and the others, especially Edeya and Darren, who were so fragile in their current state.

It was Sora’s turn to ask, “You know him?”

“The name rings a bell. Have you seen him?”

“I’ve watched him perform in other spectacles—arena fights and sanctioned duels. He’s popular in the city. I’m surprised he was knocked out. I’m quite sure he was tier-nine before entering.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Huge. Well, to me. He’s about your size, with crimson flesh, spikes on his shoulders, elbows, and around his crown . . .”

“Golden eyes?”

“Um, some gold, perhaps, but mostly crimson. He’s brutish but wields terrible Energy beams. It’s some kind of specialized fire affinity, but not fire . . .” She trailed off, staring at the sky, searching her memory. “Something to do with an infernal plane.” She shrugged and looked back at Victor. “I’m sorry, I can’t remember.”

“It’s all right. More than I knew a minute ago.” Victor pointed to the stone tunnel opening. “My coyote is just in there. I think it’s the stairs.”

Sora jogged toward it. “Then let us climb before the Energy hits.” Victor nodded, following her. The tunnel was too low for him to enter without stooping, but after only a few yards, it opened up into a spiral shaft lined with steps, not much different from the last staircase they’d found. Victor’s coyote was sitting on his haunches by the steps and started whining with excitement when Victor and Sora stepped out of the tunnel. Victor patted his head, scratching around his ears.

“Good job, hermano.” He was about to send him home to the Spirit Plane, but that’s when orbs of golden Energy slammed into Sora and him, blinding him and sending his mind reeling through a kaleidoscopic series of images and colors,

none of which made much sense to him. Part of him, still cognizant, hoped for another glimpse of the strange hirsute giants climbing the mountain, but it didn't come. When the rush of Energy was over, he didn't have any System messages, but he felt fully refreshed and restored. Sora was sitting on the steps, petting his coyote, which made Victor wonder why she'd recovered before he did. Hadn't they both gotten the same share of Energy from the System's award?

"That one really took you," she remarked, looking up from his traitorous coyote. "I think your friend likes me."

"Oh, he likes the attention." Victor almost joked about the coyote being a fragment of his spirit and how they both loved that sort of thing. He cut himself off, though, deciding Sora and everyone listening to their conversation had learned enough about him. "Shall we go up?"

"Yes! Let's see if the awards are better this time!" She hopped to her feet and, with a final glance over her shoulder, ran up the stairs. After her fourth step, she shimmered briefly and faded from Victor's view.

"Okay, brother. Head on home. I'll call you again soon." Victor dismissed his companion and then followed Sora.

For the third time, after just a few steps, he walked into a small stone room with a chest at the center and a closed door opposite the stairs. The chest was similar to the last one, but the material was different; it looked almost like sandstone with inlaid copper glyphs. "Maybe a little bigger," he muttered as he knelt before it, lifting the rough, delicate-seeming lid on its polished copper hinges. It swung wide, and, just as before, golden mist spewed forth. After waving it away, he saw two items: a thick leather belt and a piece of fruit that looked like an apple-sized blueberry.

Victor picked up the fruit. It had a bright green stem with a label attached to it by a short length of silken string. The flesh under the taut blue skin felt soft, spongy, and strangely warm in his palm as he turned it to regard the words on the thin slip of pale yellow paper. Before reading it, he inhaled the scent of the fruit, savoring the odors that reminded him of orange blossoms and honey as they tickled his nose. With a salivating mouth, he read, "Urd Berry of the Windswept Moon. Eat when nearing a difficult breakthrough." Before he lost control and took a bite, he quickly slipped it into his storage pouch.

Victor lifted out the belt, already guessing it was part of the same set as his gauntlet and boots. When he trickled some Energy into it, his guess was confirmed:

**\*\*\*Belt 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.\*\*\***

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"Too easy," he muttered, slipping his third set piece into his pouch. He stood and pulled Lifedrinker out of her harness, striding toward the door. He tried to open it,

but it wouldn't budge, and Victor turned, annoyed, wondering if he'd missed something in the award room. He didn't see anything; even the stairway was gone, just a stone wall where it once had been. The chest had crumbled to sand, and the individual grains burst into golden steam as he watched. The room was utterly empty.

Victor slowly walked around the wall, dragging his fingertips over the stone, but he found nothing out of the ordinary when he'd made a complete circuit. The delay was annoying; Victor was tired of the dungeon and wanted to end it. Besides Sora and himself, there were only four others still in action; he figured if he and the slight, elven woman hurried, they'd either get to the end or run into whoever was ahead of them, hopefully on the next level.

He stared at the door, contemplating hacking at it with Lifedrinker, but wondering if that would be stupid; it was part of the dungeon, controlled by the System. Would it really expect people to have to break through a door to leave an award room? He stood there for several long seconds, staring at it, working himself up to the action, but he heard a click just as he started to lift his axe.

"Finally," he grumbled, pulling it open. He wanted to get out there, gather up Sora and haul ass for the next stairs. He figured he'd summon his coyotes again to find them. Of course, plans were one thing, but reality was another.

When he stepped out of the award room into an enormous, natural-looking cavern with gigantic, redwood-sized stalagmites and stalactites stretching from the floor and ceiling and a far wall so distant as to be shrouded in misty shadows, he found himself side by side with Sora, facing four other people. Victor sighed, looking at the threatening crew. He'd wanted to chase down whoever was ahead, but he didn't think it would be four of them working together and a step ahead, waiting for him instead.

They didn't look like slouches; each was primed with Energy, glaring at him in varying degrees of hostility, weapons ready. Still, they hadn't immediately attacked, and, in fact, Victor had heard a choked-off utterance from the tall, armored woman at their center as though she'd been mid-conversation with Sora. Mid-conversation or mid-threat? As he examined them each, he smiled grimly and twisted his fists on Lifedrinker's haft, getting ready to prime some spells in his pathways.

The man in the center was the biggest, but he didn't feel the most dangerous. That honor went to the dark-robed woman on Victor's left. He could feel the bite of her aura, thick with killing intent, cold with the chill of the grave, and slippery as it sought to glide around his own heavy aura. She held a staff that looked like a polished two-meter bone, and her black eyes glared at him from beneath a silken cowl.

The man beside her was close to Victor's size. Seeing that, Victor's mind went off on a tangent about how he was starting to realize that the bipedal people of at least this part of the universe came in roughly three categories when it came to size—human-sized, "giant-sized," which was around ten feet, and titan-sized, which was more like fifteen to twenty. Of course, Victor was technically a titan, but he hadn't grown into his full size, not unless he berserked. The weird side thought only took an instant as he regarded the giant in his fur-covered leather clothes. He wielded a club that

reminded Victor of the giant axe he'd used to smash Darren's tanks. It wasn't a fine weapon—more like a petrified tree branch, both enormous and heavy-looking.

To the giant's right was another woman. She was lithe but tall, something between Valla's height and Victor's—maybe eight feet. She wore fine, silvery mail, a winged, visored helmet, and held two hatchet-like axes. Finally, to her right was another magician-type. This man was cloaked in soft green robes, wielded a staff that looked like a living sapling, and wore a crown of fall leaves. He smiled rather pleasantly when Victor's eyes passed over him.

"They can't attack us," Sora said.

"Tut, little elf," the tall, hatchet-wielding woman said, pouting her full, red-stained lips beneath her silvery visor.

"Not until we step off this stone platform." Sora tapped her foot, and Victor looked down, nodding. It made sense that the dungeon wouldn't allow someone to camp the entrances to each level, at least not without giving the people coming up a chance to react.

"So? What is it? You pendejos want to fuck around?" Victor stepped toward the platform's edge—one more step, and he'd be off it.

"Gods, you are a cocky one, aren't you?" again, the armored woman spoke. Victor ignored her—he could tell she wasn't the strongest. His instinct was to focus on the giant man, but he knew better. He felt strong, but Victor knew he'd crumble if the two of them went toe to toe. He turned his gaze to the pale Death Caster and smiled.

"Well, bruja? What's it gonna be?"

She looked at him, smiled her black-painted lips, revealing teeth that would make a vampire proud, and turned to Sora. "Well, elf? Did you make a decision?" Those words opened Victor's rage-attuned Core, sending hot, red Energy into his pathways. So, that was what they'd been talking about when he'd abruptly appeared—they'd offered Sora a spot on their team.

Victor turned to his right, looking down into almost too-large, angular silver-blue eyes. "Well?" he repeated.

She frowned, scowled at the dark-cloaked woman, then shrugged. "It's a competition, Victor. You're strong, but Arona is in the ninth tier, Brontes has never lost a martial battle, and Valeska is sought as a master axe instructor by people from a dozen worlds." She jerked her chin at the man in green with the living staff. "Never mind that they have Elandor here to work his nature magic." She tentatively reached out her slender fingers to grasp his wrist. "Will you hold it against me?"

For some reason, Victor felt like what he said mattered to her. He had a feeling she might tie her fate to his if he asked her to. The thought brought a smile to his lips and lowered the heat of the rage in his pathways down to a simmer. He didn't need this woman's mercy. He didn't need her to sacrifice for him. He took a long, slow breath, then nodded as though to confirm his words were

true, saying, “To be honest, Sora, I’ll fight better knowing I’ve nobody to protect. I won’t promise you’ll survive if you join the four of them, but I won’t hold it against you if we all make it out of here. At least you had the guts to betray me to my face.”

“Dead gods, this one has a pair of balls,” the big man said, his voice like a mudslide, loud and rumbling but indistinct and poorly enunciated.

Victor stretched his neck, released a few staccato pops, and then looked over the four again. “How long is your deal with Sora going to last? If you beat me, she gets to work with you all the way to the end? You all like each other that much?”

“Do not concern yourself with our arrangements, big man,” the Death Caster, Arona, said. Her voice was cold and sharp, like her fangs and death-attuned Energy. “Come, little Fae, join us.” Victor watched as Sora, her gaze averted, refusing to meet his eyes again, walked off the platform to stand beside the green-clad man. As she stopped beside him, he reached out his left hand to gently squeeze her shoulder, offering her a commiserating smile.

Victor sighed and slowly turned in a circle. He was backed up to the cavern's wall, and his four—five now—enemies were arrayed in a loose semi-circle facing him. They were each about ten yards from the edge of the platform, giving them room to maneuver or react if he did something.

They stared at him, each full of Energy, their pathways charged, their weapons throwing off auras from cold frost on Valeska’s hatchets to something like toxic gas seeping out of Brontes’s club. The Nature Caster, Elandor, still wore that enigmatic smile, but Victor could feel the potent, verdant Energy pouring out of him. These were five high-level, dangerous people, and their skill sets were very diverse. He figured he might stand a decent chance of eliminating one of them with a burst attack, but he could be wrong. Any one of them could have some sort of skill that would let them avoid his attack or escape with their life. If he berserked, they might have a way to snare him up, confuse him, or lead him on a chase, forcing him to waste his Energy.

What he needed was a way to separate them or get out from under their focus. They couldn’t attack him while he was on the stone, and he had a feeling that protection would disappear if he initiated hostilities. He gazed over their heads at the forest of giant stalagmites. If he could get out there among those stony protrusions, he might be able to use them for cover. He might be able to pair down his enemies one by one or two by two.

He had to consider that they were expecting that. He had to consider that they’d heard rumors of his rage or even talked to Sora about his abilities before he’d interrupted. Had the damn dungeon kept him locked away so they could talk behind his back? Even if not, any of them might have witnessed one of his earlier fights, especially on the first level.

No, rage might not be the answer yet, though his Volcanic Fury was always a nice Hail Mary. How would they fare if he brought the cavern down? He must have chuckled or grinned at the thought because Arona hissed, “Something funny? Are you going to stand there all day? Take your medicine! If you’re afraid, just use your Lifesaver now and save us the trouble!”

Victor chuckled and gently twisted his hands on Lifedrinker's haft, forming the pattern to summon his coyotes. He had to assume that his protection would fade as soon as he cast it, so he knew he had to be ready. Still, he wanted to catch them off guard, so he began pacing back and forth, carefully avoiding the platform's edge.

"Sora, I feel sorry for you a little bit, and I feel like I'd be bummed if you died, so let me just say, if you start to hear something that scares the living shit out of you, that literally starts to make your bowels turn to water, do me a favor, and use your Lifesaver. I don't want to kill you." Victor had heard plenty of accounts of what people in his own army had thought of the sounds he'd made during some of the battles they'd waged.

"I . . ." she started to say, but Victor cut her off, not done planting his seeds of doubt.

"Actually, that goes for all of you. I don't know any of you enough to hate you yet. I can't promise the System will be able to pull you away fast enough if I get my hooks into you. Honestly, if you all back down now, I might just walk past and finish the dungeon, and you can escape this whole thing without any losses. I won't even make you use your Lifesavers. What do you say?" As he posed the question, Victor had three spell patterns ready to go, the most he'd ever prepared all at once. He was surprised by how easy it had been.

"I think you're a fool who knows far too little about the world," the hatchet-wielding woman said.

Arona lifted a hand, "Don't feed his ego with an answer, Valeska . . ." Her words were cut short as harsh growls erupted behind her. Victor's rage-attuned coyotes sprang out of red pools of Energy, leaping at his urgent instructions to attack his foes, one for each. Meanwhile, he cast Energy Charge using glory-attuned Energy, streaking in a shower of golden sparks at the man in green. He wasn't sure why he'd chosen him as his first target, but something about him being attuned to nature made Victor think of grasping vines, thorn patches, and other things that might slow him. So, even before his coyote could leap at the man, Victor crashed into him.

The impact was tremendous, and his glory-attuned Energy rapidly depleted as it protected him from the damage. Elandor, too, used some sort of defensive spell; a brilliant green shell erupted around him, and the force of Victor's impact washed over it, throwing up dust, shattering a nearby stalagmite, and sending Sora reeling. Victor didn't wait to see or experience any of that. As soon as he impacted the man's shield, he bunched his legs and fired off Titanic Leap, angling into the forest of enormous stalagmites. While he soared through the air, he cast his third prepared spell: Aspect of Terror.

Book 7: Chapter 46: Terror

Sora tumbled over the hard, dusty ground, channeling wind Energy into her Gusts of Balance spell so she gracefully rolled to her feet. She lifted her bow, and one of her crystalline mesmer arrows appeared under her fingertips as she drew the string back, but Victor wasn't where she'd last seen him.

She saw Elandor there, down on one knee, his hands grasping his staff as though it kept him from sinking into the earth, pumping torrents of green Energy into a shell as two massive, frothing, red-eyed, wolf-like creatures tore at his barrier. Looking around, seeing the others all dealing with similar canine antagonists, she had to wonder if one of the two on Elandor had been meant for her.

With a thought, she sent her arrow back into her bow and began firing simple moon-steel arrows into the wolves attacking Elandor; the others were managing fine. As she landed mortal shots, they disappeared in gusts of red-tinged smoke, and she wondered where they went. From what world had Victor summoned them? She tried to think of the word he'd used to describe them. Cotees? The thought was shoved aside as a firm, armor-clad hand grasped her shoulder, and Valeska growled, "You didn't tell us he could fly!"

Sora looked up, peering toward the massive stalactites hanging down and the dense pockets of shadow between them all. "He flew?" She'd missed that part as she'd tumbled in the force wave of Victor's charge. Before Valeska could say more, a terrible keening howl echoed through the cavern; the mists and reverberations made it impossible to discern its exact source, which made it all the more disturbing. Victor's words came back to her, his warning about fleeing if she heard something that "turned her bowels to water." That wasn't happening, but perhaps it was only the distance that lessened the wail's impact.

"Is he a man or a beast? Does he shift?" Brontes asked, lifting his club to his shoulder. None of the wolves remained.

Sora was quick to reply, "I never saw him change shape; I saw him grow, as I told you, but that's all. I knew he could charge but never saw him fly."

"He didn't fly," Arona rasped. Though her words were more a whisper than a shout, everyone flinched. "He leaped into the shadows up there. An impossibly high leap, but a leap, not flight. I'm sure he came down behind one of those protrusions.

"Stalagmites," Elandor said, straightening from his kneeling position. He looked wan and exhausted. "I'll need time to recover my Energy; my shield burned much, defending me from his charge."

Sora watched Arona as Elandor spoke. The cowed woman smirked and shook her head. Elandor had a Core that utilized life and nature-attuned Energies, and Arona was ever looking for a reason to mock him. The Death Caster lifted a necklace of bones from around her head and said, "You can wait here then." The consideration surprised Sora, but she supposed the stakes were rather high; they were the last ones in the dungeon, and none of them had finished a challenge like this. The previous champion was already working on his test of steel.

Arona broke the string of her necklace and scattered the bones around the rocky cavern floor. Sora knew what was coming; she'd adventured with her before. She backed up a few steps and watched as the Death Caster began to glow with misty blue Energy, and then the bones started rattling and jumping about.

A surge of grave-scented wind rushed out from Arona, and then the bones exploded with growth, stretching and multiplying until the clearing around the platform was crowded—dozens of skeletal



horrors had sprung up from Arona's scattered bones. No two were alike; some were the size of people with two legs and two arms, but others looked like giant canines and others like demonic predators. The only commonality was the eerie blue light in their eye sockets as they stared at Arona, waiting for their master's instruction.

"We should have laid in wait further afield and surprised them both well away from the platform!" Valeska growled, her hand still gripping Sora's shoulder.

"She's with us now," Brontes rumbled, stepping up behind the two women and nudging Valeska's hand away with his enormous fur-wrapped arm.

"Indeed, but was her loyalty worth giving up the surprise?" Valeska flicked her right hand, sending both of her hatchets twirling in an arc before her, then snatched them again, one in each hand. She didn't wait for a response, turning away from the giant savage and Sora, gazing at Arona through her thick, silvery visor. "What's the plan, then, boss?"

The black-cloaked woman let loose a surge of cold Energy, and the small army of skeletons turned in unison and click-clacked into the forest of stalagmites. "My bones will fish him out." As she spoke, another unnerving cry echoed through the cavern. Sora fought to keep her face neutral, and even Arona flinched.

Valeska hissed, "Dead gods! What is he?"

"I . . ." Elandor started to say, but another cry cut him off, and when Sora turned to him, she saw his face had grown even more pale. His eyes were wide, and he licked his lips, clearly feeling stressed in his depleted state. "I can feel fear biting at me, permeating the air. Is that from him? I thought he was a Berserker!"

Arona waved a hand. "Many Spirit Casters have more than one affinity. Get a grip on yourself, nature boy. If this bothers you, you're lucky you haven't glimpsed the things I've seen through the veil." She turned to Valeska. "You and I will search in that direction." She waved vaguely northwest. Then she pointed to the southeast, "Brontes and his little girlfriend can go that way. Elandor, recover yourself here."

"Alone?"

"He's clearly not here. If he returns this way, we'll see him—he's not small." She shrugged and gestured toward the backs of some of her bony minions. "My bones will likely flush him out shortly, in any case." Turning back to Sora, she added, "Fire something bright into the heights if you find him. I'll do similar."

#

The Aspect of Terror hung high above the cavern floor, clinging to the rough stone of a stalactite, fully shrouded in shadow. The cavern was dark, but darkness didn't exist for him. Everything was cast in shades of gray save the bright spirits of those he wished to feed upon. They sat clustered down there, brilliant sparks flaring in the monochrome world. He wanted to leap upon them and

feast until he burst, but a vestige of his former self, that one called Victor, still clung to his mind, curbing his enthusiasm. No, these were powerful spirits, and the feast would be short-lived if he tried to enjoy them all at once.

So, he lurked hundreds of yards overhead. Now and again, losing himself in his hunger, he'd cry out, sharing his fear and burning need with the world. A lesser predator might have been cautious of making such noise, but Terror knew better. His instincts were crafted over millennia, and he knew his cry would echo strangely in the cavern. Hadn't his kind hunted in the depths of the earth for thousands of years? His screams would echo, and his prey would begin to taste his fear, and when they felt his claws, they'd be all the more ready to succumb.

His great, shadow-clad, black-feathered wings hugged the stone, his talons bit into it, and there he perched, just another shadow among many as he watched the pale blue spirit burst, sending tiny motes of herself into nearly thirty smaller ones. Even so, her spirit still flared brighter than any other, and those tiny motes were hardly tempting. While he puzzled over the strange phenomenon, he heard snatches of voices drifting up to him, tickling his ears and fanning the flames of his hunger. Why did he wait? What could these morsels offer to him in terms of a threat? He started to loosen his hold, preparing to dive, but then a thought came to him from that other, a command that bristled the feathers along his spine: WAIT!

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So, Terror hung there, his shadows, steeped in fear, pooling around him like a comfortable bath. He watched as the tiny spirits drifted away from the five brighter ones, spreading out through the enormous cavern, several passing directly beneath his perch. A few more words drifted up to him, meaningless in the face of his hunger, and then, to his delight, the five spirits separated. Two moved off to his left, two to his right, and one, the dimmest, frailest, lingered. Terror's hunger surged, saliva dripped over his grinding teeth, down to his razored beak, to slide along the surface of the stalactite.

Still, the other urged him to bide his time, to wait until the four had well and truly separated from the lone straggler. He glanced around the gray, monochrome environment. He saw the distant fall of a frigid waterfall and the tunnel behind its sheeting water. Some instinct or sense he couldn't understand told him a draft moved up through that tunnel.

He saw other spirits, too, bright in their sluggish movements. There were denizens of this world that he could feast upon when he finished with the five who'd troubled his alter-ego. Fantasies of ripping flesh, drawing fear-tinged Energy into himself, and gorging on the cries of his prey filled his mind for several minutes before he came back to himself and took stock of the wandering spirits. They'd moved a long way from the lone straggler, which had, in turn, begun to grow brighter.

Terror couldn't restrain himself longer. He released his hold on the hard stone and fell, his dark, shadow-clad feathers rippling in the wind as he plummeted, streaking for his prey, talons extended.

As Terror fell, he saw his prey sitting on the stone, his soft gray form awash with the light of his spirit.

Something must have given the pale green spirit a hint that he was in danger—halfway there, feathers hissing in the wind, the spirit leaped to his feet, and a bright green orb of Energy surrounded him. Terror didn't care. He screeched his hunger, his fear, and his frustration, sharing it with the world. His bright, silvery talons began to glow, soft orange, then bright yellow-white as they gained more and more heat. Black smoke trailed from them, joining the shadowy tendrils streaming from his wings. Then, he impacted the spirit with another horrible, screaming cry of hunger.

He could feel the Energy of the orb surrounding his prey, trying to fling him off, but, with crackling sizzles and drips of smoldering Energy, his talons pierced it, grasping hold, refusing to be dislodged. Terror flapped his wings, using them for leverage as he dug and dug at the obstacle.

The spirit was bright, but he could see it fading; he could feel the barrier growing more and more fragile as his talons sank deeper and began to rend it. With a final, savage cry, he drove his beak into the shield, and it shattered. He was much larger than the little spirit and bore down on it, hooking his burning, knife-like talons into its flesh. He put his horrible maw before the spirit's eyes and opened it wide, screaming, projecting his fear-attuned Energy like a geyser.

His terrible grasp, horrible aura, and projected Energy twisted the spirit's Energy into something he could feast upon. Terror clung to his prey, drinking deeply of the radiating fear. The spirit had gone entirely limp, lying on the stone, hot juices pouring from the deep, burning holes Terror had put in it. The feast was rich; despite this spirit being dimmer than the others, it was something incredible—satisfying on a level he couldn't remember.

The satisfaction was brief; his hunger, after all, was insatiable. Worse, before he could even drink the last dregs from the limp vessel, the flow of Energy was suddenly cut off, and the System announced it had cheated him. Terror screamed.

#

Sora moved closer to Brontes as yet another scream echoed through the cavern. "Was that from behind us?"

"How can anyone tell?" he grumbled, his consonants, as ever, indistinct. "These stone columns echo and distort the sound."

"It felt louder."

"Aye," he rumbled.

"We shouldn't have separated. Even if I launch a fire arrow, who's to say Arona will see it? These stalactites hanging above might block it from view."

"Hush, little bird. Your arrow will shed light in the dark, making itself seen, even around these rocks." Sora blushed at his words; she'd known Brontes for a while, one of the first people she'd met when she'd come to the city. He doted on her, but she'd never been wholly comfortable with his pet names. Another shriek

sounded, and this time, she felt the hairs on her neck stand on end, and some moisture gather on her palms. Was the thing wearing her down? Was she losing control? Was her overactive imagination making things worse?

“Gods, that sound grates,” Brontes rumbled. “Why doesn’t he flee? He could move on or hide. Hells, he could use the Lifesaver. Why risk,” he gestured at himself and vaguely back toward Arona and the others, “this?”

Sora shook her head. “You didn’t see him fight. He’s . . . well, he’s like you—fearless, powerful, shrugging off anything thrown at him. I would have stayed by his side if you weren’t here, despite my earlier arrangement with Arona.”

“Don’t let that witch hear you say . . .” his words were cut off by a shriek far louder and more frenzied than before. It also sounded like its source was moving. One cry after another split the air, echoing sharply off the stone walls, each one driving a knife of fear just a little deeper into Sora’s chest. It sounded like Victor, or whatever he’d become, was going mad or . . . “He kills something!” Brontes growled, hefting his club and turning in a slow circle. Was he right? Sora thought it made sense; it reminded her of when she’d been a child watching her father hunt—the sounds his hawk made when it fought a fox.

“A creature?” She asked, knowing full well there had to be dungeon monsters in the cavern with them. Before Brontes could ask, the shrieks rose into a crescendo of outrage, and a message appeared in her vision:

**\*\*\*Elandor Wildspeak has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Five entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

“Bastard!” Brontes roared, turning to jog back the way they’d come. Sora trailed after him, her heart cold, her eyes wide, looking up into the shadows of the cavern.

Her voice was small as she gripped her bow, “We shouldn’t have separated.”

#

When his feast was interrupted, the Aspect of Terror launched himself up, soaring to the heights of the cavern. Something crackled and ripped the air behind it, but too slow, dispersing in a cascade of ghostly blue flames that fell downward, effectively blinding anyone trying to track his movement into the shadows of the stalactites. Once he rounded a large cluster of them, he banked to the right, cracking his wings to launch himself further afield. His fear-attuned Core was pulsing, thick and swollen with Energy—time was on his side. Once he’d maneuvered to the point where he could see the bright spirits of his pursuers, confirming that they’d lost sight of him, he dug his talons into a stone stalactite and hugged it close, watching their movements.

The blue and orange spirits had stopped, lingering near where he’d feasted, and the enormous golden spirit ran through the stalagmite forest, aiming for the

same spot. They were reuniting. Still, the more diminutive silvery spirit was lagging, hardly moving. Had it become wounded? Was it time to strike again so soon? He eyed their movements for several seconds, trying to time things in his mind. Something in him growled, the other. It was angry that he waited. A thought came to him: Momentum. Terror's hunger surged as it let go of the stone and drifted down, gliding toward the small but very bright spirit.

He desperately wanted to scream his hunger and frustration, wanted to project his fear into the world, but he was on the hunt, and this time, he had to be stealthy as he struck. So, gliding on palpable waves of darkness, he descended like an eagle toward a rabbit. The spirit was strong with Energy, and she must have sensed him. Bright streaks of light and biting metal filled the air between them, punching holes in his wings and slamming into his fur, feathers, and scale-clad ribs. They ground furrows in his shadowy flesh, but the darkness streamed out of him, filling the holes, patching his bones, and wriggling the lodged missiles out, dropping them to the cavern floor as his talons slammed into his target.

Terror didn't stop his glide. He latched onto the spirit, pumping his wings and dragging her over the stone as he worked to turn his descent into a climb. He pulled the bright, silvery spirit into the air, trailing rivulets of Energy-tinged blood through the air. It splashed against the stone as it fell, a bloody, glowing trail. He felt his quarry writhing, struggling to do something, and he squeezed his talons, driving the knife-like hooks through her body, punching them through her chest and back. He'd just gained the heights again, swerving left and right to avoid collisions with the many stone protrusions, when he suddenly lurched up to crash into the ceiling; his burden was gone.

**\*\*\*Sora Deval has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Four entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

The Aspect of Terror screamed his bloody frustration, and a new but familiar sensation came over him. Hot rage was seeping out of his Core, crowding the dark, fear-attuned Energy, and something stirred deep in his mind.

The other was starting to assert himself again.

#

“What in the name of the ancient dead gods have you unleashed on our students?” The man was livid, red-faced, spittle flecking his pale green lips. Ranish regarded him; he was Fonroy Boloviture, the master of Elandor Wildspeak. He was a well-regarded man known for his impressive healing abilities. Still, he was apparently unwilling to accept that his “student,” a grown man well into his sixth decade, had started something he couldn't finish.

Ranish would have shrugged, but his physique didn't lend itself to the gesture. Instead, he turned his thick, black palms up and rumbled, “I did not tell your student to join four others to attempt the assassination of mine.” Fonroy had appeared at his table not five minutes after Elandor's elimination. Either he'd been in the building or had teleported; both options were equally plausible. Still, Ranish didn't know why he was accosting him. “Is there aught I can do? He escaped with his

life; count yourself blessed. Kim Jyster's loved ones mourn today, thanks to the efforts of your student's team."

"He is a shell of himself! Something in his wounds, unhealed by the System and its Lifesaver, taints his soul! He appeared on the ground, curled into himself, unable to speak coherently, fear alive in his eyes."

"Ah! I knew my boy had a fear affinity, but I wasn't quite aware of how strong it was. A pity, but I'm sure we can help to mend Elandor's spirit; time and the right meditations will do wonders. Perhaps I'll give the task to Victor; he has much to learn in the areas of finesse." He paused and rubbed his chin in contemplation. "What of the Fae girl? Is she similarly stricken?"

Fonroy's pale green flesh was still hot, and he scowled deeply, but he knew better than to press the matter further with a man like Ranish Dar. He frowned and glanced from Dar to Lo'ro, who watched the exchange with an amused grin. "I don't know. She funded herself; does she even have a mentor?"

"Ah," Lo'ro clicked his tongue, "Shall I send someone to find out, Dar? I'm sure your boy will feel poorly if something terrible happens to her."

Dar nodded. "That would be well received, old friend." He looked back to Fonroy, and his heavy, stony brow shifted lower in a scowl of concentration. "Tell me, Fonroy, do you think those other three have communication with the outside?" He knew they likely did. If anyone in the contest were cheating, he'd lay a bet that it would be Arona and her master.

Once again, the man's cheeks bloomed with a scarlet flush of blood. "How would I know? Are you making an accusation?"

Ranish Dar chuckled, a sound like axe blades on a whetstone, and shook his head. "No, no. I was simply going to say that if those other three were my students and I had the means of contacting them, I'd probably encourage the immediate use of their Lifesavers."

Book 7: Chapter 47: A Brutal Brawl

As Victor's rage grew and he pushed his conscious mind into control of his body, he felt his Aspect of Terror begin to fade. He knew he could fight the change and maintain the aspect, but he never felt good when he came back to himself after running amok as an incarnation of fear. He wanted out of it. Flexing his wings and angling downward to swoop around a massive stalagmite, he fought to push away the stomach-churning waves of guilt and paranoia that came to him the same way they might a drunk after a blackout binge. No, he was done with fear for now; he was ready to embrace some good, clean, hot-burning rage.

So, as he scraped his talons on the stone, coming to rest behind the giant stalagmite, he pushed the fear out of his pathways, flooding them with rage instead. The shadows swirled around him, taking with them the strange fur, scales, and feathers of his terror form. The hot fury boiling his blood straightened his limbs, pushed his muscles to the point of bursting, and tinted his gray, monochrome vision into shades of blood. Victor cast Iron Berserk and tilted his head back to roar into the echoing cavern.

It was then that he noticed a System message lurking in the corner of his vision:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! Your Impart Nightmare – Basic has become Impart Nightmare – Improved.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Impart Nightmare – Improved: While wearing your Aspect of Terror, using gathered fear-attuned Energy, you can corrupt the spirit of another being with a seed of fear, sending it to dwell in their Core where it will grow and fester. This ability will fail upon those whose will can resist your intention. As you improve your mastery of this spell, it will become harder to resist and spread its roots more rapidly. Energy Cost: Minimum 100, scalable. Cooldown: Dependent on harvested fear.\*\*\***

Victor brushed the message away; he didn't have time to contemplate the repercussions. He was aware of what the Aspect of Terror had done while he'd taken a back seat. He knew only three enemies were left in the dungeon, and, with the simmering heat of his rage stoking the fire in his chest, he didn't have the emotional bandwidth to feel sorry for Sora or the pitiful Nature Caster he'd feasted upon.

He could feel his swollen, fear-attuned Core and knew he'd taken much from them both, even with the interference of the Lifesaver charms. He gripped Lifedrinker, comfortable and eager in her proper, axe-shaped form, no longer the talons on his nightmare alter-ego. "Let's slay," he rumbled, lifting her in one titanic fist, his smoldering gaze scanning the darkness.

#

Arona crept through the shadows, following behind Brontes and Valeska, pondering the sound of that great roar as it echoed through the cavern. It was of a decidedly different timbre than the screeches and shrieks that had pounded on everyone's psyche for the last several minutes. Had the stranger changed again? This new sound was that of a great beast—a predator staking a claim, a primal challenge for territory.

She'd anticipated losing some of her team in the confrontation, but not two, not before they'd managed to harm their adversary in the slightest. For all she knew, he was fresh and whole, undamaged by Sora or Elandor. She couldn't stop the doubt from creeping into her mind—could he handle them all at once? Was it wise to throw her lot in with these "friends?"

That last thought stung, but she couldn't help herself. What would Master Vesavo say? He'd mock her for any sentimentality. He'd remind her that the universe is cruel and friendship mere currency, meant to be spent for the greatest profit. Wouldn't it be wise to hedge her bets? As the so-called titan bellowed again, much closer, and Brontes began to surge with hot, golden glory, she rasped, "I will try to flank." Then, she cloaked herself in cold, dark mists and drifted away to the northwest, where they'd earlier mapped out the exit to the fifth floor. Let these brutes thrash about, distracting each other; she would finish the dungeon.

#

"Thash right," Lesh slurred, slamming his sack of arcanite billets on the table. "Pure arcanite. I'll wager it on Victor winnin' tha' fight." The bet-taker, a man who

likely shared some common ancestry with Lesh's people, ran a thick, pink tongue along the lip of his crocodilian snout.

"May I weigh it?"

"Yesh," Lesh peered at him through a bleary eye while still trying to focus on the viewing window at the center of the big wall. Through one of the smaller, magical windows, he'd seen the Death Caster slink away, abandoning her companions, and he had confidence that Victor was about to lay out a titan-sized thrashing.

"Lesh," Valla said, reaching across the table to grip his wrist. "You've had much to drink . . ."

Lash waved her hand away, snorting. A fine mist of acid escaped his nostrils, spotting the table and sizzling as it sank into the dense, heavily stained wood. "Am fine!" he grunted, working hard to enunciate each word. "Weight it!" he growled, "But be quick before my bet is too late!"

The man's scaled, clawed fingers hefted the bag, and he grinned. "Very well. On condition that it's proven to be pure arcanite, I'll value this sack at 200,000 beads." He turned to glance at the various viewing windows. "Seeing as your boy is now only facing two enemies, and considering his earlier victories, I'm only willing to give one-point-three to one odds. That work for you?"

Lesh nodded, waving him away. "Yesh." The bet-taker scribbled something in his notebook, hefted the sack, and wandered over to another table where patrons shouted for his attention. Meanwhile, Lesh turned a bleary eye on Valla. "Should've bet earlier. Don-shu think he'll win?"

Valla sighed and shifted on the hard, wooden bench. He knew how she felt; his arse felt sore, too. "I have to believe he will. Still, Lesh, those are powerful people, and they don't seem to be the soft, untested sort. The only thing keeping me sane right now is that I don't believe anyone in there can kill Victor so quickly that the Lifesaver won't function."

Lesh shook his head. "He'll be pished if he gets reshued." He narrowed his eyes at the woman. He'd never considered that Victor might die in that dungeon, but, for the first time, he let his mind wander down that path, wondering what Valla would do. Putting that aside, he wondered what he'd do. Seek vengeance against whoever killed him? Yes, he supposed that was the only honorable thing. He couldn't progress, couldn't move on with his life, with Victor's unavenged specter haunting him.

Would Valla return to Fanwath? Would the others? Not Darren. No, Lesh would keep him close and train him properly. He was making progress, changing his outlook, turning away from his old habits of blame. When the youngster had built his own Core, Lesh had been surprised and proud, but he knew better than to offer too much praise too soon.

"Where did you go?" Valla asked, chuckling. She pointed to the viewing window. "Look. The two fighters close with Victor."

#

Victor didn't hide or stalk. He was ready for a brawl. He pumped his Sovereign Will boost into strength and vitality, summoned his Banner of the Champion, and stood waiting. He held Lifedrinker loose but ready; he and she both were limned with a red halo of rage, and Victor's eyes



smoldered balefully under the golden light of his banner. Of course, his aura was enormous in his titanic form, and so, too, was the area affected by his banner's glow. Not a wisp of shadow surrounded him as the bloody sun sparkled in the air behind him. He breathed deeply, with purpose, stoking his breath Core, fanning the flames of his magma, priming it for the fight to come.

When the giant, fur-and-leather-clad warrior stepped around a stalagmite into his banner's light, Victor's grin widened, his white teeth glinting as his keen eyes tracked the challenger. He recognized the answering gleam of golden Energy in the aura of the giant; here was another Spirit Caster, another glory hound. Something deep in Victor rejoiced—had he, at last, found a worthy opponent? Victor lifted Lifedrinker and roared a challenge. By way of answer, the burly giant smashed his club onto the stone floor, shaking the ground and cracking a nearby stalagmite. Victor's furious Core surged at the challenge, and he cast Energy Charge, fueling it with glory-attuned Energy.

Iron Berserk allowed Victor to control himself and think with a rational mind while driven to the brink of frenzy by his rage, but it only worked that way if he consciously exercised his will and made an effort. When his titanic pride and hunger for the glory of battle goaded his furious temper, there wasn't much thinking taking place in his head. It seemed the big, mumbling giant didn't suffer similarly. He'd been ready for Victor's charge, and, using some movement skill of his own, he flickered, almost like a ghost, and shifted behind an enormous stalagmite.

Victor was moving too fast to correct his course, so he propelled himself into darkness, bathing the new space in light as he moved, revealing the tall, hatchet-wielding warrior-woman. She stood to the side of his streaking path, hacking those deadly crescent blades deep into Victor's side and hip as he passed by.

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Victor roared in fury, sliding to a halt, spinning with Lifedrinker arcing out, cleaving the space behind him, anticipating a follow-up attack. No one was there, but he saw the woman to his left and the giant to his right. Victor's instinct was to charge again, but he forced himself to breathe and think, giving his rage a moment to heal the deep cuts the woman had imparted. Had his wyrm-scale helped at all?

The woman, Valeska, was half his size, made larger by some magic of her own, but the giant had swollen further still, probably two-thirds as tall as Victor but significantly bulkier. As Victor glowered at them, his mind going through a dozen attack scenarios, Valeska laughed, a sound full of confidence and genuine mirth. "He struggles to think, Brontes."

"Rage ca' make tha' har'," Brontes chuckled, his voice rumbling, his words flowing together, muddled by his lazy tongue.

Victor had been goaded before. He'd experienced a lifetime of trash talk long before he was ever summoned to Fanwath. It didn't further enrage him. In fact, it had the opposite effect, convincing him that these two were afraid. He let go of Lifedrinker with his left hand, reached to smear the blood off his side, and drew it across his face, grinning madly as he did so. If they thought he was enraged, they hadn't seen anything yet.

Valeska stood beside a stalagmite, and Brontes leaned on another. Two dozen yards separated them, and Victor knew they aimed to bait him, get him to charge again. They wanted to set him up for another sneaky attack, but he had other ideas.

The fact was, he'd expected something more; he'd expected something from the Death Caster, but he'd gotten a good feel for her aura, and there wasn't any sign of it. Was she lying in wait, hiding herself, looking for the perfect opportunity to strike? He figured that was the case. Still, he couldn't find it in himself to care all that much. He wanted to hit one of these two fighters, wanted to make up for that charge into nothing. As far as he was concerned, he'd deal with the Death Caster when she showed her face.

So, grinning, face bloody, Victor reached into his Core, pulled forth a torrent of inspiration-attuned Energy, and summoned his great bear, willing him to appear behind Valeska. He chose inspiration because he had plenty of it and because the bear would coalesce out of a cloud of white-gold Energy; it wouldn't be obvious in the light of his banner.

Stalling momentarily, giving his bear time to appear, Victor slapped Lifedrinker's haft into his left palm and growled, "So? Two at once, then?" He kept his posture neutral and relaxed, almost lazily looking from Valeska to Brontes and back again. They both had eyes only for him, so neither saw the cloud of Energy behind the woman.

"He just cast something," Valeska said, staring hard at Victor. "Maneuver two . . ." Her words were cut off by a bone-rattling roar as Victor's bear burst into being—tawny, almost golden fur covering a mountain of bone and muscle, bright, yellow-gold eyes, and teeth like gleaming sabers spread wide as it emptied its lungs directly behind the woman. Just as he'd hoped, even Brontes couldn't resist looking to see the source of the roar. In that split second of distraction, he filled his pathways with fear-attuned Energy and charged again, rippling over the cavern floor in a cloak of purple-black shadows.

Valeska rolled to the side, avoiding a double swipe of the bear's saber-like claws. Brontes turned back to Victor, but only in time to register the streak of shadows flying his way. His eyes opened wide, and he jerked his club before himself and channeled his Energy, blazing with brilliant golden light, as Victor smashed into him. Victor had timed an overhead chop with Lifedrinker, aiming to split the giant's sternum, but the great, gnarled club got in the way. Lifedrinker flared with molten fury, and her razor edge cut into the trunk-sized bludgeon, biting deep. Meanwhile, the force wave of Victor's charge washed over them both.

Victor's pool of fear-attuned Energy rapidly poured into the effort of shielding him. At the same time, Brontes flared with golden, sparkling light, his entire body rigid with the strain of holding his club up and weathering the storm of the collision. As they stood, two juggernauts in a whirling tempest of destructive forces, the shockwave propagated, shattering stalagmites, sending fragments of rock, showers of dust, and palpable, roiling waves of Energy outward. Valeska and the bear tore into each other, slashing, hacking, gnashing, ducking, weaving, and stumbling in the force blast from Victor's charge.

As the collision resolved and Victor's fear-attuned Energy stopped pouring out to protect him, he jerked Lifedrinker, pulling her from the club, and began hacking in earnest, working to get past

Brontes's guard. The stout warrior was surprisingly nimble and skilled with his bludgeon. Moreover, he used his glory-attuned Energy in weird, showy maneuvers that erupted with blazing sparks or false images—flickering copies of the club, the giant, or both that served to distract Victor or even draw strikes away from the real target. If they weren't both moving with lightning speed, Victor was sure the dazzling echoes of reality wouldn't be so effective, but when a tiny fraction of a second meant the difference between landing a blow and striking nothing but air, they took a toll.

Brontes was strong, his girth giving him what it took to absorb Lifedrinker's hacks, soaking them up as she bit into his enormous cudgel. The weapon was sturdier still; each deep, smoking groove Lifedrinker tore into the wood closed before Victor's eyes as he pulled her out. Even so, Victor maintained the offensive, pushing Brontes around and forcing him to expend his Energy abilities just to keep from being dismembered. He grunted and groaned, great gouts of golden Energy surging through him, bolstering his movements, distracting Victor, and drawing things out.

Of course, the constant rebuttals to his masterful strokes began to wear on Victor's state of mind. More and more rage seeped into his pathways, turning his vision darker and darker shades of crimson. He'd forgotten Valeska and his bear, their contest nothing but a token afterthought in the focus he devoted to breaking through the giant's resolute defenses. Just because he'd set her aside mentally, though, didn't mean the axe woman had forgotten him.

If Victor were paying attention, he would have known his bear had been vanquished. He would have probably backed off on his furious assault and tried to get eyes on the woman. He didn't, though, and she caught him mid-attack, using a charge of her own to streak through the air and bury her two hatchets into the meaty spaces beside his upper spine. They snipped through his armor like it wasn't there, and he knew they'd buried themselves to the wooden hafts. To a man Victor's size, the wounds were an inconvenience, but he'd taken much worse.

Roaring in fury, he backed off his attack on Brontes, bunched his legs, and launched himself into the air, using Titanic Leap. Valeska was still clinging to her axe hafts, hanging from his back, and Victor aimed to impale her on a stalactite. He was so committed that he fully expected to do the same thing to himself in the process, but he was banking on being able to recover faster than she could. Valeska was no slouch; she grunted with surprise as they exploded into the air but braced her shoulder against Victor's back, holding onto one of her hatchets for purchase. At the same time, she somehow created a silvery shield of Energy with her free arm.

The glowing shield shattered the stalactite, sending a rain of rubble down toward Brontes. Victor careened sideways from the impact, tumbling in slow motion as he fell toward the ground. At the last minute, he jerked his shoulder, rolling, trying to smash Valeska into the stone floor beneath him. She, too, jerked, pulling on the hatchet she still held, sliding it out of Victor's flesh, and rolling over his side, bouncing off as he hit the ground. Victor roared in pain and fury as the remaining hatchet was driven further into his back, and he bounced with a cavern-shaking crash.

He'd barely managed to get up to a knee before Valeska was on him, hacking her single hatchet like a mad woman, left and right, then downward and reversing the blade to hack it up toward his chin. Victor bobbed and weaved, got an arm in the way, and then, as he bled from three or four deep gashes, finally brought Lifedrinker around in a terrible chop that caught the woman on the side of her helmet, sending her much smaller frame tumbling and bouncing over the stony ground. Victor couldn't savor the perfect hit—Brontes smashed into him. The fur-covered giant had bounded

across the cavern on floating discs of sparkling golden Energy, building momentum each time he pushed off.

Victor grunted as thousands of pounds of meat, bone, and enormous club barreled into him, driving him back into another stalagmite, shattering it. The two giants tumbled through the stone fragments, acquiring cuts in their flesh wherever they weren't armored. Victor was nearly blind with rage by then; everything was crimson, and he moved by touch, grabbing Brontes under one arm, then over his neck with the other. He arched his back and pulled with all his might, flinging the gigantic man over him, sending him flying over the rubble-strewn cavern floor. Grunting with fury, Victor lurched to his feet, dimly aware that Lifedrinker had slipped from his grasp.

He turned, scanning the floor, trying to spot her gleaming, burning axe head in the crumbled stone. Struggling to focus with the rage clouding his sight, he just caught a glimpse of flickering silvery light coming toward him. Knowing it was Valeska charging him again, Victor growled, lowered his helm-covered head toward her incoming form, and cast Roots of the Mountain.

Maybe it was clever, or maybe it was stupid; he didn't know yet, but he was pleased by his quick reaction, regardless. Valeska's single hatchet led her charge, much like Lifedrinker usually led Victor's. The blade hit him square on the crown of his Kethian Juggernaut helmet, and Victor's head and body didn't even flinch. His spell had made him unmovable. Instead, a hundred percent of the impact was absorbed by Valeska's hatchet, Victor's helmet, and Valeska's body as she crumpled against him.

With a terrible screeching explosion, the magic that bound the incredibly dense metal of Victor's helmet failed, and he felt it loosen on his skull as it split. The hatchet must have been made of amazing stuff because its bright blade survived the destructive forces, but the handle turned to splinters and dust in Valeska's hand. Her fingers twisted and snapped as they hit Victor between the eyes. Then, as her body crumpled against him, he heard several more sickening, wet snaps as larger bones broke. The entire collision lasted a split second, and then Victor was left reeling, blood dripping into his eyes, his ears ringing. Valeska writhed in agony at his feet.

Growling, Victor reached up and pulled off his damaged helmet, shaking his head, trying to get his ears to work properly again. The mighty helmet was split from the nose-guard to the crown where the axe had hit. Worse, it didn't feel as heavy as it once did. Victor frowned and sent it into his storage pouch. Then, blinking and swiping at the blood in his eyes, he canceled the Roots of the Mountain spell before it drained his Core of Energy. He saw a glimmer in the dust to his left and stomped toward it, hoping it was Lifedrinker.

His foot touched something soft, and he remembered Valeska. She was still alive, grunting and gasping, struggling to turn from her twisted back onto her side, away from him. Her broken arm was pitiful, curled up and bleeding with fragments of bone sticking out of the flesh. Victor couldn't find the rage in him to stomp on her, to break her neck, or shatter her skull—whatever it might take for the System to recognize she was done and activate her Lifesaver. Instead, he growled, “You have until I pick up my axe to use your charm.”

As he stalked over to the shiny glint of metal, he was well aware that he'd lost sight of Brontes. His ears still rang, but he glanced left and right, thankful for his banner's light, as he glared through the blood in his eyes. The giant didn't make an appearance before he stooped to pick up Lifedrinker, but as soon as his fingers closed on her haft, the System announced Valeska's removal:

**\*\*\*Valeska Thornrend has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Three entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

The message was a splash of cold water on Victor's muddled thoughts—he'd yet to see the Death Caster, and several of his Energy pools were running perilously low. Thanks to the System's strange, hidden rules, he couldn't count on that Energy infusion until the fighting was done. Tumbling stones and rubble got his attention, and he turned in time to see Brontes lifting himself from the broken rubble of a stalagmite; he'd, apparently, tumbled into another when Victor had thrown him.

The giant lifted his great gnarled club, and then, surprising Victor but sparking something like respect in his heart, the giant began to flicker with a strange, hazy, yellow-green aura as he strode toward him. He felt that weird spirit Energy immediately; it was something that pulled at him, digging up haunting moments of failure and secret regret—his inability to return to his abuela, his rejection of Chandri and her simple, peaceful life, and, most damning, his choice to be with Valla rather than wait and see if he could ever measure up to Tes. A dozen more shame-inducing thoughts fought for attention in his mind, and Victor felt his grip on Lifedrinker loosening.

"I didna' wan' ta use this," the stout, bloody, dust-covered giant rumbled as he drew near. "Makes things too easy." He lifted his massive club and, with a belly-shaking grunt, jerked it down toward Victor's unprotected head.

Now, Victor might have been troubled, shamed, and even dazed from the onslaught of the giant's unpleasant spirit Energy—Shame? Regret?—but his will was like a mountain fortress, and he saw the giant coming his way, saw him lift his club, and fully recognized the threat. As the massive cudgel fell toward his head, he lifted his left hand and caught it, the fury in his eyes flickering red like twin torches in the face of that sickly yellow-green aura.

Brontes grunted, jerking with his two arms, but Victor didn't let go; he squeezed his iron fingers into that hard, uncaring wood and felt it give. He felt his mighty grip find purchase, and his mad grin returned as he stoked the fires of rage in his pathways with something extra—the furious fire of his magma heart. Flames began to flicker between his teeth, licking upward, as black smoke drifted out of his nostrils. He didn't speak. He simply continued to squeeze that cudgel, looking down at the enormous fighter as the magma spread through his pathways, and he activated Volcanic Fury.

Book 7: Chapter 48: The Mountain's Fury

Ranish Dar watched Fonroy as he stiffly retreated, walking through the crowded club to the elevator that would take him up to the more private viewing chambers no doubt on his way to report every word of their conversation to some of the other masters who were too proud to show their faces. Across from him, Loro chuckled as his privacy spell fell back into place with an audible pop, dampening their words. A little hysterical, wasn't he? Has he never watched a death match in the colosseum?

Ranish sighed and shook his head, idly watching Victor embrace his berserk titanic form, openly waiting for the last three challengers to find him. Gods, but he had a hell of a spirit! He turned to

Loro. Not involving their students. Well, let me rephrase that: not unless they were certain their students would win. That's the problem with Sojourn. Thousands of years of placidity have led to a generation of soft, untested souls. Consider this, Loro: That man's student, what's his name? Elandor? How old is he? Seventy-odd years?

Something like that. Not more than a hundred, certainly.

Dar slapped his hand on the table. Exactly my point! Thank you. You consider him young, yes?

Naturally . . .

In the world where Victor was born, Elandor would be considered a senior citizen. Think of that! Elandor has had a life of study, mentorship, and dungeon delving. A truly safe, tranquil existence.

Loro's eyes narrowed. Dungeons carry with them quite a risk . . .

Fah! Dar waved his hand dismissively. In Sojourn? Where every dungeon is mapped and cataloged, and where they're all curated and offered only to appropriately leveled entrants? You could read a dozen encyclopedias on any one of the dungeons available to the citizens of this city. Do you think a pampered nature student like Elandor would go into a dungeon if there were any chance he couldn't escape? This is likely the first contest he's entered where there was a true risk of death, however small; you've seen how effective the Lifesavers have been. Loro started to say something, but Dar wasn't finished. Let's not forget he went in with an alliance of rather absurd strength.

I begin to see your point. So, you're saying this is why your boy is different?

Exactly. Just this morning, I was reading through the journal I tasked him with writing. That young man has been on the brink of death more times than he wasn't. He's been enslaved, tortured, had his Core shattered, and recovered while under the threat of constant death and brutal beatings. He has regularly battled enemies stronger than himself, and each time that he's felt death's breath on his neck, he's fought his way back. I had no doubt he would thrash any one of the entrants in this dungeon, given a face-to-face challenge. The surprise of some of the other masters is telling.

So, you think he'll win?

He'll win this fight, aye, but look. He pointed at Arona's viewing window. The young death caster has more wisdom than her friends, though some might call her cleverness cowardice. I won't be surprised if she wins the dungeon, but Victor won't be eliminated, especially as his biggest threat slinks away.

Loro shifted, smiling. I know I'm biased in my agreement, but tell me: Why do you consider her the biggest threat?

I worked with her master on a project. I'm sure you know him: Vesavo Bonewhisper?

Oh, aye. I know him quite well, quite well, indeed. I'm also well acquainted with the young lady pictured there. Loro gestured to the viewing window where, even now, Arona was slipping away behind the curtain of the waterfall.

Well, then you know that, unlike other Death Casters, his practice specializes in harnessing and cultivating champion spirits, bringing them forth in constructs of bone and flesh. I'm certain that

young woman has some powerful summons she can employ, and, with an enormous Energy pool, she might have been able to wear Victor down. Especially with her two brawny allies.

We may never know. Again, Loro pointed to the viewing window. Arona had slipped into a short stone tunnel and now approached a set of stairs.

Perhaps not in today's contest. Dar smiled, leaning back, interlocking his stout, black fingers on the tabletop.

Yet you seem smug, even in the face of Arona's impending victory.

Victor's showing has already confirmed my hopes and won me enough money in the gambling halls to fund a decade of projects. I am not displeased. Moreover, is it not lovely to know a few of the more passionate, active members of the Sojourn political scene have been taken down a notch or three?

Aye. Loro smiled, his corpse-like skin stretching tight along his facial bones. Just a second later, though, his eyes unfocused, and the smile faded from his expression. My follower has set eyes upon the Fae girl, Sora Deval. She suffers greatly.

Is she alone, then?

Aye. She lies in the recovery room of the World Hall, unattended.

Will your follower convey her to my estate?

Which?

The lake house.

Again, Loro's eyes unfocused, and then he nodded. Shevelia is taking her now.

Good. I'll teach Victor how to remove his curse upon her, and then I'll let him decide whether he'll help Elandor or not.

Is he the only one who can . . .

Hah! Dar chuckled. Not in the least. A hundred Spirit Casters in this city are qualified, but do you think those pompous fools know that? Dar pointed one of his thick fingers toward the ceiling, indicating the club's private viewing parlors. He sighed and shrugged. Given a little research and the right expenditure, I'm sure Elandor will find the care he needs, but it would be good for Victor to put Fonroy Boloviture in his debt.

Ah! A two-fold lesson for your prodigy, then.

Again, Dar folded his hands, and his grin reappeared. Softly, he rumbled, Exactly. Exactly right, my old friend.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

#

As the potent mix of magma and rage began to propagate his pathways, flooding into Victor's body, his vision shifted into pale shades of yellowish sepia. His banner flickered and faded in motes of sparkling golden Energy, and Victor's need for destruction outweighed every other thought in his

mind. He still gripped Brontess club, and smoke began to rise from the dense, stone-like wood as his fingers burned into it.

For his part, Brontes seemed to have overcome his stunned surprise at Victors ability to shrug off his mental attack and was once again channeling his glory-attuned Energy. Grunting with the effort, he wrapped both hands around the narrow end of his club and pulled, jerking his stout body backward, driving a foot against Victors hip. Victor was preoccupied with his fury, only idly gripping the weapon by now, and the giants gambit worked; he freed his cudgel and flung himself back, losing his footing in the process.

Victor saw the over-large man stumble away, collapsing onto his butt and scrambling to stand, but something else was distracting him. Something stung at the center of his back, and he could hear a weird, keening, wailing sound almost on the edge of his range of hearing. He still held Lifedrinker in his right hand, but he took his now-empty left hand and reached back over his shoulder, probing for the source of his discomfort. Prodding around, he felt something hard jutting from his flesh. Growling in annoyance, he gripped it with his vise-like fingers and tugged. It slid free, and when he held the object before him, a dim, distant part of his mind recognized Valeskas hatchet.

The metal was white-hot, the wood charred black, and his ears told him it was the source of the wailing sound. If hed had the capacity to care, he might have wondered if the axe had been suffering from the molten heat of his blood. He didnt, though; he only knew he was angry at the man before him, and he didnt want to hold the little weapon, so he threw it at him. It ripped through the air like a missile, smashing into the fur-covered chest of the stout giant, and, as if it were designed for throwing it was the smoldering blade sank deeply into his flesh. Brontes grunted in pain, stumbling back further, and then Victor lifted Lifedrinker and did the only thing he had the presence of mind for: He tried to kill the man before him.

Brontes had defended against Victors berserking axe attacks before. Hed stood toe to toe with him, using that massive club to intervene in Victors hatchet attacks. Earlier, hed been able to use glory-attuned spells and abilities to distract, daze, and misdirect, but none of that worked for him now. Victor had no eyes for distractions, no mind to be dazedhe saw only a target for the endless waves of hatred and fury boiling in his blood. Perhaps it said something about his Iron Berserk upgrade: It took away the purity of his rage, allowing his other emotions and thoughts to dull its edge. His Volcanic Fury had no such problem.

Lifedrinker answered his molten violence with her own, her blade blazing like a white-hot scythe as she cut the air, ripping massive, smoking gouges in Brontess club, making wounds that were slow to close, carving off chunks that might be too much for the clubs ability to self-repair. Just being close to Victor was taking a toll on Brontes; the heat rolling off him was difficult for the giant to bear, and desperate sweat sheened his red, strained face as he struggled to avoid the terrible, powerful, skillful cleaves of that axe. To his credit, Brontes stood up to Victor for more than two dozen seconds before he started looking around, fervently hoping for some sort of intervention.

If Victor could read his mind, he would have heard Brontes vehemently cursing Arona. He would have seen images replaying Valeskas impotent charge. He would have heard him cursing himself for aligning against Victor rather than listening to Sora when shed whispered her doubts, suggesting he try to join her and Victor instead. Victor couldnt hear them, though, nor did he have any desire for it. He was lost in the heat of his rage, in the undeniable urge to deliver punishment to any who stood



before him. With each resounding, deadly impact of Lifedrinker on the giants club, he bared his teeth in a cruel grimace of pleasure.

His brutal punishment was cathartic, feeding his fury, encouraging his rage, driving him to more and more violence. Everyone who watched the fight could see the writing on the wall: Victor was too much for Brontes to handle. Hed been too much before, even with Valeskas aid, but now, in this state, seemingly burning with an endless supply of furious fire, he was utterly dominating him.

The fur-covered giant was more than on the defensive; he was in full retreat, seeking an egress, a way to escape Victors fiery frenzy. He tried to dash away more than once, but even using the ability to run on glittering glory-infused steps of light, Victor was too fast, and Brontes couldnt risk showing him his flank. Finally, the frustrated despair was apparent on his face: Hed realized he had no way out other than to embrace the painful penalty of the Lifesaver.

Victors breath was short and ragged as he panted his lustful fury, hacking Lifedrinker in precise, deadly strokes. His eyes smoldered, burning like white-hot coals. Smoke and flames licked his lips with each exhalation, and if he hadnt been reveling in the destructive smashes of his axe against that club, he might have sought to end things faster with a burst of magma-infused breath.

His opponent stumbled back, and his face took on a new expression, one Victor couldnt read in his current state. After a deep inhalation, Brontes straightened and braced himself, blazing with golden, glittering, glory-attuned Energy as he dug his left hand into his neckline, pulling on a cord from which a tiny charm dangled.

Victor saw the charm, and a corner of his mind knew he didnt want the giant to activate it. With desperate, frustrated strength, he lifted Lifedrinker high. He hacked her down, seizing the moment to strike when the giants cudgel swayed to the side, unable to guard effectively with only one hand guiding it. Lifedrinker, trailing black smoke, screaming through the air, descended toward the side of Brontess neck, and Victors maddened eyes widened with the anticipation of the blow, eager to see his enemys blood flow. Just as her edge sliced the first layer of the giants flesh, though, he burst into golden smoke and was gone.

Victors eyes flared with fire as he stared at the dissipating smoke. Lifedrinker hung at his side, his hand gripping her handle with enough force to shatter stone. His veins bulged with boiling blood. The wreathing aura of fire that encased his body flared, lifting toward the cavern ceiling like a torch doused with kerosene. His mind was driven blank by the apoplectic agony of his righteous fury. He had been denied, and the world would feel his wrath! Victor arched his back and opened his mouth in a scream of outrage that carried no sound other than the freight train roar of a torrent of fire as he emptied his magma Core in a fountain of streaming white-hot lava.

Simultaneously, he stomped his foot and cast Wake the Earth. As a Herald of the Mountains Wrath, Volcanic Fury and Wake the Earth walked hand in hand in his subconscious, instinctive brothers of destruction. It was instinctual, automatic, and there was not a single thought behind it. He poured everything he had into the spell, his wrath having removed any temperance. The ground shook, a ripple of force rolling out from him as the epicenter, and, like a spiders web, hundreds of cracks tore open on the stone cavern floor, widening as they spread away from him. Stalagmites burst as the cracks went through them. Stalactites fell as the world shook. Stones the size of buildings crashed down in a deafening cacophony of destruction.

Through it all, Victor howled. His initial burst of magma had done much to paint the world in hues of orange and red. The fire of his breath Core was hot enough to melt stone and had a liquid quality that clung to the surfaces it touched, continuing to burn as the world came apart around him. He screamed and frothed, and the world exploded and fell, and through it all, Victor's ire burned, his mind utterly gone in the face of it.

#

Arona watched as Shol-pan, the first spirit shed ever harnessed, finished killing the bridge trolls. She could see the stairs to the sixth level on the other side, and she hadn't minded the opportunity to let some frustration out. Valeska was out. That meant Brontes was left to stop or slow the stranger. Victor, I suppose, she muttered, facing the fact that everyone would know his name soon enough. And if Brontes failed? How quickly would Victor catch her? Shed hoped the fifth level would be the final one, that she could wrap things up quickly before he had a chance to pursue. It didn't seem likely, however. Not with the speed with which Valeska had fallen.

Shol-pan glided back to her, trailing lines of blood from his long, spectral claws a trail of gore leading to the two dead trolls. Mistress. He bowed, staring at her through his weird, ice-blue eyes, waiting for praise, dismissal, or a new task.

Well done, Shol-pan. You grow ever stronger; I am pleased. She stood and started over the bridge, pondering the bodies, contemplating the removal of a bone or three for later use. No time, I suppose. Was she being overcautious? It could take Victor hours to find the stairs in that great cavern, assuming he beat Brontes . . .

**\*\*\*Brontes Ironhide has been rescued from certain death and removed from the dungeon. Two entrants remain. Prepare for an Energy infusion.\*\*\***

Damn it! she hissed, breaking into a jog toward the distant stair. Shed just cleared the stone span when the ground lurched, and the dungeons diffuse, pale light flickered and winked out. Arona stumbled, falling to her hands and knees, scuffing her palms on the rough stone. Her eyes flared with cold Energy, turning the darkness to twilight, and she looked around, mouth partially open, wondering what could have caused the dungeon to react in such a way. Another faint tremor vibrated the stone under her hands, and, to her shock, the bridge split with a thunderous crack, and the near side slipped into the chasm. Arona scrambled forward, putting more distance between herself and the abyss.

Mistress . . . Shol-pan hissed, his semi-corporeal blue form glowing in the dark as he swooped near.

Hush! she hissed, scrambling to her feet and stooping to pick up Balefrost where shed dropped him. The polished bone in her hand comforted her as her brain scrambled for an explanation. Leaning on the staff, its hard end pressed against the stone, she felt the vibrations continuing, and her grasping mind couldn't fathom what it could mean. Suddenly, the sourceless, simulated daylight flickered on again, nearly dazzling her Ghost Sight-enhanced eyes.

**\*\*\*Attention: This dungeons dimensional bonds are being strained, requiring an ongoing Energy infusion to maintain. All entrants will be removed to allow the owners an opportunity to provide Energy, facilitating repairs. The remaining entrants will be awarded a chest as**

**though they have cleared their current level. No penalty will be applied to the entrants removed due to this emergency. No outstanding Energy infusions will be awarded.\*\*\***

Arona frowned, studying the words to ensure she understood. There wouldnt be an award for the elimination of Brontes, Valeska, Sora, or Elandor. The city of Sojourn would be on the hook for the repairs, and she would get a chest for this level. And no penalty, Shol-pan. Ill take that. Again, I am pleased.

Your pleasure brings me joy, Mistress.

Arona started to make a quip about him being incapable of joy when the world flared with white light. The ground seemed to shift under her feet, and as her vision recovered, she found herself stumbling onto the teleportation platform in the World Hall Annex, where theyd all gathered to enter the dungeon. Three gray-robed attendants rushed forward, but two of them stopped beside the enormous, steaming, dust-and-blood-covered form in front of herVictor.

Book 7: Chapter 49: Consequences

Victor was stunned by the sudden, violent shift in his circumstances. One moment, he'd been a passenger to his rage and magma-fueled alter ego, half participating and half observing as he unleashed his frustrated wrath upon the world. The next, he'd been stripped of his Volcanic Fury, ripped from the dungeon, and deposited on the metal teleportation platform back in Sojourn.

As the world reeled, he dropped to one knee, cradling his spinning head with his dirt and blood-stained hands. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember the System message text he'd glimpsed before furiously swiping it away. "What the hell did it say?" he grumbled.

Several gray-robed attendants rushed onto the platform, two of them stopping next to him. Even with him kneeling, they had to look up slightly to make eye contact. "Do you require healing?" the man on the left asked, reaching to scratch at his smooth, pink-skinned head nervously.

"Nah. I just wish I had read what the System said. Why am I here?" Victor stood, grunting with the effort, and started dusting his tattered, singed, utterly ruined pants.

"You didn't read it?" a raspy, emotionless, feminine voice behind him asked. Victor recognized Arona's affect, so when he turned, he found his hand reaching for Lifedrinker's haft, which made him wonder when he'd put her back in her harness. Had the System done it? "Peace, angry one!" the woman said, stepping back. She held her hands out in the universal sign of "I'm not looking for a fight."

Victor lowered his hand. His rage was gone, spent on his Volcanic Fury and then ripped away by the System. The only emotion he could muster at that moment was something a lot more like apathy than anger. "I . . . was preoccupied." He shrugged, narrowing his eyes, suddenly wondering why this woman hadn't helped her friends. "Where the hell did you go, anyway?"

Before she could answer, the attendant who'd spoken earlier said, "Please vacate this teleportation annex. We'll close it now that everyone's out of the dungeon."

Victor scowled and then walked to the door, which was currently held open by another attendant. Arona followed, saying, “I was trying to win the dungeon while you and the others were occupying each other.” There wasn’t a hint of shame in her voice. “The System, or at least the part of it in charge of the dungeon, threw us out. The message said something about the ‘dimensional bonds’ being strained. Whatever that means.”

“And the Energy?” Victor asked, turning to face her once he stood in the hall.

“You mean our pending infusion? The System greedily claimed it, no doubt justifying the theft by using the Energy to maintain the dungeon’s integrity.”

“That’s some bullshit,” Victor growled.

Arona shrugged her broad, bony shoulders, her black-painted lips curving into a wry smile. “Well, at least we weren’t penalized for our removal. We’re supposed to get a chest, too, but I don’t know where to claim it.”

Victor stretched his neck, and several loud pops erupted from the maneuver. He looked up the hallway and saw figures approaching. One of them was Ranish Dar. “Here come some answers, I hope.”

Arona leaned on her polished bone staff, facing the approaching group. Victor saw four others besides Dar, all humanoid, some even appearing human, though Victor doubted that was the case. He glanced at Arona again, realizing she, too, looked human—vampiric but human, nonetheless.

“What’s your species?” he bluntly asked, seizing the moment to gather some information before the group arrived.

“Hmm? I’m a Faeling,” she replied. When Victor wrinkled his brow in confusion, she sighed and explained, “On my homeworld, the Fae have lain with the natives for centuries, resulting in people like me.”

It was strange, he decided, how relaxed he was speaking to a woman who’d been intent on killing him not long ago. Hadn’t he been just as murderous, though? Hadn’t he been eager to fight? Coming down from the enormous wave of rage he’d been riding, he found himself oddly introspective. The truth was, he hadn’t been treating the dungeon like real life; the Lifesavers and the competitive nature of the setting had made him reckless and a lot less concerned about individuals and the lives of everyone involved, his included. He shook his head, forcing his mind to focus on present circumstances. He gestured toward the people walking with Dar. “Are they? Faeling?”

“Oh, something similar, no doubt.” She narrowed her eyes, a gleam of amusement brightening her dark irises. “Surely you know about the elder races? Many were similar in appearance; you could be descended from the Fae based on your features if not for your great size. Some elder giant race, no doubt?”

Victor couldn’t help but grunt, “Titan.” After a pause to think, he asked, “So, the elder races wandered around the universe screwing everything they came across until we all started looking like long-lost cousins?”

“Well, not everything. Surely, you’ve seen the many unique species in this city. What an unexpected conversation! I thought you’d be spewing threats and glowering with murderous . . .”

“Victor!” Dar bellowed, interrupting Arona.

Victor glanced back down the hallway and saw the group had drawn close, only a dozen strides away. “Yeah?” Dar’s tone and the scowls he saw on everyone’s faces began to drive home the idea that everything wasn’t exactly rosy.

Two men in ornate robes, one silver and one black, flanked Dar, and behind them were two large individuals wearing black, metallic armor, their heavy helms hiding their faces. They carried long, wicked-looking polearms, and their posture was decidedly aggressive. The auras vying for dominance were palpable and heavy, and Victor had to brace himself in their presence as the group continued closer. Dar didn’t answer Victor, and he soon realized why, listening to their ongoing conversation.

“. . . should be held until the trial.”

“There will be no God’s damned trial!” Dar roared, whirling on the much smaller man. He wore a cape made of some kind of shimmering, almost metallic fiber. It was crimson with a high collar that gave Dar’s already imposing stature an even more regal bearing. The fabric snapped as he turned dramatically, causing the smaller, silver-robed man to step back nervously.

“Inquest, then! Peace, Ranish, peace!” The fellow, a gray-skinned man with curly white hair, opened his deep-purple eyes wide, making a sort of soothing expression with his mouth as he tried to placate Victor’s new mentor.

Dar flexed his stony hands into anvil-sized fists, and something very much like rage began to emanate from his towering form. “How can you think to hold him responsible for . . .”

“Peace!” the second, robed individual snapped, his voice like the hiss of a green log in a fire. Victor felt a wave of power behind it that made his knees threaten to buckle. It was enough to stop Dar’s words in their tracks, and that was something Victor had never expected to see. He couldn’t see the speaker’s face; it seemed to be shrouded in black smoke within the cowl of his robes, quickly banishing Victor’s notion that he was human-like. Victor looked for his hands, hoping to catch a glimpse of his flesh, but they were obscured by the robe’s long, voluminous sleeves. “Save your arguments for the inquest.” He turned to Dar, adding, “Yes, Ranish Dar, there will be one. It is decided.”

The other man, the one in the silver robe with the much more pleasant demeanor, said, “Arona Moonshadow and Victor Sandoval. You are both hereby ordered to attend an inquest by order of the ruling council of Sojourn. Report to the Council Spire at noon tomorrow. Am I understood?”

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Arona immediately bowed and mumbled, “Yes, Lord.”

Despite himself and his Quinametzin pride, Victor found he had no will to argue or refuse. He nodded his head and said, "Yes." He was heartened to see Dar nod along with him.

The cowled, smoke-bound individual turned while simultaneously saying, "Very good." Then he, the two armored halberd-wielding guards, and the other silver-robed fellow departed just as quickly as they'd arrived.

"Moonshadow, you should find your master," Dar rumbled after waiting several seconds for the clanking footsteps of the guards to retreat.

Arona, still bowing, asked, "What's this about, Lord Dar?"

"Don't fret. I believe Victor will bear the brunt of the council's wrath. He broke the dungeon."

She whirled on Victor, straightening, her black eyes widening with the first emotion he'd seen out of her. "What? Is that why we were ejected? What did you do?"

"I . . ."

"Not now, Moonshadow. Begone." Dar's voice had taken on a particular edge Victor recognized; he'd spoken that way to him back when he'd tried to argue about the cost of Edeya's healing. Arona pressed her palms together, bowed low to Dar, and then scurried away, walking quickly down the hallway. "Making friends of your enemies so quickly?"

"Not friends." Victor shrugged. "Just talking."

"You shared a challenging experience. It's only natural to find some camaraderie, so long as you can look past the cut-throat behavior so many of you displayed in there."

"I didn't betray anyone." Victor found his brows drawing together in a new scowl. Was his rage Core recovering so quickly?

"Don't quibble, pup. You fought like the monster you are, and sore feelings abound in this city." He glanced at the distant figures of the two robed individuals. "Even the current Consuls are eager to see you pay. The System's demanding a financial penalty to put the challenge dungeon back in order." He shrugged. "I won't rescue you with a gift, but there have been worse debts. I'm sure we'll sort things out at their little inquest." He reached out to rest a heavy hand on Victor's shoulder, and, for the first time since his arrival, Dar showed a pleasant expression, not quite a smile, but certainly not a scowl. "I think we can afford to celebrate a bit. First, let's go and get your chest. I hear it spawned near the city's System stone."

Victor's eyes widened. "What if someone grabs it?"

“Impossible. It’s your reward; no one can take it, just as you couldn’t take the one awaiting that young Death Caster.” He turned and started striding purposefully toward the main World Hall. Victor hurried to keep pace, and Dar kept speaking while they walked. “Tell me, your friends, those who traveled here with you to find aid for the young insect girl . . .”

“Edeya’s not an insect!” Victor laughed.

“What? She has gossamer wings and tiny antennae on her head. Are you certain?”

“Uh, well, shit.” Victor shrugged. “I never thought of Ghelli as insects. They make me think of fairies more than they do bugs.”

“Fairies, hmm? I suppose I could see some Fae in her appearance. This is beside the point, whelp! Tell me, are they still in Sojourn?”

“Yeah. They should be. How long was I in the dungeon? It only felt like half a day to me.”

“Closer to a day and a half! Time flies when you’re bludgeoning half the city’s most promising iron-rankers.” Dar chuckled. Then, his brows narrowed, and he growled, “You distracted me again! I’m trying to warn you! As I said earlier, you ruffled many feathers with your brutal dispatching of so many of Sojourn’s finest. Most were tier eight or nine and have likely lost close to a decade’s progress from the Lifesaver’s Energy tax. I wouldn’t be surprised if some sought retribution.”

Victor wasn’t stupid. He growled and increased his pace. “If anyone hurts one of my friends . . .”

“Calm down, Victor.” Ranish reached out and grabbed his shoulder again, effortlessly slowing his pace. “I have spies out and about. I don’t believe anyone’s taken action yet, but it’s something we should be wary of. Your friends should always travel in pairs, and the one I healed, being so low level, should be escorted by two or more of your stronger friends wherever they go.”

“She and another very low-level friend are planning to go into a dungeon, um, later today, I think. Maybe tomorrow. I’ve lost track. Should I have them cancel?”

“No! If they are partners, the tier-zero dungeons are perfect for them. No one of any strength can enter, so they’ll be on at least even footing with any would-be assassins or kidnappers.” As Dar answered, they stepped out of the world hall into the morning sun, and Victor sighed, pausing to soak it in as he breathed deeply of Sojourn’s fresh air.

“God, that feels good.” He saw Dar watching him with his smoldering, coal-like eyes and shrugged. “So, you’re saying they should spend as much time in dungeons as possible for now. Yeah?”

“Hah! Aye, though I warn you, you trounced some of those so-called champions in the challenge dungeon because they gained most of their levels in these dungeons. They don’t know real war or the desperation of a true life-and-death battle. Well, they do now!” Dar laughed and clapped Victor’s shoulder again. “At the least, encourage your friends to take on dungeons a tier higher than themselves. This advice pertains to their careers after they’ve gotten their Classes. The tier-zero dungeons are fitting for their current situation.”

“And Valla? She and another tier-six friend are planning to enter a dungeon. Should they, too, take on a higher-tier dungeon?”

“As a team? Definitely.” Dar pointed down a nearby street. “Come, the System stone is in the Council Spire, this way. It’ll be good for you to see where we’ll meet for tomorrow’s sham of an inquest.”

Victor frowned as he followed him. “Can you explain that? I think I get the meaning of an inquest, but, like, am I on trial?”

Dar sighed, shaking his head. “Nine Consuls sit on the Sojourn ruling council at any given time. They’re voted for by those few thousand of us with voting privileges and serve an eleven-year term. I’ve served a time or ten over the years. Their word is law, so, no, it’s not a trial like you might be thinking. Still, they must consider the political fallout of their actions and they’ll want to avoid offending me and my allies too much.

“Your detractors will start off clamoring for your head, then they’ll suggest enslavement, and finally, they’ll look to levy a fine. We’ll find a creative way to settle the debt; don’t worry. I’ll bring an advocate for you and also stand by your side. Nothing much will come of this other than people rightly learning to show you a bit more respect than your level would usually warrant.”

“I still don’t see why the hell I’m in trouble. Was it my earthquake spell? How was I supposed to know the dungeon was so fragile? You’d think it should be designed to handle any sort of Energy ability!”

“Aye. Your quake brought the entirety of the fourth level crashing down. I’m glad you weren’t squashed before the System pulled you out.” Dar started up the steps of the largest building Victor had ever laid eyes on, save maybe the Warlord’s citadel in Coloss. It was certainly much, much taller than that great structure, but the citadel had a larger footprint. Regardless, Victor’s complaints and objections were thrown from his mind by the wonder invading his thoughts as he craned his neck, looking toward the distant shimmering heights of the spire; he couldn’t see the top from where he stood.



“I wonder if this is what skyscrapers look like up close.” Tucson had a few tall buildings downtown, but they were nothing like this or, he supposed, the great buildings in cities like New York.

“Skyscrapers? A poetic moniker for a great building. I think I’ll add that to my vernacular. Come now, Victor. You may gawk on your own time. I’ll see you to your chest, watch to see your award, and then I’ll be off; I have a lovely friend waiting to grace me with her company.”

“Oh yeah?” Victor smiled, wondering if he knew Dar well enough to rib him a little. He decided he didn’t. Perhaps he would have risked it if he weren’t so exhausted, filthy, and ready for rest. He was ready to hurry, too; Dar’s talk of people seeking vengeance had him more than a little worried about Valla and the others. As he followed Dar through the lobby, past floating platforms adorned with silken cushions, crystal fountains, and plants that looked to be a cross between gemstones and succulents, he had a sudden thought. “Do people know I’m alive? What did it look like when the System shut things down?”

Dar walked through a massive archway into a great, domed cathedral-like central hall. The ceiling was hundreds of feet above them, supported by enormous gold-inlaid white marble archways. At the center of the space was the towering System stone of Sojourn. It looked a lot like the one Victor had planted in the Free Marches, only about five times the size—a black obelisk that rose more than a hundred feet into the air, pulsing with shifting, Energy-rich glyphs and runes that seemed to float beneath the surface. Dar paused and turned to answer him, “The viewing windows went blank, but then the council announced what the System did and proclaimed you and Arona victorious. If your friends were watching, they know you’re alive.”

Victor nodded, his question almost forgotten as he looked at the monolithic stone. Nine separate sets of stairs approached the stone, allowing for multiple queues, but, for whatever reason, there wasn’t much of a crowd at that hour. Only a few people stood near the stone—hands resting on its surface—and the stairs were clear. Dar pointed, and Victor saw a faintly glittering golden chest near the platform’s edge. Of course, not five feet from that unattended chest stood Arona with a skeletally thin man who had to be eight or nine feet tall. He wore a black capelet over a fine, black velour suit, and atop his bone-white skull sat a wide-brimmed black hat.

Dar shoved him. “Climb those steps and claim your chest. Let’s see what you receive.”

Victor started moving, but he turned back to his mentor. “Who’s that with Arona?”

“Her master, Vesavo Bonewhisper. Do not offend that man.”

Victor sighed, shaking his head. Why did everyone expect him to pick a fight with everyone he met? He made short work of the steps and moved to stand by his chest, sort of hoping he could open it without having to talk to Arona again. His hopes were dashed when the scarecrow of a man beside her said, in a voice like dry tinder, “Ah, Ranish Dar! I’m pleased I’ll have the opportunity to meet your young champion. What a thorn in my Arona’s side he was!”

“Master . . .” Arona started to say, but when the man turned his weird, crystalline, diamond-colored eyes her way, she snapped her mouth shut and looked down.

Dar moved very slightly between Victor and the other two and, staring at the tall, strangely dressed man, said, “Victor Sandoval, greet Vesavo Bonewhisper, one of Sojourn’s great Death Masters.”

Victor cleared his throat and nodded, trying to banish any aggression from his features. “Pleased to meet you, sir.” He could feel the cold Energy of the man’s aura seeping out, and if he looked closely, he was sure he saw frost riming the marble platform near the man’s feet. He kept his head ducked for three or four seconds, then looked up to see those weird diamond eyes staring at him. The man’s skull-like face, with flesh so thin and pale as to be nearly transparent, regarded him for another two or three long, silent seconds, and then he nodded and turned to regard Dar.

“A good showing. We gave the lickboots and flower sniffers something to talk about, eh? Well, in three weeks’ time, I’ll be hosting a dinner. You’ll both attend, yes?”

Dar’s answer was immediate, “With pleasure.”

“Excellent! One of mine will deliver the invitation.” He turned to Arona, who was still staring at the ground. “Come.” With that, he turned and strode away. He didn’t use the steps; rather, he gently glided down from the platform as if floating on an invisible cloud. Arona hurried after him, scurrying down the nearest stairway. Dar watched her and the strange, floating man depart through the nearby archway, then turned to Victor.

“That’s one of the most dangerous people in Sojourn. I don’t fear him, but I certainly respect him.” As Victor nodded, his eyes glazing over as he stared after the two Death Casters, wondering what the man with the diamond eyes was capable of, Dar jostled him. “Come now. Open the chest.”

“Right!” Victor turned and reached down, lifting the lid and watching as a torrent of glittering, golden steam burst forth. He waved away the steam, wondering if the award could possibly make up for all that he’d lost by ruining the dungeon and getting kicked out.

Book 7: Chapter 50: Welcome Home

Victor leaned over the chest and peered within, immediately amused by the System’s sense of justice. His trusty old Kethian Juggernaut helm had been broken in the dungeon, so now he was being awarded a new one. Was that the case? Had the System tailored the reward for him, or was this just random chance? He supposed he’d never know. He reached into the chest and lifted out the rather plain, steel-colored helmet. It looked like it would cover his head, his brow, and the sides of his head. The inside was lined with supple, padded leather and looked quite comfortable, but he couldn’t help being disappointed; his old helmet had been a lot more unique and stylistically intimidating. “Bleh,” he grunted, holding it up for Dar to see.

“You sound disappointed. Isn’t that one of the new set pieces?”

“Probably,” Victor trickled some Energy into the helmet and was awarded with a System-generated description:

**\*\*\*Helm 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.\*\*\***

“Yeah, it is.” Still holding the helm aloft, Victor peered into the chest, ensuring he hadn’t missed anything. As he looked, though, the chest began to break apart, turning into Energy mist and fading out of existence, going wherever the System drew it.

Dar took the helm, turning it in his hands, studying the angles. “These aren’t common awards. Did you receive any other pieces in the dungeon?”

“Yeah, I did.” Victor looked around, surprised they hadn’t drawn any sort of crowd. Was it due to Dar’s presence? Was he intimidating the “lower” Sojourn denizens? He supposed it wasn’t an everyday occurrence for someone of his stature to be standing around with the simple folk.

“I believe these sets will change in appearance when fully enchanted, based on the imbuelements you select or provide. It’s quite a robust system; the council spent a fortune on it.” He handed the helmet back to Victor, who slipped it into the pouch with the rest of the pieces he had gotten.

“I need another piece before I can ‘imbue’ them.”

“Visit the auction house. The drop rates are high in the Vault of Valor, much higher than in the other city dungeons. Few people would have the patience to gather a full set on their own, so they’re likely to be some for sale.” Dar turned to the archway leading from the vaulted hall. “I’m off. I’ll send transport for you tomorrow. I’d like you here early so my advocate can prepare you.”

He gave Victor a long look, making a sound like softly grinding stones in his chest. Victor realized he was chuckling as he took in Victor’s shredded, burned pants. “Dress appropriately.” He didn’t wait for a response; rather, he seemed to shimmer for a few seconds, and then he was gone. Victor had to jerk his head toward the entrance to see that Dar had either moved impossibly fast or teleported down from the platform. He just caught a glimpse of his flowing red cape as he departed the hall.

“All right, then.” Victor took a deep breath and started down the steps, glancing around nervously as he realized more and more people were stopping to look at him. It confirmed his earlier theory; no one had wanted to be caught daring to stare while Dar was around. He suddenly wished he could step into a bathroom or something to change his pants, but with no idea where to begin looking for one, he decided a hasty exit was more in order. He hurried down the steps and through the spacious, magically appointed lobby. The sun had risen further, and

its light sparkled on the crystal towers, forcing him to squint as he looked around and inhaled the fresh air.

Traffic had picked up, and throngs of people walked to and fro on the sidewalk. He saw a man wearing a short black cape flag down a passing vehicle—something that brought to mind a cross between a carriage and a steam train. Victor noticed an emblem on the side like a fanciful P, and when he looked at the traffic, he saw several other strange vehicles, all different in design, with a similar emblem. He supposed he could summon Guapo and see what it was like riding around in the traffic, but he was tired and eager to be out of the public scrutiny, so he tried his luck flagging one of the cars down.

He chose a large one, about the size of a panel van from Earth. It was brass with tall, thin, spoked metal wheels. Something clung to the rims, moving around them like steam, and he figured it had to be some sort of Energy enchantment to provide padding and traction. The driver sat on the top, controlling the big vehicle with brass levers. He was a small fellow wearing a high, brimmed hat, and when he saw Victor wave, he nodded eagerly, steering the steam-belching conveyance over to the side of the street. “Need a lift?” Victor nodded, giving him his address.

The driver nodded. “I know it! It’s down in the old River View neighborhood, right?”

Victor nodded, remembering the realtor mentioning a riverwalk a few blocks from his house. The driver pulled a lever, and the door opened with a hiss, revealing a spacious interior with headroom even for a man Victor’s size once he’d sat down. The seats were plush leather, and the air inside was scented with coffee and vanilla, making Victor’s stomach rumble. He wondered about the scent’s origin but found nothing other than more leather seats when he looked around the interior. The door hissed closed, and the vehicle started moving. Surprised by its speed and smooth ride, he watched out the window as the buildings rushed by.

They were forced to stop for traffic a few times, but Victor hardly noticed. He was close to drifting off to sleep, his mind replaying the weird, jumbled events from his time in the challenge dungeon, especially his final encounter with Arona and her team. Had she really slipped away to try to finish the dungeon? He could only imagine how irritated those she’d left behind were.

He hardly remembered what he’d done as the Aspect of Terror, but it couldn’t have been pleasant for Sora and that nature guy. And Arona had left them to that! Thinking of the aspect, he didn’t feel much lingering guilt after using the spell. That felt like a first. Was it because he knew he hadn’t killed anyone? He thought it was probably more likely a result of them starting the fight five versus one. How could he feel bad about anything he did in that situation?

When the taxi—as Victor thought of it—pulled up in front of his house, he was pleased to have solidified his outlook. He shouldn’t feel guilty about any of that business, least of all damaging the dungeon. How was he supposed to know how fragile it was? For all he knew, the System and any environment it governed were indestructible. He found himself almost looking forward to the so-called inquest. In his mind, there was no way the council’s accusations would stand up to logic.

The driver asked for five Energy beads, and Victor handed him ten, amazed that anyone could make a living on so little. He’d barely reached the gate leading to his little courtyard when Valla slammed into him, wrapping her arms around his waist in a vise-like squeeze. “Oof!” Victor laughed.

“I’m so glad you’re home. Rumors at the public house were wild! Some people thought you’d be imprisoned!”

“What the hell? Why?”

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Valla looked up at him, squinting in the sunlight. “As I said, rumors—drunken ones, at that. People seemed to think the council would hold you responsible for the dungeon’s damage. Lesh wanted to find the council building, but he was drunk, and I hoped you or Ranish Dar would send word to us. Well, more, I hoped you’d come home. And here you are!” She laughed and squeezed him again.

“Well, whatever rumors you heard were only half-right,” Victor sighed, returning her hug, pressing her against him, gently stroking her back, and running his fingers along the soft ridges of her feathers.

“Half-right?” She looked up at him, and Victor grew weary of stretching his neck down, so he cast *Alter Self*, bringing himself closer to her height.

“Yeah, I guess the System’s going to charge them an arm and a leg to fix the dungeon, so they’re mad at me.” He shrugged, draping an arm over her shoulders and guiding her toward the house. “Dar says not to worry, so I’m not going to. Anyway, I have to go to some stupid hearing tomorrow to argue about it.”

Valla stiffened under his arm. “Tomorrow? But we’re meant to head into Desperation Gap tomorrow! Lesh really hoped you’d come along!”

“Lesh did?” Victor cocked an eyebrow as he pulled the door open for her.

“Well, of course, I did too!”

“Look, Valla, I want to go too, but I can’t miss this hearing—inquest. I also think Dar has plans for me. If I’m honest, I’m fucking tired, too; that challenge dungeon took a lot out . . .”

“It’s okay.” She cut him off, lifting his arm off her shoulders, and despite her smile, he could see the strain behind it. Victor almost said to forget what he’d said, that he’d find a way to join them, but he wasn’t only being selfish. He wanted Valla and Lesh to get stronger, and how would they do that if he came along and steamrolled everything? Was he being a little full of himself with that thought? He supposed so, but he knew how much stronger he was than Valla, and he had a good idea that he could toss Lesh around, too; they only had draws while sparring because Victor never used his strongest abilities; he never berserked.

Rather than try to placate her, he shifted the topic. “Is Lam coming with you?”

Valla sighed, shaking her head as they walked into the little kitchen. Victor sat down with his back to the table, stretching his legs out while she chose her words. “She’s determined to escort and wait for Darren and Edeya. I know it’s for Edeya’s benefit, really, but she keeps pointing out how Darren has yet to gain a single level: ‘He’s like a newborn,’ etcetera. Lesh scoffs, tells her his ‘fosterling’ needs to stumble on his own, but she insists that, at least for this dungeon outing, she wants to be near at hand.”

Victor grew curious as she mentioned the others, “Where are they all?”

“In the travel home, sleeping the night off. Everyone had a bit too much, but you should have seen Lesh! It was both funny and frightening. He made a lot of money betting on you, by the way.”

“Really? Hah!” Victor slapped his hand on the table, watching Valla doing something by the sink. He thought he saw something red in her hand, and as he craned his neck, trying to see, she smiled and held up a bright red fruit; it looked almost like a tomato.

“From the garden.” She put it on the butcherblock counter and started slicing it into segments. “You’re going to love it. It’s sweet but a little tart. Lesh puts salt on them, but I like sugar.” She looked at him, the question plain on her face.

“I’ll try both,” he chuckled, his stomach telling him he needed to eat a hell of a lot more than a fruit. Of course, that made him think of meat, which reminded him of the gargantuopod he’d harvested. Should he eat that heart? Should he wait? He supposed he’d ask Dar about it.

“Are you very hungry?” Valla set the plate before him, and Victor picked up the fruit, smelling it. It reminded him of citrus, and when he put the piece in his mouth—salty—he grinned.

“I’m starved, and this reminds me of an orange, but, as you said, a little sour. I’d say half orange and half lemon.”

Valla smiled, watching him eat more slices, then asked, “Which is better?”

“Oh, the sugar is great, but the salt brings out the flavors; I dunno which one I like more.” He laughed as she snorted, shaking her head.

“Won’t pick a side, hmm?”

“Just telling the truth!” He finished off the fruit, and he had half a mind to start pulling some of his favorite foods out of his storage rings, but he wanted to see if Valla had something planned first. She’d resumed shuffling around in the kitchen, pulling things from the cold cabinet and pantry. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to make you some food!”

“So, you’re not mad?”

“About?” When she didn’t look at him, he knew darn well she knew what he was talking about.

“The dungeon?”

“No. How could I be mad at you for being honest? I was foolish to expect you to want to run straight into another dungeon after all you went through in that challenge.”

Victor groaned and folded his arms on his chest, kicking his feet out further and pushing the table legs to the edge of their endurance as he leaned into it. “I wish the stupid thing wasn’t televised.”

“Televised?”

“Those dumb spy stones, projecting the whole thing for you guys to watch. It seems to me that couldn’t have been fun for you.”

“It was nerve-wracking, but watching Lesh cheer and listening as you quickly became a crowd favorite was fun, too. Naturally, knowing about the Lifesavers helped, but I heard one of the entrants died. Is that true?”

“Yeah, early on, I saw that message.” Victor rubbed a hand through his hair, sighing as he felt the grit sticking between his fingers. “I didn’t meet the person, and I’m not sure who eliminated them. You didn’t see it on the screen?”

Valla began chopping some vegetables and turned on the sink; it all looked so much like a scene out of a modern Earth kitchen that Victor felt a weird wave of something like *déjà vu*, so strong that it started up some butterflies in his stomach. She turned and answered, “No. When you weren’t on the central viewing window, I watched your smaller window most of the time. I missed it.”

Victor nodded and stood, jerking a thumb toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms. “You care if I go clean up? I could use a soak in the bath if there’s time.”

“Of course! I should have suggested it.” She put down the knife and came over to him. “I’d join you, but I’m enjoying the idea of cooking something good. I invited the others, too. Do you mind? We’ll spend a lot of time alone tonight, yes?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s perfect. Thank you, Valla.” He looked over to the counter at the start of her preparations and added, “If you’re tired, we could take a nap. I’ve got tons of prepared food in my storage rings . . .”

“No! We’ll have something fresh. There’s much to celebrate and even more to discuss; Lam met someone you’ll find interesting, and Darren and Edeya will enjoy some advice about their first dungeon.”

“Oh yeah? Well, now you’ve piqued my interest.” Victor leaned down and, intending to give her a quick kiss, found himself wrapped up in something far more amorous. Valla’s mouth tasted like the fruit he’d just eaten, and she must have liked something about his because neither broke it off quickly. After several long, feverish moments while both of them did some exploring with their hands, she finally pushed him off.

“Tonight!” she panted, breathless.

“Right,” he chuckled, wiping his mouth with a grin.

“Did you just wipe my kiss off?”

“Uh . . .”

Valla laughed and pushed him again. “I’m teasing! Go get cleaned up; you stink.”

“I stink?” Victor grinned, then he stepped forward, squatted, stretched his arms around Valla’s hips, hooking them just below her butt, and hoisted her over his shoulder. “I think that dinner can wait a few minutes. I’m kidnapping you!” As she howled in protest, slapping his butt with her palms as she dangled behind him, Victor carried her back to the bedroom and their private bath.

#

Arcus Volpuré leaned against the high, limewashed brick wall, gazing down the street at the little villa gate the giant and his winged woman had just stepped through. So, this was his home. He’d expected something grander, but size and prowess didn’t necessarily translate to class. Still, it stung a bit more knowing a peasant had gotten the better of him. Strista shifted beside him, pulling her cowl forward, further sinking her visage into shadow. “Nervous?” he asked, his thin lips curling into a smile.

“Of course. I said I was interested in vengeance, not suicide.”

“Relax. Didn’t you see how they fell all over each other when she came to the gate? He won’t be back out soon. Even if he did, it’s not like we’re doing anything untoward; we’re just out for a stroll.”

“As if he’d buy that. Two people he’d just vanquished happened to stroll into this old slum?” She turned and gestured toward the city. “Come. You’ve seen his home. It’s enough for now.”

“A fearful little bird, aren’t you?”

Strista turned a huge golden eye his way, and Arcus had to hand it to the avians; they could certainly scowl. Her dark feathers and golden beak only made it more severe. “I’m afraid of him, yes, but I’m not a little bird, and I’m not weak. Don’t mock me, Pyromancer!” He noticed her hand resting on the coiled whip at her side and held up an open palm.



“Peace, lady. I agree; I’ve seen enough for now. We must tread lightly with this matter—his master is influential.” He had seen enough; now that he knew the house, setting up a watchful familiar would be simple. He’d learn the man’s routines, learn more about his acquaintances, especially that lovely, celestial being who’d just met him at the gate, and find a way to extract some payment, be it material or symbolic. “I will have justice,” he whispered harshly, turning to his coach parked at the corner. “Come, I’ll deliver you to Balefor Estates. You still live there, yes?”

“That’s right. Can your coach fly, then? It’s rather distant.”

“Oh, aye. On wings of flame, no less. I’m happy for the ride; we can discuss who else might enjoy our little alliance. The giant made no small list of enemies yesterday. With a few good minds coming together, I’m sure we can think of a way to extract our due.”

Strista nodded and took his proffered hand, careful not to hook his tender flesh with her needle-like talons. They’d known each other most of their lives and had, once upon a time, been lovers. Now, though, Arcus had little time for romantic distractions; he was close to truly understanding the nature of fire, to becoming one with it. Well, he’d been closer two days ago. Now that he’d fallen back into the eighth tier, he had years of hard work ahead of him to regain what he’d lost.

As the thought passed through his mind, his body began to steam, and flames lit up behind his eyes. Strista tried to pull her hand away, but Arcus tamped down the fire and persisted with his grip—something in him yearned for the closeness despite his bravado. Something in him still stung from the punishment that bastard giant had doled out.