

Victor BK8: Ch1

Book 8: Chapter 1: Nightmare Manifestation

Victor and Ranish Dar sat together on a low, freshly oiled wooden pier that extended from the grounds of his mentor's house into the placid, deep blue waters of a lake. Sojourn's atmosphere was thin, though the dense Energy of the small world served to make life comfortable for the people living there. The overall effect, however, was that the stars were almost always visible, especially away from the city. It also made the water look dark and almost like a mirror of the star-filled firmament overhead. The lake was beautiful, and the soft breeze tickling his bare chest as he dried off put Victor at ease as he dangled his feet over the edge.

"Enjoying the view?" Dar asked, his bright gaze aimed at the brilliant expanse of stars above.

"How could I not? When I heard the guide say Sojourn was a 'city world,' I'd thought countryside homes and lakes were out of the question."

"Well, it's a small world, and much of it is taken up by the city. People want to be where the action is, so the vast majority of the populace lives in, around, and above its streets."

"Like the, uh, Arcanum where we met?" Victor pictured the floating spires on their stony, rune-etched platforms.

"Exactly. It doesn't hurt that grounds such as mine are prohibitively expensive. Those of us who own the lakes, forests, and valleys would charge a dear price for the city to expand."

"But no one owns the sky," Victor said, connecting the dots. "That's why the Arcanum is floating above the city?"

"Perhaps, though, it's likely that the first towers were simply put up as a show of power." Dar shrugged and leaned back, basking in the sunlight. "I received word from my driver; your friend is en route."

"Lam? That's great." A knot of tension Victor hadn't acknowledged melted away. Thanks to the way he'd dominated the challenge dungeon, he knew his friends weren't exactly safe around the city. He sighed, closing his eyes, enjoying how the cool water lapped on his shins with the gentle waves stirred by the breeze. "I share Farscribe books with Edeya and Valla, so when they finish their dungeons, I'll pick them up."

"Providing you're available, aye, that's a good enough idea."

"You think I might not be?" Victor opened one eye and regarded his stone-fleshed host.

“I have tasks and training for you. The city may reach out with one of their demands.” He shrugged, both of his blazing eyes still closed. “The future is fickle; don’t make too many plans, especially about trivialities. If you’re busy, I’ll see your friends home safely.”

“Fair enough.” Victor started to relax again.

“Speaking of tasks, there’s the matter of the Fae girl.”

“Sora. Right.” Victor had been dreading the topic ever since Dar had mentioned it on the coach ride from the city. He didn’t like thinking about his time as the Aspect of Terror, let alone looking at the aftermath.

“She’ll likely have a fit and regress when she sees you. Well, perhaps not. In your current form, you don’t resemble the one who terrorized her. You can make yourself smaller, yes?”

Victor nodded. He was naturally close to Dar’s size, closing in on ten feet, and with just the two of them on the pier, it felt perfectly natural. Still, he’d recently improved his Alter Self spell and knew he could bring himself down to a much less intimidating stature if he wanted to. “Yeah. You think I should be smaller when I see her?”

“I do. I’m also quite interested in that spell. I noticed a curious lack of its mention in your journal.”

“Yeah . . .” Victor didn’t know how to proceed. Dar was easily one of the top five most powerful people he’d ever known, and he didn’t want to offend him by lying or holding back information, but he also didn’t want to betray Tes’s trust. Now that he’d visited Sojourn and learned about some of the power scales of people in the universe, he couldn’t help wondering how she’d stack up. She hadn’t ever mentioned “iron ranks” or “tests of steel,” let alone the “lustrous veil” that lay beyond. He knew those were terms coined by the old masters of Sojourn, but surely other civilizations had names for the same stages. Or did they?

Tes came from a world of dragons, a place where Elder magic reigned, and the System held no sway. Perhaps things were different in that case. How would Tes compare to Dar? Victor had only seen her true form in a couple of illusory glimpses, but he’d felt her aura, or, at least, the part of it she let loose to make a point. What’s more, she’d been altering herself down to the size of a petite human. If Victor changed himself so much, his Core would be a fraction of itself, yet Tes had been starting from the size and shape of a dragon! Even so reduced, she’d been immensely powerful.

“My innocent question seems to have set your mind’s gears spinning,” Dar chuckled.

“I’m trying to think of a way to explain to you, without offending you, that a very powerful being taught me how to do that magic and made me promise not to spread that knowledge.”

“And you fear angering this being?” Dar’s stony brow lifted over one eye.

“I . . . fear what it would do to my spirit if I betrayed her trust.”

“Ah! Don’t lose sleep over it. We’ve years of study and work ahead of us. Perhaps one day you’ll introduce me to this friend of yours, or perhaps you’ll realize the secret isn’t something you need to fear sharing. It’s possible I know more about it than you think.” Dar winked at him, and then, with a grunt, he stood, water streaming off his stone legs. Victor shook his head; he kept thinking of Dar’s flesh as stone, but he knew it wasn’t. It moved and felt like flesh.

“Come, it’s time you faced your handiwork.”

Victor swallowed a groan as it tried to escape his lips and hopped up, nodding. He summoned a clean pair of pants and a comfortable, loose, linen shirt. Dar gestured to the house. “I’ll meet you on the deck if you want to change.”

“Thanks.” Victor watched his retreating back, and then he quickly slipped out of his damp, homemade shorts; he’d cut the legs off a pair of torn pants. He pulled on his dry clothes, shrugged into Lifedrinker’s harness, and then, still barefoot, made his way up the long, steep flight of sandstone steps to the house. It was situated on a hill, but the slope was severe enough that Victor couldn’t see the house until he stepped onto the upper landing. The back of the residence was set with windows that opened onto a broad wooden deck that overlooked the lake, and Dar stood near one of the big glass doors, waiting for him.

It was a beautiful, well-appointed home, but it wasn’t ostentatious. It had a few large living spaces—a dining room, two parlors, a library, and half a dozen or so bedrooms. Everything was open and bright, and Victor had the distinct impression that it was designed as a place for Dar to relax. Victor liked the white-washed brick exterior walls and the tarnished copper roof; it looked like it belonged to the rocky, hilly landscape. Soft-spoken servants, all wearing the same uniform of pale blue shirts over tan pants, could be seen here and there, cleaning, cooking, and basically waiting on Dar’s every whim.

In the few hours Victor had been at the house, he’d seen at least four different servants, but they all looked related—green skin, yellow eyes, and pointy ears. He was curious whether they worked for a company or directly for Dar and, if so, why they all looked so similar. The topic hadn’t come up yet, so he pushed the thoughts aside as he stepped across the deck and followed Dar through the giant-sized glass door into one of the home’s parlors.

“The Fae girl is in one of the bedrooms. My steward restrained her for her safety.” He didn’t elaborate, but Victor could read between the lines. Whatever his alter ego had infected her with might drive her to harm herself. “I’m going to

explain what you must do, but then I'll leave you to it. My presence seemed to alarm her."

"Oh, you checked on her already?"

"Yes, while you were swimming, I took a look." They were standing in a hallway now, and Dar nodded toward one of the closed wooden doors. "Fear not; these doors and rooms are enchanted against prying ears. When I examined her, I could see the infection you caused, and while it would be devastating if left unchecked, it's nothing a strong Spirit Caster with the proper affinity couldn't remedy." He inclined his head toward Victor. "It should be trivial for the original caster to rectify."

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"Didn't you say the other guy . . . what was his name? I wanna say Eleanor . . ."

"Elandor. Yes, his mentor came to me distraught, but I'll be surprised if he hasn't paid someone to fix the lad by now. I'll check on it before I send you there."

"I thought you were going to give me a choice." Victor's objection was half-hearted. He and Dar both knew he'd do it.

As if to illustrate that point, Dar ignored his words. "When you look with your inner eye upon the girl beyond yonder door, you'll see that your fear-attuned Energy has manifested into a sort of pseudo spirit and is assaulting her on two fronts. It attacks her Core on this plane, and on the Spirit Plane, it attacks her very spirit. It's powered by your will, so it shouldn't be difficult to command it to return home. Pull that Energy out of her, and, if you must, Spirit Walk to claim any that resists."

"Seems easy enough." Victor scratched the back of his neck, wondering if he'd missed something.

Dar was quick to drop the other shoe: "There will be a small challenge involved. Your fear manifestation has been corrupting her Energy, attuning it to fear, making it something you could cultivate if you wanted. You may find it difficult to resist the urge to drain her dry, which would kill her just as surely as if you opened one of her veins."

"Shit. Is that going to mess up her Core?"

Dar clapped him on the shoulder. "Not permanently. Once you remove the influencing corruption, her Core will slowly cleanse itself. You have a powerful will. Use it. Silence your urges and command your Energy to return. This is an excellent chance for you to practice—a safe exercise; if she dies, none will come looking for her."

"What the fuck, Dar?" Victor looked at his new mentor with sudden anger flaring behind his eyes.

Dar scowled at him and shrugged. "I'm simply trying to put your mind at ease. This woman has no family or sponsor in Sojourn. Her homeworld is distant, as are her kin, and none know that I

brought her here.” His big hand was still on Victor’s shoulder. It was heavy, but none of his aura leaked out, and though his face was scowling, Victor didn’t feel any anger. Was the man testing him? Was he making light of Sora’s life to see how Victor would act?

“I’m not going to kill her.” Victor turned to the door and took a step, part of him bracing, wondering if Dar would tighten his grip and stop him, but the giant let his hand drop. Victor stopped before the door, concentrated, and cast *Alter Self*, shrinking himself back to his old human proportions—just a fit, broad-shouldered man of about six feet. Without looking back, he opened the door and stepped through.

The first thing he noticed was the stench. It smelled like sweat and piss and fear. Idly, he wondered when he’d begun to be able to smell that scent. Had he always? “No,” he whispered as his eyes caught up with his nose, and he took in the scene. The curtains were mostly closed, allowing only a sliver of light into the spacious suite. Closed doors on the left and right led away to other rooms, but there, in the main chamber, the space was dominated by a big, four-poster bed draped with gauzy, pale blue curtains. A table, bookcase, and several comfortable chairs filled the rest of the space.

Victor stepped onto a plush, dark carpet and moved toward the bed, noting the shadowed, veiled figure writhing there. He could hear ragged breaths, whispered words, and the soft clink of chains. Victor reached up a hand to *Lifedrinker*’s haft, seeking some comfort as his nerves suddenly turned to ice. He’d seen countless horrors, from monsters to evil men to the terrible aftermath on a battlefield, but this was something different. Sora wasn’t a monster. She wasn’t a dead soldier. She was a person twisted by the dark side of Victor’s spirit, made ill and mad by the force of his will.

Lifedrinker’s haft was warm, and he felt strength radiating from her. Suddenly, he felt ashamed. Who was he to hide from his own handiwork? Did he answer to his fear, or did it answer to him? Growling, Victor summoned a torrent of inspiration-attuned Energy and cast *Inspiration of the Quinametzin*. As his eyes flared with the white-gold Energy, the shadows fell back, driven away by the clarity of his mind. He strode forward, and in three long steps, he was at Sora’s bedside, throwing aside the gauzy curtains. She lay there, wrists and ankles bound by padded silver chains to the bed’s posts.

Sora’s eyes were wild, wide open, and bloodshot. Her gray, nearly white hair was a sweat-matted mess, and he could see the sheets around her were drenched—sweat or urine or both; Victor wasn’t sure. It smelled like both. She wore the same clothes she’d had on in the dungeon, though someone had removed her leather armor, leaving her in a soft, earth-toned, close-fitting vest over stained, tan pants. Her lips were pale and cracked with dehydration, her cheeks devoid of color, and when she briefly focused on him, a whisper croaked in her throat, but Victor couldn’t make out the words.

“Shit, chica,” Victor sighed, reaching down to grasp her wrist. She tried to pull away, but Victor’s fingers were like iron bands, his arm an immovable force. Still, he held her gently and willed his inspiration to extend, to include her. “Come on, focus on me. You’re okay. Whatever you’re seeing or feeling—it’s not real.” She continued to writhe, her knees going up and down, her hips shifting left and right, her head flopping about on the pillow. It almost seemed like she was trying to get something off herself. “Goddamn it,” he hissed, “If I knew this was so bad, I

wouldn't have been swimming like an asshole while you were suffering. Fucking Dar should have said something."

Victor's frown deepened, and he closed his eyes, turning his gaze inward, starting with his Core and pathways as he always did to open his inner eye. He quickly let his gaze travel out of himself, and that's when he saw and felt the rich, roiling storm of fear-attuned Energy raging at the center of Sora's being. Despite himself, something in Victor felt excited, like a wolf eyeing a wounded rabbit. It would be so easy to pull that Energy out of her, to add it to his Core, swelling it, pushing it toward another advancement.

Victor looked at the temptation abstractly, almost like he was outside his body, watching himself figuratively salivate over the feast his corruption had created for him. He squashed that feeling, crushing it into nothing with his will, and then he turned back to Sora and traced the corruption away from her Core into her pathways. He could see his Energy there, and, almost like an echo of one of his spirit companions, he recognized the shape of his spirit. Dar's description was apt; his spell had created a pseudo-spirit entity that was carrying out his Aspect of Terror's will.

With a surge of focused will, Victor walled off Sora's Core and pulled the corruption, dragging it through her pathways and into his, through the connection where he held her wrist. It resisted at first, hungry to complete its task, but once it felt his touch and tasted the familiar grounds of his pathways, it practically charged toward his Core. It rejoined the glowering ball of purple-black Energy from whence it had spawned. When nothing more came out of Sora, Victor stared for a long time at her Core, watching to see if it would begin to recover, to drive away the corrupted, fear-attuned Energy.

If Dar hadn't warned him, Victor might have tried to help, to siphon away some of that tainted Energy, but he knew better. Her Core needed time to cleanse itself and generate new, properly attuned Energy. If he pulled all of that tainted Energy out, she would die. "Did I get it all?" he asked softly, not expecting an answer. Sora's writhing had ceased, and she lay with closed eyes, still pale and slick with sweat but quiet. Victor kept hold of her wrist, then sat on the side of the bed, shifting her slightly to make more room. He needed to see how things looked on the Spirit Plane.

He wasn't worried about his body; he was in Dar's home, and there wasn't any way anyone would get to him to cause harm without the powerful Spirit Caster knowing. Additionally, if Dar wanted to harm him, he didn't need Victor to be on the Spirit Plane to do so. He closed his eyes, built the pattern for Spirit Walk, and flooded it with Energy. When he looked around, the house was gone, and he was sitting on a large, flat stone overlooking the twilight landscape of Sojourn.

Before he could take in the vista, marveling at the changes between the world's Spirit Plane version and that on the Material Plane, he noticed the coiled, black-feathered serpent on the stone beside him. It was both alien and familiar, and Victor knew it was the manifestation of the pseudo-spirit his Aspect of Terror had created to infect Sora. It watched him through hooded eyes, black with vertical red pupils. As he regarded it, the serpent's tongue flicked out and seemed to lap up some misty white Energy that coalesced in the air before it.

"Is that Sora's spirit?" he growled. The serpent unwound and slithered toward him, but Victor didn't flinch. It was probably four feet long with weird, glossy

black feathers adorning its scales that invited his touch as it slithered into his lap, slowly sliding up along his chest, resting against him like it was coming home. Part of Victor wanted to recoil, but part of him recognized the serpent as part of himself. Its weight was comfortable, its chilly aura a perfect echo to the resonance of his fear-attuned Energy. “Okay, hombre. You’re done. Leave her alone now and come home.”

The serpent’s head was on his shoulder, and it lifted further still, bringing its face close to his and looking him in the eyes. Its dark tongue flickered out again, and then it simply burst into a cloud of purple-black smoke. Unlike natural smoke, though, it didn’t waft away. Rather, it settled on Victor and sank into him, and regardless of his wants or desires, he felt a massive influx of fear-attuned Energy. Victor grunted in surprise as his Core swelled, stretching to bursting and then compressed with a soul-jarring pulse of Energy.

*****Congratulations! Your Core has advanced: Advanced 9.*****

“Shit,” Victor muttered, then he cut the Energy feeding his Spirit Walk spell. As the material world slammed into his senses, he jerked his head, looking at Sora, hoping she was all right. To his relief, some color tinted her cheeks, and her eyes were closed as she breathed deep, steady breaths. He reasoned that the serpent had been the spiritual manifestation of his spell and had been slowly feeding on the corrupted Energy from Sora’s Core, siphoning it like a leech.

Using his inner eye, he looked at her Core again and saw it was still roiling with fear-attuned Energy, but that, at its center, a tiny, pale pearl of pale shimmering Energy slowly grew. Victor was reasonably sure that as her Core recovered, it would slowly push out the corrupted Energy, and she’d be okay. “Are you in there, Sora?” He squeezed her wrist, still cool to the touch, but then, everyone’s skin felt cool to Victor’s hot hands.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she took a slow, wheezy breath. It took a few seconds, but her gray eyes finally focused on him. She licked her cracked lips and croaked, “Victor?”

“Hey!” Victor summoned a copper water bottle from one of his rings and handed it to her. “Drink that.”

“What . . .” Her eyes widened, and something flickered behind her irises like a shadow, and she shuddered. She squeezed them shut, took the bottle, gulped several mouthfuls, and then handed it back. “I’m embarrassed to say that I feel terrified right now. My Energy feels wrong, and I keep having flashes of . . . nightmares. Has my Core been poisoned?”

“Sort of. I removed the infection; it’ll recover. You’ll probably feel much better if you can sleep until tomorrow.”

“You removed it? Why?”

“I caused it! I guess I tore you with my talons or something; it’s all a blur to me. I mean, whenever I wear that aspect, things are unclear afterward.”

She closed her eyes, and he could tell she relived some painful memories. When they opened again, he could see she had more questions, but she looked around, taking in the gauzy curtains around the bed and the dim room beyond. “Where am I?”

“At my, uh, mentor’s house. He had you picked up when he saw you didn’t have anyone looking after you.”

Sora glanced at his hand, where it held her wrist, then up into his eyes. “Weren’t you taller before?” Before he could answer, she asked, “You’re not angry?” Her eyes pooled with tears.

“Seriously? I thought you were going to be pissed at me. I mean, you just went through a day of hell.”

“It’s . . . I don’t remember it all.” Her voice was quiet and soft, and he could see her eyes getting heavy. Whether she remembered it or not, Victor’s nightmare manifestation had done a number on her. He found himself feeling more than a little responsible for her. Learning that she had no mentor or family in the city and that one of Dar’s people had found her alone and taken her without any objection—it all felt a little sad.

He recognized the feeling as different than guilt; they’d been fighting, and she’d known the risks. He wasn’t guilty. He supposed he just empathized with her. Even he, the only earthling in this part of the universe, had a support group here in Sojourn. How bad would it feel to not only lose but to find yourself alone afterward?

“All right,” Victor shook his head, standing. “Time for you to get some rest. We can talk more tomorrow.” His musings loosened his tongue, and he added, “Hey, you know what?”

“What?” He couldn’t help noticing how she turned her hand up, her fingers stretching toward his.

Victor took a step back, but he smiled and said, “I guess we’re more than just dungeon friends.”

Book 8: Chapter 2: An Earnest Appeal

Lam sighed and stood, stretching as she took another deep breath of fresh lake air. She’d been relaxing on the little sandy, gravel-strewn beach outside the entrance to the Grotto, reluctant to leave in case Edeya and Darren found something was wrong and came out prematurely. She’d hardly noticed the hours ticking by as she lazily soaked in the sun and listened to the water lapping against the stony shore.

She wasn’t the only one who’d been enjoying the day; ten or so others, even a couple with a child, had been picnicking on the sand. It was strange to think that children could be playing just a stone’s throw from the entrance to a dungeon. It said a lot about how tame and regulated Sojourn was.

“Guess they’re not coming out early,” she sighed, brushing the sand off her butt. With just a touch of obsessiveness, she pulled out the Farscribe book she shared with Edeya and flipped to the last page, ensuring she hadn’t missed a message. The last note was still the same: We’re in. Everything’s fine—write to

you before we camp for the night. Lam couldn't argue with that, so she tucked the book away and started following the path out of the narrow lakeside gorge. The cave entrance and the beach were at one end, while the access road and public transportation were at the other.

Looking up, squinting into the setting sun, Lam was tempted to flutter her wings and fly to the top, but she saw other flight-gifted folks soaring by occasionally, and she wasn't sure of the etiquette of it all. If she were honest, she might admit that she didn't want to flutter around while people soared past—Ghelli flight was best used for flitting between branches, not gliding through canyons. She'd met a few who were fast and could fly great distances, but they had other, more advanced bloodlines. Lam's race was listed simply as "Ghelli," and when she'd pushed it into advanced, her wings had grown, and she had gotten faster, but nothing like how Valla could fly.

"A strange tangent," she muttered, shaking her head. Was she already talking to herself? "I'm not that lonely!" She blushed a little when a pair of youngsters hurried past her, eyeing her strangely as they went. Sighing, she inwardly admitted she was, indeed, lonely and, on top of that, worried. It was quite normal for her to find odd topics to think about to keep from obsessing over Edeya. To her, it seemed mad to send her into a dungeon after all that she'd been through, but everyone disagreed. Victor was the only one who'd been partially on her side, but only because he worried too much. In a way, his agreement had helped Lam to take a second look at herself and realize she was being just as bad.

Ultimately, it hadn't been anyone's decision but Edeya's. Well, she supposed, Edeya's and Darren's. They were both adults, and they both wanted to go in. "That was that," she sighed, rounding, she was reasonably sure, the last bend before she'd climb a slight slope to the cluster of carts and temporary storefronts. Apparently, many trailheads started at the same point, and people came out this way for recreation, nature walks, and access to not only the Grotto but several other low-level dungeons. The city rented space near the road to merchants—food vendors, general suppliers, alchemists, and even taxidermists who would buy pelts and monster trophies.

As she crested the rise and saw more and more people, Lam took in the eager faces and the bouncing steps and felt a little jealous. What would she have given to grow up in a place like this? What would she have given to have parents who supported her, whom she didn't have to flee to seek a life of fortune, selling her early years to the Empire and its Legion? The thought brought her round full circle to Darren and Edeya, and she nodded, a little pride swelling her chest. If she couldn't have it, then they would. She couldn't have it, could she? A far-fetched idea began to tickle the back of her mind.

"Excuse me, miss," a tremulous voice called from a nearby open-backed wagon. Lam paused and turned toward it, her hand opening, ready to summon her hammer from her ring. A girl, maybe seven years old, looking very much like a little red-skinned Shadeni with red, almost pink irises, looked back at her. She was sitting at the back of the wagon, her legs dangling, and beside her was a box of polished stones.

Lam was curious about seeing a Shadeni there, so she stepped toward the wagon, looking for an adult that might belong to the girl. When she didn't see anyone, she said, "Did you call me?"

"Yes, miss. Are you from Fanwath?" She had a sweet, sing-song voice, and Lam smiled at her, nodding.

"How'd you know?"

"My da has friends who look like you."

"Your father?"

"Aye, miss. He works in Lord Warin-dak's household." That statement made everything fall into place. Of course, the Ridonne would bring servants over with them.

"And you, sweetling? What are you doing here?"

"My da drops me off some mornings so I can sell some little enchantments. Luck stones." She smiled with pride, exposing her pointy canines as she gestured to the case of polished rocks.

"Luck stones, hmm?" Lam looked again at the sun moving toward the western horizon. "And you've been here all day? By yourself?"

"Aye, miss. My da will pick me up when he's done for the day in the lord's kennels."

Lam stepped closer, peering at the colorful, smooth stones. "What do they do?"

"Well, miss, I'm a Spirit Caster like my granny, at least that's what my da told me. I was born here in Sojourn, so I've never met her. I have an affinity for luck, and I put a bit of my spirit into these stones while I polish them. If you have one of my stones in your pocket, you'll find things looking up for you!"

Lam narrowed her eyes and looked more closely at the little girl. She didn't seem to be lying. She reached for one of the stones, "May I?"

"Please!"

"Hmm." Lam hefted the little, smooth stone. It was striated with shades of orange and gray, but she felt some warmth emanating, just a hint of Energy.

"Luck, you say?"

"That's right, miss."

Lam idly rubbed the stone with her thumb, enjoying the sensation. "What's your name?"

"Dalla, miss." She ducked her head subserviently.

“Well, Dalla, I know a very strong Spirit Caster, and he’s going to be thrilled to learn about you. Would you mind if I bought a few of your stones?”

“A few?” Her reserved formality faded as her bright eyes widened.

“Oh, aye. I can’t buy one for just one of my friends. Let’s see. I need . . .” Lam counted on her fingers as she silently recited the names of her friends. “Six of them.”

“I sell ‘em for three beads each, miss. Is that all right?”

“Oh, sure. Pick me out your best six, and I’ll get your payment.” While she fished out one of her sacks of Energy beads, Lam couldn’t help thinking of the strange coincidence. She’d run into Warin-dak himself just the other night, and now she’d come across one of his servants’ children? Was this an elaborate ruse? The stones were harmless, and she couldn’t deny the positive nature of the Energy within them. Victor would likely know more—

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“Ahem, would you be the Lady Lam?” a stodgy voice behind her asked. Lam whirled, once again ready to summon her hammer, Victor’s warning fresh in her mind. She relaxed immediately when she saw a small, elderly man with wrinkled green skin and bright white hair. He wore a coachman’s livery—a tall black hat, black jacket, and a striped gray and blue shirt tucked into black pants.

She nodded. “That’s right.”

“I’m one of Lord Dar’s coachmen.”

“Dar? Oh! Ranish Dar?”

The man nodded, the folds of skin on his neck piling up into four distinct layers. “Yes, my lady. Your companion, Victor, has requested you join him at Lord Dar’s lake house.”

“Really? My, how things change! Back home, it was I sending coaches around for Victor.” Lam sighed, shaking her head, then turned back to the little girl. She carefully counted out eighteen beads into her cupped hands, then added three more and offered her a wink. “Those are for you, just in case your father’s counting your profits.”

“Thank you so much, mi . . .” She caught herself, looked at Dar’s driver, and quickly said, “My lady.”

“Sweet girl, you can call me Lam. I hope we meet again.”

“Me too!” Darra said, quickly looking down. Lam knew if her skin weren’t so red, she’d see her cheeks flush with color. She laughed and reached out to tousle the girl’s thick black hair.

“Did you pick me six good ones?”

“Aye! The best!” She scooped up a little pile of the stones she’d gathered by her knee. “They’re all good, but this one,” she held up a gray, silver-flecked, flat stone, about twice the size of Lam’s thumbnail, “is very lucky.” She smiled again, her sharp, white teeth flashing. Lam nodded and took the stones into her palm.

“Then I’ll keep that one with me.”

“Thank you again, Lady, um, Lam.” Again, the little girl ducked her head, and Lam’s heart almost burst. Did she want a child so badly? She sighed, gently tousled her hair again, then turned back to the driver.

“Well? Shouldn’t you show me Lord Dar’s sigil or something?”

“Of course, my lady.” The driver opened his black jacket, displaying a complicated pattern on his vest’s left breast. It meant nothing to Lam, but from what she’d gathered about Dar and the city of Sojourn, it would be suicide for someone to go around pretending to be a member of his household. She nodded and gestured down the row of carts, wagons, and stands.

“Lead the way.”

He pivoted on his heel and began striding toward a hovering, brass-colored metallic conveyance shaped vaguely like a coach—one with no need for wheels or a tongue to tether animals. The inside was spacious, decorated in plush burgundy velour fabric and buttery smooth leather. Lam was the only occupant; the coachman closed her in and entered a different compartment. She sighed, leaning back in one of the soft couches, and opened the perfectly tooled little cabinets, curious about what a man like Ranish Dar stocked in his coach.

As her stomach flipped, indicating the vehicle had lurched into motion, she found a collection of liquors and crystal tumblers. Lam smiled as her mouth began to salivate at the idea of a strong drink; she’d been too stressed lately. Didn’t she deserve to let go a little? Edeya was “safe” in the dungeon; none of Victor’s enemies could reach her there. Lam nodded to herself and poured a quarter glass of a rich, caramel-colored liquor into it. The smell wafting from the glass reminded her of decadent spices and brown sugar. The first sip altered that opinion as she coughed, wondering if her breath had turned to fire.

The second sip went down easier, and Lam was certain the liquor was her new favorite by the third. She wasn’t sure how long the ride took because, as the tension left her body and the warm buzz of the alcohol brought a silly smile to her face, she began to doze. Of course, her half-waking thoughts were focused on Edeya. She saw her smile and heard her laugh. She watched her shouting, her face fiercely determined as she worked to be just as tough as Victor and the other Deep Delvers. The coach vibrated slightly, startling her awake, and Lam chuckled as she tried to snatch at the dream,

adding it to her waking memories. When was the last time she'd thought of the mine? What a strange life!

"We've arrived, Lady Lam," the coachman said, standing just outside the open door. Lam yawned and stretched, then, graceful as a cat, slid out of the coach and onto the pink and tan cobbles of a walkway leading to a charming little estate with a tarnished copper roof and white-washed stone walls. In the distance, she could see a long, narrow, landlocked lake, its waters so dark and reflective that they looked like a mirror to the dark, starlit sky.

"Lovely," she said, smiling.

"Yes, my lady. Lord Dar is proud of this property. He and your friend await within." He gestured toward the house.

"Excellent." Lam nodded to him, fished out a handful of Energy beads, and held them out. He accepted them with a smile, and Lam winked, breezing past. At least that was common ground between Fanwath and Sojourn—the servant class was eager for a few extra beads. Or, she supposed, he may have been humoring her. Perhaps she'd just gravely insulted him. The idea made her laugh, and she enjoyed her sudden good mood. A green-skinned, bald man with sharply pointed ears stood near the front door and pulled it wide as she approached.

"Welcome, Lady Lam. The Lord and his guest are on the rear deck. Shall I guide you?"

"Just point the way, good man." As he did so, she paused on the threshold and gave him a closer look, peering into his yellow irises. "Tell me, what's the hour?"

"Just past seven."

"Ah, not so bad. I had such a restful ride in Dar's coach." Lam stretched again, then asked, "Does your culture see gratuities favorably?"

"Gratuities are always welcome, my lady."

"Ah, that's a relief." She smiled and handed him a few Energy beads. "Thank you for your candor." She followed his directions, walking through the foyer, past a small library, a well-appointed parlor, and then into another living area with great, crystal-clear windows open to a deck and the picturesque starlit lake beyond. She saw Dar and Victor right away, standing near the far railing, each holding a glass, talking animatedly. Other green-skinned servants bustled about, nodding deferentially to her as she passed. She stepped onto the smooth, polished decking and said, "Lovely place you have here, Lord Dar."

The two men stopped talking, and Victor smiled brightly, his eyes twinkling in the starlight. Dar's eyes were blazing like tiny suns, per usual, but he offered her a smile and gestured for her to approach. They were both gigantic, making her feel small—an absurd notion considering she was a foot taller than an average Ghelli. Still, as she approached, she had to crane her neck to continue looking them in the eye. “Welcome to my lake house, Lam. Victor's told me a bit about you today; I understand you've a few lovely properties of your own.”

“I have some nice homes and recently have gained some beautiful acreage, but this is something quite different. Standing here, with the lake below us and the night sky above, it almost feels like we're soaring through the stars!”

“Aye! That was my thought when I chose this spot to build. I rather enjoy your description. I may use that to impress the next guest I invite out this way.” Dar gestured toward one of the servants and said, “Bring Lady Lam a glass of the forty-year Rovahl.”

“You're going to like it, Lam,” Victor said, grinning, and Lam realized his cheeks were flushed; was the giant idiot drunk? She supposed if anyone had liquor that could get the titan buzzed, it would be Dar.

“Your young protégés are safely ensconced in their dungeon?” Dar asked, leaning on an elbow, likely putting a tremendous strain on the railing, as he tried to lower himself more to Lam's level.

“Well, I'm not sure that's the right word.” She didn't know what she'd call Edeya, and to avoid having to think about it too much, she turned the topic to a target closer to hand. “One time, I might have tried to call Victor that, but he quickly outpaced my grasp.”

“I know a very abbreviated version of Victor's history. He mentioned the mine and your role in his escape. I understand you must have been walking a fine line, trying not to anger the lords and ladies you served while attempting to retain some semblance of morality.”

“I . . .” Lam sighed, and it was her turn to feel flushed. How did the topic get around to this? “I'm not really proud of that time, Lord Dar. Things changed when I met Victor and took Edeya under my wing. I used to do anything possible to improve my lot, to gather wealth and power. I sought a place among the nobility, too blinded by my ambition, my desire to reach a place of respect among them, to see that there were other ways to surpass them. I'm happy to say that, rather than pay homage to their gatekeepers, I joined with Victor, and we made our own gate.”

“You disagree with the notion of nobility?” Dar asked, and Lam wondered if she'd just put her foot in her mouth.

“The notion of it?” She glanced at Victor and saw that he wasn’t really drunk by the clever gleam in his eyes. He nodded, and Lam pressed on, “I have a problem with nobility as it pertains to people being born into positions of power. I’m far more impressed by those who earn their power.”

“Hard to argue with that,” Dar nodded. He gestured to her right, and Lam turned to see one of his servants holding a tray out to her, a tumbler like Victor’s, but smaller, at its center. She lifted the chilled crystal and smelled the amber liquor within. It reminded her quite a lot of the alcohol she’d helped herself to in Dar’s coach. A sip confirmed it was the same stuff, and her smile widened as her tastebuds woke up.

“Excellent stuff, Lord Dar.”

“It’s one of my favorites. Well, Lam, tell me, what will you do with yourself for the next few days?”

“Honestly? I had an idea, Lord Dar. I know Victor’s going to be learning from you for the next, um, few years.” She knew she was making an understatement; Victor had agreed to ten years of servitude, though honestly, it didn’t exactly look like Dar intended to make him work in a quarry.

Victor shifted, perhaps uncomfortable with the reminder. Lam smiled and fluttered her wings, sending motes of golden Energy sparkling down behind her. She watched as both men’s eyes followed the motion, distracted as people always were by the display. She fished her hand into the pocket where she’d stowed Dalla’s stone and gently rubbed it with her thumb. Grinning, she continued, “Dar, might I bargain for your help?” She purposefully left off his honorific.

“Hmm?” He looked into her bright emerald eyes. “I didn’t expect this. Should I sober up before I hear your proposal?”

“I would think a great man such as you could match wits with a lowly soldier like me, no matter the drink involved!” Again, she fluttered her wings and leaned closer, resting one of her hands on the railing between Dar and Victor.

“What’s this got to do with me serving Dar, Lam?” Victor’s tone proved her right; she was making him nervous.

“Well, if you’re going to be in Sojourn for years, and Edeya’s going to be here learning and challenging dungeons and . . . other things, I don’t see me running back to Fanwath to live.”

Dar took a big sip from his very large tumbler of alcohol. “Go on.”

“Well, when you saved Edeya, and she lost all those levels, you mentioned something I found very intriguing. You said something to the effect that there were powerful people who paid greatly for opportunities to have a second run at

gaining their levels and Classes, that they sought out master Spirit Casters to perform something very much like what Edeya went through.”

“This is true,” Dar nodded.

“Lam . . .” Victor started to say.

Lam put her hand on Victor’s wrist, startled by how hot his flesh felt. She licked her lips, swallowed, and, in a rush, asked the question, uttering the idea she’d barely realized she’d formed in the back of her mind, “Well, what would it take for me to get you to do that to me? What favor or price could I pay to get you to wash away my accumulated Energy and bring me closer to Edeya’s level?”

Book 8: Chapter 3: Dinner Time

As Lam uttered her request, Victor felt his eyebrows shoot up, and even Dar grew quiet, staring with his blazing eyes into Lam’s. Was she serious? Victor couldn’t imagine the Lam he knew giving away most of her levels and power. He found his brain scrambling for explanations. Was it all about Edeya? Was she going through some kind of identity crisis? He knew Kethelket had saved her from Catalina; had that near-death experience made her reconsider her strength, seeing weakness where once she’d seen power?

While his tongue was tied with too many questions to choose from, Dar simply said, “Why?”

Lam smiled, perhaps taking the lack of an instant refusal as a good sign. Victor saw her thumb moving, rubbing against her palm or something small she clutched there. She looked up, her eyes filling with moisture as she gathered her thoughts. “Many reasons,” she finally said.

“I’d like to hear them before considering your request.” Dar’s voice was softer than Victor had ever heard; there was no grating of boulders for Lam, but rather the soft susurrations of gravel washed along stone by a gentle stream.

“To begin with, there’s the obvious,” Lam said, wiping her eyes and smiling. “I love Edeya, and I want to be close to her. It could take years for her to approach my level. Meanwhile, I’ll find it hard to advance, knowing I’d continue to leave her behind. Valla and Lesh invited me to their dungeon dive; part of me wanted to go, but another part hated the idea of gaining another level while I’m already nearly forty ahead of Edeya.”

“How do you love her? As a mother? An older sibling? In such a role, being more powerful is natural, it’s . . .”

“Not like that,” Lam said, smiling and, to Victor’s horror, blushing. What had become of the stoic champion he’d so idolized? Blushing?

“Ah,” Dar nodded. “What else?”

“I had a base-tier Class until twenty. I’ve only had an advanced Class since. I was preoccupied with fast levels and gaining wealth; I took Classes with those

short-sighted goals in mind. I'd like another chance to make those selections, to earn more powerful options."

As Dar nodded, she continued, "More than anything, I crave the experience of adventuring with friends and learning for the sake of it. I never had friends or companions when I was at a low level. I joined the Legion, and everything was competitive; everyone was scheming. The few friends I made died or moved on, constantly transferred. I didn't see my first dungeon until I was tier-three, and that wasn't a fun experience, though I did make a valuable ally." She looked at Victor and smiled, "Polo."

"Ah," Victor said, nodding as he finally found his voice. "Is this really something people do, Dar?"

Dar leaned back on the railing, causing the wood to creak ominously, though he seemed unbothered by the sound. "Very few, for obvious reasons. First, it takes a great leap of faith to relinquish decades worth of growth for the chance at a second run. Few people consider their lot so bad that it's worthwhile. I had an heir to an imperial throne from a world called Rikahl as a supplicant because he'd failed to earn the Class all of his forefathers had held. He gave away eighty-nine levels. I wonder how he did on his second attempt . . ." Dar rubbed his chin, shrugging. "Well, no matter. The second reason is that only a few Spirit Casters on a handful of worlds know how to perform the ritual. Yes, and I suppose there's a third factor: cost."

Victor sighed, knowing Lam had nothing Ranish Dar needed. He could only think of one thing that might pique the Spirit Master's interest, and there wasn't any way he was giving that up, not unless it meant saving someone's life—the ivid royal jelly. Lam, apparently, didn't share his pessimism. "I'm not one to be scared away by high costs, Ranish." Victor almost snorted, hearing Lam use Dar's first name. Had he heard anyone call him Ranish?

"No. No, Lady Lam, I'd be inclined to believe that statement. You've quite a determined look in your eye. In fact, you remind me of my young protégé here. It's no wonder you took to each other when he was naught but a slave."

Lam looked at Victor, and when their eyes locked, Victor couldn't help smiling. He remembered the first time he saw her back in the mines, how he'd been utterly struck dumb by her beauty and power. The memory made him consider what she was asking of Dar in a different light; she was fearless. When she saw something she wanted, she took it. If she couldn't, she changed her life around that goal until she could. He nodded, deciding to take up her cause. "You should do it, Dar. Earning Lam as an ally is worth it—she has a spine of solid steel."

"Is that what you're offering, Lady? An alliance? A favor owed?" Something about Dar's tone and the way his eyes blazed gave the words a lot more weight than their simple nature warranted. Dar was a man who might be thousands of years old; he had the patience to make long, long bargains.

Lam seemed to understand the weight of his words, too. She locked her emerald eyes on Dar's blazing ones, and her green irises sparkled with the reflected light. They stared at each other for several long seconds, and then she nodded. "If that's what you're asking, then that's what I'll pay."

Dar straightened up, and Victor imagined the railing breathed a sigh of relief. Dar gestured for Lam to sit down around a small outdoor firepit one of his servants was stoking. The chairs arranged around it were of various sizes. Some were just right for Victor or Dar, but several were perfect for people of Lam's stature. Once they'd all taken a seat and were comfortably looking at one another over the faintly crackling fire, the Master Spirit Caster said, "I'd like to explain a few things to you before we continue this negotiation."

"I'm all ears, sir," Lam said, suddenly more deferential.

"Ensure you pay attention, Victor. This may become one of your first lessons." Victor was already quite piqued, but the idea that Dar might teach him how to do the, apparently, secret ritual really got his attention. He nodded and leaned forward as Dar continued speaking, "Lam, you need to know that there's some risk involved. What you ask for is known as a type of resurrection: we'll have to take your spirit from your body, leaving behind a tiny shard that I'll cleave from the whole. Once that's done, the ritual, which I won't explain at this time, will require the greater part of your spirit to pass through a crucible, testing it and burning away your Energy to protect it in the process. Your spirit, newly reforged in the process, will be reunited with the tiny shard in your body, bringing you back to life with a stronger spirit and broader karmic ties. You'll have a new chance at all the things for which you yearn."

Lam's eyes were wide, and she leaned forward, hanging on to every word of Dar's. As he finished, she nodded and fervently whispered, "Yes."

"However!" Dar held up a thick, stony finger, wagging it back and forth. "The crucible must be designed with precision, providing the perfect resistance to your spirit's passage. If I miscalculate, or your will is too weak, you may not make it. You may fade from this plane of existence, lost to wander the Spirit Plane until such a time that you gather the Energy to breach the veil and begin the journey meant for all once-living spirits."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"Oh, aye, I think so. I've been wrong about important things before, however. Bear that in mind." Dar looked at Lam and seemed to like what he saw. He nodded and said, "Dinner then, we'll toast to our bargain, Lam."

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

"Truly? You'll do it?"

"I'm here in Sojourn to recover and amuse myself between tribulations. Victor has already proven his value in that regard, but I wouldn't mind seeing what you do with yourself if given a second run. I'll hold you to your word, however, Lam. There's no escaping an oath to a master of the spirit."

Lam launched herself out of her chair, and her wings veritably blazed with golden motes, showering the deck in a carpet of bouncing, sparkling Energy as she fell to her knees before Dar, grasping one of his great, stony hands in her slender, tanned, well-scarred fingers. “Thank you, Lord Dar. Thank you!”

He nodded, suddenly sober. “You thank me now, Lady Lam, but someday you may find yourself cursing my name.” When Lam’s expression didn’t waver, he nodded and said, “Victor and I can perform the ritual. I have plans for him in two days, but if you’re ready, we will do it tomorrow.”

Victor was almost startled by the use of his name. “You have plans for me . . .”

“I’m ready!” Lam said earnestly, cutting him off.

“Tomorrow, then. Victor, this will be a good lesson for you, and the day after, a good friend of mine, Lo’ro the Grim, will help you start work on a cultivation chamber.”

Victor heard him, and he nodded, but his mind had drifted back to Dar’s words to Lam. Someday, she may curse his name? Was he trying to say that the payment he took, whatever favor he collected, would be unbearable? He didn’t doubt that Dar could collect what he wanted; he’d keep tabs on Lam, and she’d never be able to outstrip his power before he came calling. Half his mind wanted to warn Lam off, to discourage her from bargaining with the man; wasn’t one of them under his yoke enough? The other half thought about how he’d feel. If someone tried to talk him out of doing whatever he could to be closer to Valla or acted like he was too weak or stupid to enter into a bargain . . . Victor shook his head at the thought—enough to say he’d be pissed.

“Why not you?” he asked, suddenly snapping back to the current topic.

“What, boy?” Dar’s chuckle sounded dangerously like a growl. “I use up a precious favor to have one of the most powerful men in Sojourn spend his equally precious time helping you earn the heart of your cultivation chamber, and you dare to imply that I . . .”

Victor held up both hands in surrender, “No, no! I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant, is there something your friend can do that’s, I don’t know, like, a specialty?”

“Yes. He can pierce the veil in the Spirit Plane and open a gateway for you. With Lo’ro’s aid, you’ll find spirits twisted into manifestations of your affinities. You’ll need to capture and bring them back to add to your chamber.”

Victor’s mind painted wild images for him at those words. He’d seen Belikot trying to pierce the veil, pulling spirits through to inhabit his undead armies. It didn’t surprise him that Dar’s friend could easily do what Belikot had been working for years to accomplish, but it also gave him pause. “I’ve seen tormented spirits brought through the veil before. They weren’t happy to be enslaved . . .”

“I’ll leave the finer explanations to Lo’ro, but you won’t deal with intact, mindful spirits. You’re going to be looking for spirits who have been twisted beyond

rationality by their obsession with certain darker emotions. Can you guess which ones I mean?”

Victor didn't have to think very hard. “Fear and rage.”

“In one try!” Dar chuckled, snapping his fingers with a loud crack. He turned back to Lam, still kneeling on the floor before him. Her eyes had gone distant as she either listened to their side conversation or, Victor guessed, thought about what she'd just agreed to. “Dinner?” Dar raised one side of his stony brow.

“Yes!” Lam jumped up, her wings fluttering to make the move look magical. Victor laughed and also stood. He was hungry and all too willing to push his darker contemplations aside. He'd had a hell of a few months—years, even—and he was pretty damn sure Dar wasn't going to be easy on him, so he planned to grab any chance he could to enjoy life. If Lam wanted to be happy right now, if she wanted to celebrate, then Victor wouldn't throw shadows on the occasion.

“All right,” he said, “I'm fuckin' starved!”

#

Darren lifted his boot from the cold water onto the stone and smiled, realizing his feet had survived the passage without getting wet. “These are damn good boots,” he whispered. Edeya had already scolded him several times for being too loud.

“Victor appreciates good footwear,” she laughed, making herself a hypocrite. She visibly winced as her high-pitched voice echoed down the partially submerged passage. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“Do you think anything's down there?” Darren pointed to the opening they'd spied upon rounding the bend. So far, they hadn't encountered anything other than cold, damp tunnels, stony caves, and lots and lots of lichen, moss, and, probably, mold. Darren wasn't great with identifying fungi and the like, but it seemed like all sorts of things were growing in the grotto.

“I've never heard of a dungeon without monsters and traps, so, yeah, be ready,” Edeya whispered, shifting her grip on her spear. “Make your light a little brighter.” Since he had no other abilities to use his Energy on, he was in charge of providing the light. He pushed a little more Energy into the little, faintly buzzing orb of red electricity floating above his head, and the sparks intensified, losing some of their red tint and shedding a lot more light in the dark tunnel. The walls lost some of their gloomy shadows, and the lichen and fungi brightened, displaying a remarkable array of colors.

“Oh, nice,” Edeya whispered, “It's not as red when you brighten it.”

Darren nodded, feeling proud of his light for some stupid reason. He chuckled, gripped his staff, and gestured toward the tunnel opening. "Shall we?"

"We shall!" Edeya grinned, and he saw her spear blade start to rime over with a thin layer of frost. He'd learned she had a water affinity, which allowed her to deliver extra cold-based damage with each strike. She said she had other, more potent spells but that she'd have to wait to use them until her level increased and she gained more attribute points and, consequently, more Energy. She stalked toward the opening. His light reflected off the Shimmersteel rings on the back of her vest, and Darren pressed his palm to his own chest, reminding himself he had armor on. He didn't know if he was terrified or excited, but his hands felt shaky, and his breaths were quick and shallow.

"Okay, Darren," he mouthed, not really vocalizing, "get it together. It's a newbie dungeon. Edeya's a good fighter. We got this." Just then, Edeya stepped through the opening and froze. When he caught up to her, she pointed, and Darren followed the gesture, taking in the enormous cavern. It was wide but had a low ceiling, covered with more moss or whatever the green, orange, yellow, and white fuzzy stuff was. Water dripped from a dozen shallow points into pools, and about halfway across the expansive space, Darren saw some honest-to-God frogmen lazing about, in and around a large pool of water.

"Frogmen?" he whispered an inch from Edeya's ear. She flinched and brushed at her ear, and he could see she wanted to scold him, but she regained her composure and nodded.

"Never seen 'em before, but they look amphibian. See the clubs?"

Darren nodded, eyeing the big, polished, yellowed bones some of them clutched. He scanned the cavern, trying to get a count, and came up with five. He whispered as much, "I see five."

Edeya nodded. "Same."

"Is there a chance they're friendly?"

Edeya slapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a snort of laughter. "Friendly frog people? In a dungeon?"

"I guess that was dumb," Darren sighed. "What's the plan?"

"Let's channel our inner Victor," Edeya said, grinning wickedly.

"Uh," Darren pictured Victor smashing his tanks, charging headlong into ordnance that would've turned an average person to paste. "There are five!"

"I'm level seven! C'mon, Dare! Get my back!" Before he could object further, she turned and charged, spear gripped tightly in both hands. Darren stood dumbfounded for a moment, watching as she fluttered her blue, dazzling wings

like a dragonfly, turning a hop into a twenty-foot leap, clearing one of the pools of water. She came down, stabbing her spear into one of the lounging frogmen.

Darren's eyes widened as he saw the freezing Energy stored in her spear rush out into the little humanoid's flesh, freezing a significant portion of its torso. It croaked and thrashed weakly, and then the other frogmen jumped into action, clamoring in a cacophony of alarm. Their croaks echoed in a dozen different tones throughout the cavern.

"Shit!" Darren said, realizing he was still standing there. He lifted his quarterstaff over his head and charged, skirting the pool of water Edeya had flown over, aiming for her right flank. Meanwhile, she began to dash and fly about, dodging the frogmen's retaliation and delivering punishing blows with her spear. It was clear to Darren, for the first time, that she really did know a thing or two about fighting. The frogmen might be a mottled green with yellow spots, but their blood splashed bright red as Edeya laid about with her wicked, ivory, enchanted spear.

Darren arrived in time to crack his staff into a frogman's skull, shocking himself with the decisive blow. Victor had promised the staff was enchanted to increase its bludgeoning damage, and Darren was inclined to believe him after hearing the crunch of bone. Considering how Edeya was thrashing the frogmen, Darren realized there had to be more than the five they'd counted. It was hectic in the melee, but he swore he counted more than five still up and about, warbling, croaking, and flailing about with their primitive weapons. Darren used his quarterstaff's reach and his superior height to keep them at bay, delivering jabs and overhead chops whenever possible.

"Good job, Dare! Keep 'em busy!" Edeya shouted, and a spray of something hot hit him on the back of the neck. He spun to see she'd impaled a frogman holding a sharpened bone that might have managed to stab him in the ass if not for her intervention. "Don't stare at the dead ones! Look behind you!" Darren whirled, swinging his staff in a wide arc out of reflex. The length of heavy, polished wood cracked another frogman in the side of the head and carried through to drive back another two.

Just as he began to fear they'd be overwhelmed, the handful of frogmen left standing began to try to flee, and Edeya pursued them, stabbing them in their backs. She was relentless and fast, using her wings in bursts, streaking forward on showers of blue Energy motes to drive her spear home over and over. Darren knew he couldn't keep up, so he watched her flitting around the cavern, finishing them one by one.

He was leaning on his staff, amused by the show and proud of their victory, when he heard a wet thwap, thwap, and turned to see an enormous toad, probably two hundred pounds of warty green-brown flesh, crawling out of the pool behind him. It opened its wide mouth, bulged out its huge, beady yellow eyes, and croaked a challenge.

"Ah, shit," Darren said, lifting his staff, holding it sideways before himself as Lesh had told him to do when he needed to defend. "Edeya!" he called. Then the frog

flicked out its big pink tongue. It was faster than Darren's eye could follow as it streaked out and slapped against his armored chest. "Hah!" he chortled when it didn't even hurt. Then, as it began to tug him forward, he realized it wasn't trying to hurt him. It was trying to eat him.

Book 8: Chapter 4: Grotto Talk

Darren panicked. His first instinct was to pull back, but the damn toad was twice his weight, and its tongue, well, it had to have some sort of magical effect because it wouldn't loosen its sticky grip. When he found himself losing the tug of war, he slammed his staff into the rubbery pink flesh, hoping to knock it loose, but only managed to get it caught in the sticky slime coating its surface. "Son of a bitch!" Darren yelled, a note of hysteria tinging his voice. He bunched his legs and, with everything he could muster, leaped backward. He was awarded for his efforts; the tongue ripped free from his armored vest, but he also lost his grip on the staff.

Darren scrambled backward, his hands scraping over the damp, stony cavern floor, his feet scabbling for purchase as the toad struggled with the eight-foot length of hardwood it had inadvertently pulled into its maw. Suddenly, motes of blue Energy showered Darren as Edeya flitted over his head, streaking toward the monstrous amphibian, spear out like a lance.

She drove it straight into the soft, cream-colored flesh under the monster's mouth, punching the frost-coated, silvery blade all the way through until it poked out the back of its neck, up near the base of its skull. Frosty rime spread from the devastating puncture wound, and the toad flopped onto its belly, legs splayed, red and yellow fluids gushing from its burbling lips.

Darren was on his feet in an instant, pumping his fist, "Nice one!"

"Good job keeping it busy, Dare!" Edeya laughed, jerking her spear free. She scanned the cavern, ensuring nothing else would jump out at them. Then her eyes lit up, and she said, "Are you ready?"

"For?" Darren looked around, trying to see what was coming.

She pointed to the first cluster of frogmen she'd fought, and he saw tiny orbs of golden Energy gathering in the air above them. "Your first Energy infusion!"

"Ah!" Of course, he'd heard tales of the System awarding battle victors some of the Energy from their defeated foes. He looked back to Edeya, and sure enough, there were now a few fat blobs of Energy drifting up from the dead toad. They gathered in two clumps, one a bit larger than the other, and as he watched, they streaked toward them, one directly to Edeya and one to him. The other motes of Energy around the cavern had done something similar, so both adventurers were struck by several thin streams of Energy at once.

"Holy cow!" Darren said, inadvertently using one of his father's favorite exclamations as the Energy poured into him. It wasn't like anything he'd ever felt—shudders and chills wracked his body as he tried to wrap his mind around the physical euphoria that almost felt orgasmic. He swore he saw stars and flashes

of rainbow light, and when it ended, there was a message before his eyes— faintly transparent white letters on an opaque gray background:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 2 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.*****

“It’s true,” he breathed, finally experiencing what so many of his colleagues back in First Landing had tried to explain to him. He looked at Edeya and saw her smiling at him, her big gold-flecked blue eyes bright in her lean, angular face. She looked vibrant and alive, far more than he’d ever seen her. “Did you level, too?”

“Nope, but I reckon I’m close. You’re two now?”

“Yes.” Darren leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees, still feeling woozy from the burst of Energy. A few seconds later, he saw the butt of his staff thump into the stone before him and looked up to see Edeya grinning as she offered him his weapon.

“Gonna allocate your points?”

Darren smiled and took the staff, standing up to lean on it instead of his knees. “I guess I should. Lesh says I should focus on will and vitality.”

Edeya nodded, rubbing her chin. “I agree, especially after knowing Victor. I bet you wouldn’t guess his main attribute.”

“Uh, strength?” He said it as though only an idiot would think otherwise.

“Wrong—will.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. But he cheats; somehow, he can use his spirit magic to add some of his will to his physical attributes. So, in a way, you’re right.” She thumped him on the shoulder. “How’d your master tell you to do it?”

Darren sighed and chuckled. “I know you’re trying to get a rise out of me. Lesh isn’t my ‘master.’ Anyway, he said to put five into vitality at level two, then five into will at level three, and alternate like that until ten. He thinks it will result in me getting some Class options that will complement my affinities at level ten.”

Edeya frowned. “He wants you to try to become some kind of spell flinger? No, no, I suppose not. He’d have you take intelligence and some dexterity, too. Lesh is a strange one, but he knows a lot. I guess do what he says.”

Darren shrugged. “I suppose it’d be foolish not to take advice from someone with so much experience.”

“Still, even if you wanted to be some kind of lightning master, you’re going to need dexterity too—weaving complicated spell patterns isn’t easy. I guess at level ten, depending on what kind of Class you get, you can cross that bridge.”

“Yep.” Darren had already made up his mind that he’d follow Lesh’s advice. So, as Edeya surveyed the cavern, he opened his status sheet and added all five of his new points into vitality. Back in Sojourn, when he’d imagined this moment, he’d wondered what it would be like to boost his vitality by five full points, nearly doubling his starting amount. He was a little disappointed by the reality. Thanks to the Energy infusion, he already felt fantastic, so he hardly noticed anything more—some general well-being, maybe, but it was impossible to tell if it was all in his head. Nevertheless, he looked at his status sheet with pride:

Status

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

-

Level:

2

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 1

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

97/97

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Strength:

6

Vitality:

12

Dexterity:

5

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

9

Will:

3

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

-

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Wildarc Cultivation Drill

Basic

Spells:

Arclight Wisp

Basic

“All done?” Edeya asked, and Darren realized she was staring at him again.

“Yep!” He looked around, wrinkling his nose at all the bloody, slumped figures of dead frogmen. “No treasure?” He’d heard things about dungeons. Shouldn’t there be a chest or something?

Edeya shrugged. “Not that I could see, but maybe this dungeon doesn’t award special chests, or maybe it does, but only after we find a boss or something.”

“What did your book say?”

“There are definitely reports of special awards and System-generated loot. I just don’t know where exactly. This dungeon changes its layout and monsters regularly.”

Darren nodded, scanning the periphery of the cavern. “I don’t see an exit . . .”

“Lucky for us, I have a water affinity. I can feel the extent of these little pools with my Core sight. I think that one near the wall over there is a passage.”

“Core sight? Oh, like your inner eye? What you see your Energy with?”

“Yes. C’mon!” She fluttered her wings and sort of hop-glided toward the pool she’d mentioned. Darren trudged after her. She was already slipping into the water when he caught up. “Ugh! It’s cold!” She visibly shivered.

“We’re really getting in there? What if more frogs . . .”

“It’s just a short swim under this cavern wall. I’ll go first and try to spy out any trouble.” She must have noticed his perplexed expression because she added, “It’s not deep! You can walk on the bottom and just duck when you slip under here.” She splashed the water near the wall, and Darren saw a curtain of mossy growth sway with the current. “Put your staff in your storage pouch.”

Darren nodded and did so, then sat at the edge of the pool, sliding into the water, clothes and all, just as Edeya had done. Meanwhile, with a ripple of the chilly water, she ducked into the passage and disappeared. His light still hovered above, illuminating the scene, but Darren keenly felt her absence. The water wasn’t cold enough to take his breath away, but it wasn’t comfortable, so he hurried toward the wall, hoping to follow Edeya and quickly be out of it. He’d just gotten there and was lifting the curtain of slimy growth to peer into the darkness when she came back into view, her nose and eyes barely above the water.

“It’s clear, come on.” She winked, then turned and went back into the darkness. Darren followed, relieved to feel the smooth, unobstructed nature of the stone under his feet. After a few steps into the narrow, watery tunnel, the ceiling dipped, and he had to hold his breath for a few steps, but then his light revealed the water lapping above him, and he poked his head up into another cavern, this one much smaller.

Edeya sat on the edge, watching him as he approached. “Good job, Dare!” Her pleasant enthusiasm brought a smile to his lips, and he nodded, pulling his long, damp hair back from his face and wringing it with his hands as he stood up in the shallower end of the pool.

“Should we put on dry clothes?”

“You’re wearing the clothes you bought in Sojourn, right?”

“Yeah . . .” He, Edeya, and Lam had gone shopping in preparation for the dungeon dive.

“They’ll dry on their own.

“Oh! I knew they’d self-repair and clean; I guess it makes sense they’d dry faster.”

“Yep.” She turned and pointed toward a waterlogged door in the little cavern, revealed by the glow of his floating light. “Look—a door. Want to take a minute for a snack before we continue?”

Darren hopped out of the pool beside her, noted some nice flat stones between the pool and the door, and shrugged. “Yeah. This seems a good spot.”

Edeya nodded and picked one of the natural benches to sit on. As Darren sat beside her, he rethought that assessment; the stones were worn smooth in the center like they’d been used for just that purpose many, many times. “You think the frogmen used these as seats?”

“Maybe. It’s a dungeon, so there’s no telling what’s natural and what the System designed. I have no idea how all that works. Does the System take things from the worlds it governs and place them into its dungeons? Does it just create copies of things it has seen? I wish I knew.”

Darren nodded and fished a sandwich out of his storage pouch. “Yeah. I wish the System would speak to us. I have so many questions.” Edeya nodded, chewing on a piece of bright yellow fruit. She looked vibrant and full of eager excitement. Darren couldn’t help blurting, “You look fantastic. I can’t believe you’re the same person that we guided to Sojourn . . .” He trailed off, realizing he might be treading on a sensitive topic.

“Don’t worry, Dare. I don’t really remember that whole ordeal. When I first woke up, I could remember little flashes of it, almost like how you remember a nightmare. Now, though, it’s like looking into thick fog—I know something’s there, but I can’t remember what it is for the life of me.”

“You don’t remember what that . . . um, Death Caster, right?”

Edeya nodded and sank her teeth into the fruit with a loud crunch. “Right, Death Caster,” she mumbled around her large bite.

“You don’t remember what she did?”

She chewed and swallowed and said, “I remember her wrapping me up in her creepy mist, and then . . .” Edeya closed her eyes, and her brows furrowed, but she shook her head. “And then it’s all fog.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay. I know I never knew you before, but I heard plenty from Lam.”

Edeya’s eyes twinkled. “She spoke about me?”

“Oh yes! I could tell she was desperate to see you recover. Um, are you two related?”

“What?” Edeya almost choked on her bite.

“Oh, um, well, you’re both Ghelli, right? And I saw how worried she was; I just sort of assumed she was . . .”

“We’re not related!” Edeya laughed. “She loves me, though.” As her cheeks flushed, the picture cleared up in Darren’s mind.

“Ah, I’m an idiot.” He chuckled and chewed his food for a moment, then added, “I should have realized.”

“We’re not, like, sexual or anything. She’s told me how much she loves me, and I definitely love her too, but we’re just . . . close for now. I’m younger than she is, and, yeah, we just want to be close.” Edeya shrugged and grinned at him.

“Ghelli are different about that sort of thing, Dare. We share spiritual connections a little more tangibly than some other species. Lam was suffering so much when I first met her! She didn’t really know it, but when I got hurt, and Victor left me with her, she started caring for me, and through that, we built a connection.” She held her hand over her heart. “In here,” she moved her fingers to her forehead, “and here. She realized how empty her life had become—she’d separated herself from the people she once loved, and, Dare, Ghelli don’t do well alone.”

“Oh? Why was she alone?” Darren felt his neck heat up and winced. “Am I overstepping with that?”

Edeya laughed. “The old Lam might have beaten you up for asking, but I think she’d happily share her story with you. It’s her story, but I’ll just tell you the abbreviated version. Anyway, it’s not complicated: She wanted to adventure, and her family didn’t want her to leave home. She ran away, joined the Legion, and then spent her time pursuing wealth and power. When she met me, I was, well, I was sort of a slave, and she was in charge of me.”

“What?” Darren’s mouth fell open. “She was a slave master?”

“Not . . . exactly. She worked for the mine as a mercenary, leading crews of diggers deeper and deeper, but while the miners worked, she was exploring, looking for artifacts and monsters to kill. So, I guess the diggers, like me and Victor, would have been down there with or without her. Oh,” Edeya laughed, shaking her head, “I’m being silly—she knew working for the mine was wrong. She’s sorry for it now. If it matters to you, she helped Victor and his friend Thayla escape, and then she took me under her wing and left the mine’s employ.”

“So, she was out for herself down there? Using the mining company as a means to explore and gain wealth?” Darren shrugged. “Sometimes, we have to work within a corrupt system. I know all too well how one compromise can lead to another and another.” He sighed and took the last bite of his sandwich, chewing as he thought. After a while, when Edeya was done eating and sat there sipping from her water flask, he said, “I’m glad you both found someone who makes you a better person. I mean, I’m assuming Lam’s good for you in some way, yeah?”

“Oh yes, Dare!” Edeya laughed. “She inspires me! You don’t know what a strong person she is—impossibly brave, loyal to a fault, and Roots protect the fool who harms someone she loves!” She laughed, clearly savoring a private memory. Darren brushed the crumbs off his surprisingly dry pants, then summoned his

water bottle and took a long drink. While he was screwing the cap on, Edeya said, “Ready to find our next encounter?”

Darren stood, summoned his quarterstaff, and said, “Yep. Let’s get another level!”

“That’s the spirit!” Suddenly, Edeya’s spear was in her hands, and she turned to the door.

When Darren saw her spear start to frost over with ice, he asked, “Do you think I’ll learn any spells before I gain my Class at level ten?”

“Hmm?” Edeya paused and turned back to him. “Yeah, I bet you will. Honestly, I bet I could teach you the spell that lets me put ice Energy into my spear now that you’re level two with a little more Energy. I bet we could alter it to make it simpler. Part of the pattern turns my water affinity to ice; if we took that out and you used your lightning-attuned Energy instead of water . . .” She shrugged. “I bet it could work.”

“Really? I can learn spells from patterns?”

“Yes! When you learned your light spell, we taught you how to channel Energy into the air through your pathways. Once the System saw you do it, you gained the spell, right? Now, you can see the pattern in your pathway when you cast the spell.”

“Right . . .” Darren nodded, squinting his eyes, trying to guess where she was going.

“So, if I drew you the pattern for my Frost Touch spell, you could build it in your pathways with lightning Energy from your Core. That would, in essence, cast the spell. The System would recognize what you did, and you’d gain the spell knowledge. At least, that’s how I’ve learned a couple of spells. Most of the ones I learned came from levels in a particular Class, though.”

“Is it a complicated pattern? Would it be hard?”

“There’s no way I could write out one of my tier-two spells, not until I boost my dexterity and intelligence from some levels, but Frost Touch is pretty darn simple.” Edeya frowned and looked at the closed door. “Want to try it? It shouldn’t take too much time.”

“I have some paper!” Darren said, mentally digging through his pouch.

Edeya laughed and proceeded to drag one of the heavier stones in the room in front of the door.

“Let’s make sure we’re not interrupted. I think this will be worthwhile; the dungeon will go faster if you’re doing some lightning damage!”

Book 8: Chapter 5: Horseplay

The following day, Victor rose with the dawn and walked, barefoot and shirtless, out to the deck to greet the warm light of the sun. The house was quiet, and one of the servants looked up from dusting and polishing the furniture and told him that Dar was already gone, seeing to one errand or another, and wouldn't be back until noon. It wasn't a surprise, really; Dar had impressed on Victor his lack of a need for sleep. Victor had meant to ask him if it was some quirk of his species or a result of his advanced level, but their conversation had moved quickly away from the topic, and it hadn't come up again.

"Next time," he sighed, stretching, yawning, and wondering if his idea to take a quick morning swim was still a good one or if he should get some breakfast—something smelled delicious.

A soft, sleepy voice startled him by speaking up from one of the lounge chairs, "Up with the sun, mighty berserker?" Victor took a few steps forward to better see the speaker's face and confirmed what his ears had already told him: Sora was up and about.

"Feeling better?"

"Much!" She yawned and stretched. The blanket she'd obviously brought out from her room slipped down over her shoulders, exposing the gossamer thin garment she'd been sleeping in. Victor smiled and looked away; he couldn't be sure, but he was starting to suspect she was coming on to him. She wouldn't be the first, not since he'd helped lead an army to victory in the Free Marches and become something of a celebrity back home. Once people learned about and saw Valla, though, they tended to back off.

"Been out here long?"

"I woke in the early hours, and Lord Dar suggested some fresh air. He said the sunrise might help my day start on the right foot."

"He spoke to you?" Victor leaned on the railing, still looking out at the water, watching as its dark, mysterious depths took on the orange glow of the sunrise.

"Yes, he looked in on me before he left. Quite a nice mentor you have, if frightening."

"I wouldn't really know. We only met a few days before the dungeon."

She didn't respond for a moment, and when she did, she changed the subject, "Look at the sky—see how it streaks with color? It's the only time this world reminds me of home. I'm used to a sky that's blue as an agate and stars that know they're only supposed to reveal themselves at night!"

"Yeah," Victor grunted. "Same."

"Not much of a talker, are you? Even in the dungeon, you were rather reticent with your words."

"Eh, sometimes I talk too much. I'm trying to learn to listen and choose my words more carefully." Victor shifted to lean on one elbow so he could look back

at her. Her hair looked more silver than gray in the sunlight, and her cheeks were flushed with vibrant color; she looked fully recovered. He said as much, "I'm glad what I did to you in the dungeon didn't cause any permanent harm."

"No. I'm well, and that ordeal feels like a bad dream. It grows fainter by the minute." She had to squint, looking at him with the sun in the background. "Did you mean what you said yesterday?"

"Hmm?"

"About us being friends?"

"Yeah, sure." Victor smiled. "I'm new in town. It's good to make friends, right?"

"Even after my betrayal?" Something flickered behind her eyes, and she narrowed them, "Can you tell me about the others? Did any of them die or . . ."

"Your friends? The ones you ditched me for?" Victor grinned, enjoying watching her expression reflect the emotions playing out: concern, shame, irritation, embarrassment. He didn't see any fear, though, and that made him happy. "Nah, they're all ok. Even the nature guy; I guess his people paid someone Dar knew to remove his affliction."

"Affliction?" She looked confused, and Victor realized she probably didn't have a clue about any of the fights he'd gotten into in that dark cavern.

"Yeah. He had the same problem as you."

"Ah." She nodded and, once again, pulled her blanket up to her chin. He wondered if he saw a shudder run through her or if she'd just felt a bit of a chill on her nearly bare shoulders. "When you say the others are all fine, do you mean you didn't eliminate them?"

"Nah, I did. All but that Death Caster. What was her name?"

"Arona. She defeated you?"

"No, no." Victor chuckled and moved to sit in the lounge chair next to her. "We got kicked out before she and I fought. There was a . . . problem with the dungeon. Anyway, she's fine and doesn't seem to hold a grudge. I can't say the same about the others 'cause I haven't spoken to any of 'em."

"Well, the only one I know well is Brontes, and he won't hold a grudge, not after I tell him you helped me recover."

"Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. Dar said you didn't have any family or sponsor here, but you seemed pretty friendly with Cam and seemed familiar with quite a few of the others. How's that?"

“We’re all of a similar rank, so we run into each other often in the dungeons around the city. There are also plenty of friendly competitions and social gatherings.” She shrugged and smiled. “I’d have to be a real recluse to avoid making a few acquaintances here.”

“Dar thinks some of the people I knocked out will want revenge. He thinks they might go after my friends.”

Sora frowned and turned onto her side, looking more directly at Victor. “You have some friends here? Any family or,” she smiled slyly, “anyone important?”

Victor chuckled, nodding. “Someone very important, yeah, but she’s not the one I’m worried about. I have a couple of low-level friends who are much more vulnerable.”

Sora’s frown turned into a wistful smile as she turned onto her back, breaking eye contact. “Well, I hope I get to meet this lady of yours. I’m sure some of the rich folk around here will be throwing parties to celebrate this or that. I’m surprised you haven’t been inundated with invitations.”

“Her name’s Valla, and I’m sure she’ll enjoy meeting you. Right now, she and another friend are in one of the city dungeons. As for invitations, I mean, it’s been less than a day. Dar will let me know.” He sniffed the air, his stomach rumbling at the scent of pork and fresh bread. “Are you hungry?”

“I am, but I should get going.” She stood, her blanket still clutched tightly around her, suddenly a good deal more demure.

“Why the rush?”

“My neighbors are probably worried, and I should write to my family. I . . .” She shrugged. “I just want to be home and take some time to decompress. I lost five levels in that dungeon, which will have repercussions on my finances.”

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“Really? Your finances?”

“Yes. I have a fund at Voyage Trust, but my family may cut me off when news of my . . . setback reaches my homeworld.”

Victor blinked, his mind dumbfounded by the idea of interplanetary banks and trust funds. As everything slowly settled into place, he nodded. “That’s how you paid for the exception for your dimensional quiver and bought your entry into the dungeon?”

“Yes. I make a decent living adventuring around the city, but not enough to run with the crowd in the challenge dungeon.” She shrugged. “So, I’m off to plead my case with my family and to try to avoid getting called home.”

Victor nodded but then remembered something he’d meant to ask her: “Hey, hold on. Before you go—any chance you might sell that cloak you got in there?”

“The set piece?” She wrinkled her brow. “You didn’t seem impressed by it in the dungeon . . .” Understanding dawned in her eyes. “You got more pieces?”

“Yeah, I’ve got four.”

“Well, I could try to take advantage of you, but you’d learn fairly quickly that people sell those blank set pieces at auction fairly often. I bet you could get a cloak like mine for twenty or thirty thousand beads . . .”

“I’ll give you thirty.” Victor figured he could shop around for another piece and maybe save some money, but thirty thousand beads wasn’t a lot to him anymore, and he sort of felt sorry for Sora, seeing as she was about to beg her family for money.

“Sold!” She laughed. “That’ll cover my rent for a few months. Maybe by then, I’ll be back in my family’s good graces.” She held out her hand, and the silky, dark gray garment appeared, draped over it. “You know, the set bonuses aren’t cheap, and the best ones require you to provide magical materials.”

“Oh yeah? Well, that’s all right; it’ll give me something to work for.” Victor fished around in his dwindling Energy bead supply until he found a sack with nearly the right amount in it. He summoned it out of the storage ring and handed it over. “There might be a few hundred more or less in there.”

“That’s fine. I know we’ll be seeing each other.” She grinned mischievously and added, “That cloak smells like my perfume; don’t let your lady get the wrong idea.” Before Victor could think of a witty reply, she shuffled, wrapped in her blanket, into the house, and he heard her asking one of the servants about a ride back to the city. Her words got the better of him, and he lifted the cloak to his nose, giving it a good sniff. She hadn’t been lying—a distinct floral scent lingered.

“No big deal,” he muttered, sending the garment into the storage ring with the other set pieces. He was eager to go to the Sojourn City Stone to see what the deal was with the set bonuses, but he wasn’t sure when he’d get the chance. Dar and he were supposed to help Lam with her ritual that afternoon, and the next day, apparently, he was going to be taking a field trip with Dar’s Death Caster buddy. He almost reached up to grab Lifedrinker’s haft for comfort, but he’d left her in his bedroom, which reminded him of his original intent for coming out to the deck dressed in nothing but his comfortable, loose-fitting linen pants: He’d meant to go for a swim.

He turned back toward the lake and took the steps, two at a time, down to the pier. He dove, sending his pants into his storage ring as he flew through the air and plunged into the water. It was chillier than he remembered it from the previous afternoon, and it instantly invigorated him.

Victor swam for quite a while, laughing and diving, endlessly entertained by his body's capabilities. He could hold his breath for minutes and minutes, and his Quinametzin eyes could pick out the flicker of shiny scales on fish and the long, colorful drifts of strange aquatic plant life dozens of yards beneath him.

After a time, he surfaced to find Lam sitting on the pier, her feet dangling into the water. She laughed when he burst out of the water in a shower of bubbles and spray, leaning back to avoid the worst of it. "It's cold, you big thunderak!"

Victor was anything but cold after swimming for a while, and he laughed with her, wiping his nose and face. "You should swim and warm yourself up!"

She shook her head. "I don't have lava for blood."

"Neither do I." He laughed again. "I don't think!" He brought back his hand, acting like he was about to splash her, and Lam squealed, leaning further onto the pier.

"Don't!" she shrieked.

"Did I find the great Lam's weakness? Brought low by a bit of slightly chilly water?"

Still smiling, Lam sat up, kicking one foot out to send a splash his way. "Stop it now, or I'm going to tell Valla." Her mention of Valla made Victor wonder how she and Lesh were doing in their dungeon, which made him remember why Lam wasn't with them. His smile fell away as he regarded the emerald-eyed Ghelli. She looked happier and more youthful than he'd seen her in a long time.

"You look like a weight's been lifted," he said, treading a few yards from her, glad the water was dark because he was naked as the day he'd been born.

"I feel so good, Victor. I slept last night more than I have in months. I just woke!" She squinted toward the sun. "It must be mid-morning, and I'm usually up at dawn."

"That's great. Edeya's gonna freak out when you tell her you can go in the next dungeon with her." He chuckled, adding, "And Darren."

Lam tsked. "Oh, be a little easier on that poor man. He's trying very hard to impress you and Lesh, you know."

"Yeah, I know. My first impression of him has been hard to shake, but I gotta give him credit. I thought he'd be begging to go home long before now. I'm pretty surprised he agreed to go on a dungeon dive at level one."

Lam nodded, leaning so her neck and upper chest were exposed to the morning sun. “It doesn’t hurt that Edeya basically told him he was coming. She’s been good for him.”

“She can be persuasive,” Victor chuckled.

“Roots! I remember thinking you and she would get in trouble back in the mine, flirting the way you did!”

“What the hell?” Victor’s jaw fell open. “We weren’t flirting!”

“Oh, please, Victor. You might have a stoic, brooding face most of the time, but when you’re talking to a pretty girl, you sure light up. Edeya got a lot of laughs out of you.”

“I was mostly trying to cheer her up if I recall correctly . . .” Victor tried to shrug in the water, letting his arguments fall away. Why did he care? “Truth is, that time isn’t so clear in my mind. I think I was a little too stressed to build good memories.”

“Understandable. Let’s put it behind us, hmm?” She gestured expansively at the lake and the horizon beyond. “We’re starting a new chapter.”

“You’re starting over!” Victor couldn’t resist sending a small splash her way, darkening the fabric of her rolled-up pants.

“Brat!” Suddenly, her wings began to flutter, throwing off motes of golden Energy, and she launched off the deck toward him. Victor was too surprised to put up much of a fight as she landed on his shoulders, pushing down on his head, trying to dunk him under the water. He took a breath and went down but didn’t stop there. Snatching one of her ankles, he dove further still, completely submerging her. He was amazed to see her wings continue to function underwater, spreading their golden light in the dark water as they buzzed, exposing his nakedness. In a panic, he dove further down and summoned some underwear to pull on before re-engaging. That began an hour of horseplay that left them both starved and ready for a good brunch.

Dar’s ubiquitous serving folk delivered platters of savory meats, fresh bread, and fruit on the deck while he and Lam let the sun and soft breeze dry them off. They were mid-meal when the Spirit Master returned, arriving on the back of a misty, flying serpent with glowering yellow and green eyes. Victor was sure the serpent was a spirit companion because as soon as Dar leaped off its back, landing on the decking, wringing forth creaks and groans from the sturdy wood, the creature disbursed like smoke in the breeze.

“You look well, children,” he observed in his booming voice, sitting on the opposite side of the table.

“Children?” Lam asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, to me, surely so. It’s been a very long time since I was your age, dear Lam.” He glanced over the table and picked up a fat, greasy sausage. He tucked it into his mouth, chewed twice, and swallowed it. “I’m glad you’re eating a hearty breakfast. This ritual will take a lot out of us all. Did you enjoy the lake?”

“Yeah,” Victor said, spreading jam on a slice of fresh, dark, buttery bread. “I’m damn jealous, to be honest. My little house . . .” He thought about the many complaints he might utter about his townhome and decided to keep it simple. “Doesn’t have a nice lake out the back door.”

Dar snorted and leaned back. “Hah! Someday, Victor.”

“He has millions of acres with beachfront property back home, though,” Lam said, nudging Victor’s shin with her toes under the table.

“Yeah . . .” Victor shrugged.

“Perhaps in a month or two, you can visit and check on things, hmm?” Dar said, surprising them both.

“Really?” Victor asked, pausing his food shoveling.

“Why not? After reading through your journal, I’ve begun to devise some training for you in the near future, which may involve that world.” As Victor and Lam both opened their mouths, he held up a hand. “I won’t say more because I’m still thinking about it, and there may be better opportunities I haven’t considered. For now, just know that I’ll certainly allow you to visit and check on your properties sometime relatively soon.” As Victor nodded, taking a large bite, Dar continued, “I suppose you may have wondered where I went this morning?”

“I did!” Lam nodded, and Victor grunted his agreement.

“Lam’s ritual required a few ingredients I didn’t have handy here at the lake house, so I took a morning flight out to the Arcanum. The weather was beautiful, but then it usually is in Sojourn.” He sighed, closing his dark eyelids, instantly extinguishing the fiery orbs of his eyes, and Victor wondered what he was thinking about. After a moment, though, he inhaled deeply, opened his eyes, and said, “Are you ready, Lam? The perfect time is nearly upon us.”

“So soon?” Lam gulped her last bite of food and pushed her plate away. “Um, yes! Yes, I’m ready, Lord Dar.”

“Very well.” He pushed himself up from the table and gestured to the house. “Come, you two. We’ll perform the ritual in the cellars.”

For some reason, Victor was nervous, and when he glanced at Lam, he knew why. What if Dar made a mistake? What if his mistake was trusting Victor to help with the ritual? What if they did

something wrong and Lam didn't make it through? What if they miscalculated and her Core was destroyed, or she was reduced to a shadow of herself? Could something like that happen?

Dar must have seen the concern on his face because he clapped his shoulder with one of his boulder-like hands and said, "This is going to be an important lesson for you, Victor." He nodded to Lam. "Yes, there's much at stake, but all the best things come with risk." He smiled, exposing his glittering, diamond-like teeth. "You know, I really am a great teacher, aren't I, Lam? Did you hear that drop of wisdom?"

"I did, Lord Dar. Victor is fortunate!" She grinned and winked at him, and Victor sighed.

"Is this what the next few decades will be like? Maybe I should piss off the council some more so I can get thrown in jail or something."

Dar nodded, squeezing his shoulder. "You jest, but that was certainly on the table at that inquest. Why, it was a much closer thing than I let on! It's better that you avoid the dungeon beneath the council building, lad."

"Do you mean dungeon as in . . ."

"As in filled with monsters and traps. Many a dangerous Energy user has been banished into that particular pocket dimension, never to return." While Victor stewed on that, Dar led the way into the house and then through the kitchens to a stairwell situated at the rear of the pantry. It was a spiral, metal affair that led straight down into darkness. "Come now, we've work to do. There's a natural cave down here that will be just right; its echo on the Spirit Plane has the perfect resonance." With that, he started down, his bulk causing the stairs to creak with each step. Lam looked at Victor, raised her eyebrow, and then shrugged, following. Victor set his face in a determined mask and began his descent.

Book 8: Chapter 6: Spirit Ritual

"You see," Dar said, gesturing around the damp, dome-shaped cave, "the space offers excellent resonance. Not as perfect as something constructed for the purpose, but very good, nonetheless."

Victor didn't know exactly what Dar meant by resonance or even "the purpose," but he tried to fill in the blanks and sound like he had a clue: "You mentioned something about the Spirit Plane?"

"Correct. Tell me, Victor, when you Spirit Walk from within a city, how many buildings do you see on the Spirit Plane?"

"Usually none."

"Exactly!" Dar gently ushered Lam toward the center of the cave. "Take a seat there on that smooth section of stone. Assume a cultivation pose and try to tune out our conversation; you should be working to still your mind and prepare for a difficult ordeal."

“Oh,” Lam looked around the cave, illuminated by a bright white globe of Energy that Dar had summoned. She suddenly looked less than enthusiastic, and Victor couldn’t blame her; this was a massive leap of faith she was taking.

Nevertheless, she steeled herself and moved to sit where Dar had indicated.

“So, Victor, if a building doesn’t exist on the Spirit Plane, can we use it to focus Energy, creating our crucible for Lam’s spirit?”

“No, but I’ve seen structures on the Spirit Plane. Would it be possible to—”

“Build something more precise than a cave beneath my home? Certainly! Though it would take years to force the essence of such a structure to bleed into that realm. This natural space is perfectly fine, and I think Lam would rather not wait.”

“You’re right, sir,” Lam grunted as she sat and assumed a lotus position on the smooth stone.

“Stand close, Victor, and listen to what I say. I’ll be using some spells you’ve not learned, but this will be a good learning experience, nonetheless. Your primary role in this ritual will be to supply large amounts of Energy as I construct the crucible.”

“All right,” Victor moved closer to the large, stony man. Dar wore one of his signature pajama-like sets of silken clothing. They were the color of habañero peppers and looked very comfortable as he gracefully sat before Lam, his large frame dwarfing hers.

“Listen, Lam; part of this ritual involves me separating a part of your spirit to keep safe and secure in your body. It will be the anchor that pulls the rest of your spirit home through the crucible Victor and I will construct around it.”

“I see.” Lam licked her lips and nodded, her eyes darting to Victor and then back to Dar. Victor wanted to sit beside her, to put his arm over her shoulders and protect her. He banished the impulse, knowing there was a lot more to Lam than her current nervousness. She was a walking incarnation of determination; if she wanted to succeed, she would.

“To that end, you’ll need to slip into a cultivation trance, opening yourself to the Energy around us. That will help me access your spirit from the Spirit Plane.”

“Is that all?”

“No, that’s only the first step. While you’re meditating upon your Energy, I need you to focus your thoughts on the part of yourself that’s most stubborn, most willful, and most defiant. Using your focus, I’ll be able to carve that aspect away,

and it will be that shard, with heavy, deep roots, that I'll leave anchored in your body."

"How do I focus on that?"

Surprising himself, Victor answered, "Think about all the times you've been denied and all the times you've risen up to take what people said you couldn't have. Think about when you fled home. Think about how you rose in the Legion despite captains who tried to keep you down. Think about how you used the Greatbone Mining Consortium to gather wealth and power, taking a noble title when the old nobility tried to keep you under their boots. Think about . . ."

"I think I have it, Victor. Thank you," Lam's eyes shimmered with unspent tears as she smiled at him. Maybe she didn't think he'd paid attention to all those things, but he had.

"Good." Dar nodded and then motioned for Victor to sit beside him. "We'll Spirit Walk now, Lam. When you've done what I instructed, we'll know it."

"Should I summon my coyotes to watch us?" Victor asked.

Dar shook his head. "My guardian aspect will watch over us, apprentice. Save your Energy, for I'll use every drop."

Victor nodded and sat down, forming a triangle with Dar and Lam. He felt a small surge of Dar's Energy and knew the master had sent his spirit onto the Spirit Plane. Before following him, Victor looked at Lam and said, "I know you can do this."

"I know, Victor. Thank you for your confidence and for being here with me. If something goes wrong, please tell . . ."

"Nothing's going to go wrong!" Victor growled.

"Please tell Edeya I loved her, and don't let her know what I was doing when I died."

"Dammit, Lam!" It was one thing for her to contemplate failure, but now, if the worst happened, she wanted him to lie to Edeya.

"Please?"

Though he didn't like to admit there was a chance she'd fail, he forced himself to contemplate it and be serious. He took her hand, pressing her calloused, narrow palm with his thick, equally calloused thumb. "You don't want to carry that kind of burden out of this world, Lam. Don't leave Edeya here with a lie, and don't make me be the one to deliver it. This isn't the sort of secret that would make her life easier. You're not doing this only for her, and she needs to know this side of you, the side that's willing to risk everything for a better shot."

Again, her eyes filled with tears, and she pressed her lips together, clearly stifling some emotion as she slowly nodded. "Okay, Victor. You tell her then. Tell her I loved her with everything in me."

“I will, but stop this line of thought. Focus on what Dar told you. You aren’t going to fail this. Your spirit is fucking strong, hermana.”

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and nodded, pulling her hand free and resting it atop her knee. “Okay. Go; I’m sure your mentor wonders what you’re doing.”

Victor nodded, closed his eyes, formed the pattern for Spirit Walk, and cast it. When he opened them, he sat in the Spirit Plane’s strange echo of the cave. Weird wisps of Energy flitted about in the dark, glowing with faint lavender light and turning the cave into a mysterious, magical place. Dar’s spirit-self paced about, carving runes into the stone floor with a rod of solid, peach-colored Energy. “You had words with her?” the man rumbled.

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“Yeah. She had some doubts, and I tried to get her focused on success.” Victor stood as Dar grunted his acknowledgment.

“Last-minute nerves are common in any high-stakes endeavor.” He gestured with his weird, glowing, orange rod. “This is a manifestation of my Energy. I use it to impart my will upon this tiny piece of the Spirit Plane. These runes will hold our Energy, funneling it into a pattern that will test Lam’s spirit, forcing it to shed Energy to pass through, stripping it down to her most essential, most vital essence. I could try to explain each rune as I work, but they all will require a lesson, and each lesson could take hours. We don’t want to turn this ritual into a week-long affair.”

“Will I ever learn them?” Victor asked, moving to peer down at one of the runes with its swirls and jagged lines. They reminded him of something he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“Of course. You’ll learn some of them as I teach you rituals, and I’ll also give you a text to study.” Dar moved and began carving another of his magical glyphs into the stone, and Victor decided it was a good time to voice a concern he’d only partially acknowledged himself.

“I’m not sure I’ll be in my current townhome for long, and it sounds like this cultivation chamber is a big project. Shouldn’t I wait until I have a better, more permanent place?”

“It can be moved. It’s a large task, but as you gain more power and wealth, you’ll want to do so in any case.” He looked up from his task, made eye contact with Victor, and nodded. “You’ll want to create a chamber in a portable room, something you can take with you from world to world on adventures and journeys.” He sighed and turned back to the glyph he was carving. “Such a portable space, capable of holding the Energy of strong cultivation treasures, is

not something an iron-ranker will likely come across. Not unless he was fabulously rich and could have his family purchase it for him at auction.”

Victor narrowed his eyes and absently reached for his neck, but the vault wasn't present on the Spirit Plane. “I . . .”

Dar snorted. “Have a fabulously wealthy mentor who will absolutely not spoil you to such a degree.”

“I was going to say I might have something like that already.”

“Doubtful. Still, if you think I'm wrong, we can look at what you have to evaluate the possibility.”

Victor nodded, dropping the subject; he didn't want to show Dar the vault until he'd hidden the ivid royal jelly somewhere else first. He trusted Dar, to a degree, but had no idea how an old monster like him would react to such a treasure. On many levels, Dar and his peers believed that might made right, and he very well may see Victor's possession of such a treasure as a mere formality.

He bided his time and watched Dar work and, after a while, began to notice a shimmer of pale, yellow mist at the center of the circle of runes. When he stepped toward it, he had an overwhelming sensation of being close to Lam. He could smell her faintly musky, cloying perfume mixed with her sweat. He could hear her laugh, her battle cry, and her desperate pleas for Edeya to wake. He could see her bright emerald eyes, the glitter of her wings, and the shimmer of golden Energy around her warhammer. He could feel her hard, muscular arms squeezing around his ribs. All those things combined into “Lam,” yet when he took a step back, all he saw was the misty, yellow blur in the air.

“She's opening herself well. You're feeling her spirit, yes?”

“Ah!” Victor nodded, suddenly understanding. “Yeah, I can definitely feel her.”

“Another fifteen or twenty minutes, and I'll have the circle prepared. Then we'll begin charging the runes.” He gestured with his free hand. “Come. Watch me closely. Even if you don't understand the runes, you'll benefit from the experience.”

Victor did as he was told, following Dar as he moved about the circle, seemingly at random, tracing one glowing glyph after another into the stone cavern floor. Meanwhile, Lam's spirit became more and more palpable as she opened herself to the Spirit Plane. While watching, Victor asked, “Is everyone open to the Spirit Plane when they cultivate?”

“To some degree, aye, though Lam's in a place where the barrier between planes is very thin, partly because of the nature of this cave, but mostly because you and I are currently spirit walking here, our spirits have pierced the veil, and they hold the doorway open for our return.”

“Veil? Like the veil to the land of the dead?”

“No, a more generic sense of the word. There are many veils separating the various planes, universes, and realities. The veil to the land of the dead is far more commonly mentioned, primarily thanks to Death Casters and their fascination with it.”

“But,” Victor couldn’t help but fish for answers to questions that had plagued him ever since he’d learned about Belikot and his death-attuned magic, “what is that place? If the Spirit Plane is where spirits wander, what’s through the veil? The one the death casters are obsessed with? I mean, I met Old Mother on the Spirit Plane, and she had no intention of going—”

“It’s complicated, Victor. Our spirits are influenced by our lives and our beliefs. When your Old Mother died, she believed she would wander far as a spirit and start a new life. Her belief strengthened her will, and she made it so. Some people have no such conviction, and they’ll wander the Spirit Plane for a while until their inertia fades, their lingering personality disburses, and they succumb to the pull of one of the places beyond the veil. There, they may wallow and wander for millennia or even eons before something happens to spark their desire to begin anew. Alternatively, some force, some god or equally powerful entity, pulls them out, and they make their way into another material plane to begin a new life.”

“So, what you believe affects what happens to your spirit?”

“Exactly so. For that reason, I’m convinced there are many heavens and many hells created from the combined force of will of millions of spirits believing one thing or another. Not everyone is lucky enough to be a Spirit Caster, walking around without their body long before they die, learning the universe’s secrets before their time. Your Old Mother has likely already wandered far and chosen a wondrous place to begin anew.”

“So the place your friend, Master Lo’ro,” Victor tried to show the proper respect, “is taking me through that veil, but will he know where we are when we step through?”

“Oh, he’ll have his theories. It could be some version of a hell or limbo, but it won’t be a nice place; you’re looking for tormented vestiges of intelligence. It may seem cruel, but you’re likely doing those spirits a service, bringing them forth and exposing them to repeated contact with your will. It may shorten their torment by thousands of years.” Dar stood, and his glowing wand of Energy disappeared. He brushed his hands off, looked around the circle, and nodded. “Done. We’ll charge these sigils with Energy, strategically intermixing our harsher affinities with our more encouraging ones. We must test Lam’s spirit, but we must be careful to ensure she makes it through.”

“Are you going to split off a shard to keep safe in her body?”

“Only when we’re ready to begin will I pull her spirit through, entrapping it in this circle. Then we’ll return to the Material Plane with her shard and coax the rest of her home through this crucible.” He clasped Victor’s wrist in his massive, surprisingly soft hand and pulled him toward the edge of the circle. “When I tell you to channel a certain Energy, do so; I’ll guide it into the sigil.”

“Okay,” Victor nodded, “ready.”

“Fear,” Dar said. Victor pulled a ribbon of the dark, purple-black Energy out of his Core and sent it through his pathways into Dar’s hand, where it gripped his wrist. Dar grunted his approval, knelt, and touched a sigil with his other hand. It flared with the dark Energy. “Good!” He moved his hand to a nearby sigil and said, “Rage.” Victor switched his pull, driving some of his red, angry Energy into Dar’s hand, and a second later, the sigil flared with crimson fire. So it went on for nearly an hour. Dar led him around the circle, lighting most of the runes with fear or rage, but occasionally, he’d ask for glory or inspiration.

When Dar finally released his wrist, he said, “Rest now. I’ll charge the rest.” Victor saw that he’d only helped charge about half the runes. He nodded and sat down near the misty essence of Lam’s spirit, watching as the giant, pajama-clad man nimbly stepped around the circle, effortlessly charging each rune with taps of his bare toes. Some flared with golden, sparkling Energy, others with orange light that reminded Victor of Dar’s rune carving rod, and still others were populated with cold, gray Energy that filled Victor’s heart with dread if he looked too long upon it.

“Stand,” Dar said, startling Victor out of his ruminations. He blinked, wondering where he’d gone; he’d lost himself looking into those cold, gray runes. “Watch now as I reach through this aperture into Lam’s Core and pull forth her spirit.” He didn’t wait for Victor to acknowledge his words. He just did exactly what he said he’d do; he pushed his thick, black hand into the misty golden Energy hanging at the center of the circle. He seemed to concentrate for a couple of seconds, and then he pulled his hand back, gripping the ethereal, translucent shape of Lam’s spirit by the wrist.

She was naked, with wild hair and blazing wings, and she looked furious. Her eyes scanned the cave, but they didn’t seem to see Victor or Dar. Victor averted his gaze, somehow feeling dirty looking at Lam’s nakedness, wishing he could banish that glimpse of her breasts from his mind. “She won’t be aware of us. Her senses on this plane are wanting. This is her defiant aspect, the tough, willful piece of her that you helped her to focus upon. When we return to the Material Plane, I’ll bring this part of her with us, but the bulk of her spirit will be left behind.”

“Why can’t I see the rest of her spirit?”

“Well, because this aspect is overbearing—when I pull it home, what’s left will look similar, though likely less . . . angry.” Dar chuckled, watching Lam’s spirit crouch, hands out, ready to claw anything that challenged her. Victor had never

seen such a fierce expression on her face, not even when he'd watched her fight.

“Are you sure she doesn't need that part of her to fight through the crucible?”

“She may, but it's better to have her strongest aspect in her body, clinging tightly to her flesh, forcing the rest of her to come home.” Dar clapped Victor on the shoulder. “I know you're worried, but trust me, boy. I know what I'm doing. Let's return now.” This time, rather than lead the way, Dar watched Victor until he nodded and severed his connection to the Spirit Walk.

When he returned to the dim, natural cave, he found Lam slumped over, staring at the stone floor, drool running down her chin. As he reached out to wipe the saliva from her face and gently push her mouth closed, Dar moved, grunting. He was back in his body, and he reached out to touch Lam's forehead. A flash of golden Energy told Victor the Spirit Master had put the defiant fragment of Lam's spirit back inside. Her eyes sparkled momentarily, but then she slipped back into catatonia.

“Now, Victor, you will take her left hand, and I'll take her right. Together, we'll urge her spirit fragment to call the rest of her spirit home. We'll lend her Energy for the fight, and her spirit will push its way through the crucible we constructed. When it breaks free and comes home, Lam will be whole but greatly reduced in Energy potential.”

Victor nodded, almost feeling like he'd done something wrong, like he was guilty of something, as he took Lam's hand. Was this a mistake? Should he have talked Lam out of this? Between himself and Dar, they'd put a hell of a lot of Energy into that “crucible.” What if Lam couldn't make it? What if they took away too much of her defiance in the spirit shard they'd left in her body?

“C'mon, hermana,” he growled, gripping her thin, limp hand. “I'm not letting you get lost. Come on! Time to come home.”

Book 8: Chapter 7: Lam

Lam sat in her tent, just a small canvas thing with a woolen blanket on the floor and her pack for a pillow. She could hear the others outside, talking, laughing, and carrying on about the women from Ardvale Falls, a small hamlet the cohort had marched through earlier that day. She frowned, pulled her polishing kit from her storage ring, and got to work on her boots. Lieutenant Vas had given her two demerits earlier for the scuffs on the leather.

She grimaced in anger and embarrassment at the memory. Of course, she knew the boots needed polish, but they'd been marching for days, and there were plenty of soldiers with boots in far worse condition. “Why do we even have to do this? How much would it cost for a few enchantments to keep this leather looking nice?” She angrily smeared the red-brown polish into the leather. She knew the answer all too well; the same reason they had to carry packs when most everyone had dimensional containers—character.

Hadn't Captain Trov-dak gone on and on about it when she'd addressed the recruit cohort? A soldier who cares for their gear appreciates their gear. A soldier who carries their equipment on their back

knows the worth of that equipment. She'd heard similar things from her father when she was young. He wouldn't buy her a book about Evi ap'Sheni, the Blue Deep assassin, but he let her work for a week in the family store to earn the money herself. What had his lesson been? If she earned it, she'd appreciate it. Her father would have fit right in with the Legion.

"Ah, father, I didn't think I'd miss you so soon," she sighed, setting the boot down to dry before buffing. Had she really run away? The thought came to her out of nowhere. Had she really broken her father's heart and abandoned the family business? For what? To play at swords and spears with a bunch of crude, loud, sex-starved adolescents?

As if to punctuate the thought, she heard Fol guffaw and shout, "Ancestors be true! She was asking for it!"

Lam bit her lip, wanting to shout something equally rude in defense of the unnamed woman, but knew better than to stir that hornet's nest. She picked up her tin of polish, spitting a little too vehemently into it. She worked the saliva around with her rag until she had a good amount of dark, oily stain to smear on the second boot. She was just setting the finished product beside the other to dry when she heard footsteps outside her tent. "Recruit Lam!" It was Sergeant Gonda. Lam felt her stomach start to churn with butterflies at the sound of his voice. The huge Vodkin never had a pleasant word on his tongue.

She quickly leaned forward and threw the tent flap wide. "Yes, sir?"

"Get your boots on and walk with me." He didn't wait; he just turned and started lumbering away. Lam jerked her boots onto her feet, wishing she'd had time to buff the polish. The damp leather would attract dust and dirt, and she'd have to start over. She scrambled after Gonda, and the men sitting around the cookpot—members of her own squad—laughed as she almost tripped over her long, gangly legs; she'd grown a lot in the last few years and was still awkward with her body. She caught up to the sergeant and walked a pace behind and to his left as he trudged down the central row of the cohort's encampment.

"Recruit Lam, I'm going to have a talk with you that I reserve for a few individuals from every enlistment cohort."

"Yes, sir." Lam had a feeling this was a bad thing, and she didn't know what a proper response was, so she went with the old standby.

"I can see you're struggling to fit in. I reviewed your enlistment interview, and I think it might be wise to reconsider your decision. The Legion isn't the place for a runaway Ghelli. It's something of a miracle you've been here for more than a month and haven't gotten seriously injured, killed, or worse, ravaged by one of the men."

Lam's mouth fell open at the sergeant's words. She wasn't sure if she should be thankful that he was concerned or angry that he expected so little from her. "Thank you for your concern, Sergeant—"

“I’m not concerned about you, recruit!” he barked, cutting her off. “I don’t want to lose good men dealing with a tribunal when you bring forth accusations!” He stopped, turned, and regarded her, frowning through the yellowed tusks that hung over his furry chin. “I’m giving you a choice: discharge with no dishonor or transfer to the Beneset Steppes Garrison. You’ve got until first duty to make a decision.”

“B-Beneset Steppes, sir?” She’d heard of the place, the great plains north of the Empire, where raiders and roving bands of primitive monster tribes were a constant threat.

“That’s right. Do the smart thing, young lady. Go home.” His dark, black eyes narrowed, and he shook his head slightly. “I hope you can see I’m trying to help you.” With that, he turned and stomped away, his heavy, enormous boots thudding on the freshly raked dirt. He called over his shoulder, “Dismissed.”

As despair gripped her heart, Lam listlessly walked back to her tent. She barely lifted her feet, no longer able to muster any concern for the dirt caking the damp leather of her boots. When she reached her squad’s cookfire, most of them were sitting around eating. No one offered her anything from the pot. No one called out, asking if things were all right. She was sure she heard whispers and snickers, though. They were always teasing her—she was too light. Her bones were hollow. Why would a pretty girl with fragile wings want to wear the Legion uniform? It didn’t help that she was the only female on the squad. It didn’t help that she’d never seen another Ghelli in the cohort.

She slumped down onto her woolen blanket and closed the flap of her tent. What had she been thinking? She dug through her thin, tarnished storage ring and pulled out the Farscribe book she shared with her parents. She’d written one note in it, the night she ran away, trying to explain herself, trying to convey her need for adventure and accomplishment. They’d never responded, and a glance confirmed it was still true. Lam knew her mother would have, but there was no way her father would allow it. His pride was too wounded, and, in their family, his word was law. Lam was quite sure, as far as he was concerned, she was dead.

If she went home at that moment, if she returned, wings tucked low in shame, begging for forgiveness, he’d let her stay. He’d punish her for years, though, and her miserable, simple existence from before would be twice as bad. Still, wasn’t Sergeant Gonda right? She wasn’t fitting in. She’d never felt so alone as she did in that moment.

When she’d fled home, at least she’d had her dreams and hopes to sustain her. At least she’d carried some pride in her chest, thinking of the famous Ghelli heroes she’d read so many tales about. But the Legion hadn’t been what she’d expected. They had more than enough conscripts and volunteers; a tall, scrawny Ghelli wasn’t of much value. Gonda had proven that by offering her a discharge, a release from her oath.

She lay in bed, listening to the murmured conversations and laughter around her, wallowing in her despair. It was palpable, that hopelessness. She could feel it settling over her like a blanket, and her

mind listlessly cast about for some way out. If the Legion didn't want her, why would she stay? At least her mother would be happy to see her. At least she had some friends back in Twilight Home. What would they say? She hadn't said goodbye to a single person. They'd resent her for that. They'd mock her when she wasn't listening.

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Pools of tears overflowed from her eyes, soaking into her hair as they ran from the corners. She lay still, shivering, almost physically ill from the sadness overwhelming her, and the only thought that seemed to give her any comfort was a whisper of cold air tickling her ears and threatening to constrict her throat with its icy promise, "Just give up." She was lying still, contemplating those three words, wondering the best course of action to make them a reality, when they came for her.

A shadow fell over the tan material of her tent, and Lam wondered what it was; had someone moved one of the watch lamps? But then her tent rustled and collapsed on her, and a heavy hand pressed the material against her face, gagging her as other strong hands grabbed her ankles and wrists. She thrashed, but it was like they said; she was skinny and weak compared to the Shadeni and Ardeni recruits, and there had to be at least three of them holding her down, pinned under her collapsed tent. She tried to scream, tried to think of a spell she could employ, but panic washed over her as the first heavy blow crunched into her unprotected stomach.

She jerked and pulled but couldn't move, and the punch knocked the wind from her lungs. Lam tried to scream, but the heavy hand pressing her head into the ground just jammed more of the tent's fabric between her teeth as she opened her jaws. More blows rained down. Whoever was behind them, whoever was delivering the beating, knew better than to break any bones. They knew better than to use any weapons that might leave a distinctive mark. Big, heavy impacts rocked her, smashing into her stomach, her chest, her thighs, even her groin, and Lam couldn't manage to pull in a breath, let alone formulate any sort of defense.

As a different sort of blackness closed in on her vision, as her panicked mind began to shut down, the pain of the impacts seemed to fade, and she felt herself pulling inward, away from the torment of her body, hiding in the depths of her mind with a memory that seemed strange and out of place. She saw a man, big and brooding, with short dark hair and golden, honey-brown eyes. He had a strong, sharp nose, and somehow, he looked at her and nodded, his eyes full of fiery anger. "What are you doing, sister? You're not someone who gives up. Eat the pain. Eat the despair. Chew it up and turn it into rage. This won't kill you. You're tougher than that!"

Lam's mouth, pressed so hard that her lips split and she could taste the blood seeping through the tent's fabric, tried to form a single word, and she didn't know where it came from. "Victor," she mumbled, but only she could have understood the sound as distinct from the grunts and whimpers she'd been making. She didn't know who he was but wondered if the Roots were talking to her. Had they sent her an ancestor to stir her spirit? Chew up the pain? Chew up the despair? Turn it into rage? Suddenly, something snapped in her mind, and she saw her plight from a new perspective.

Why shouldn't she be angry? Why wasn't she? Her parents shouldn't have disowned her. That wasn't her fault. She'd written them a letter. She'd promised

to remember her kin when she found fame and fortune! Why hadn't they believed in her? Why had her father disowned her rather than honoring her desire and boasting about his daughter's bravery? Were his own ends so crucial that he'd treat his only child as a means of achieving them?

Why were none of her squadmates looking out for her? Why were they picking on her for being weaker? Shouldn't they protect and nurture her strength? Wouldn't she be stronger with them by her side and at her back? Why was the dirty, rot-infested command structure condoning her release, threatening her with a dangerous post on the edge of nowhere to get her to leave? Wouldn't the Legion do better if they found her strengths and brought those forth? Was any of that her fault? Was it her fault she had big dreams but no training? Was it her fault she'd grown tall and thin but hadn't had the chance to build muscle to fill out her frame?

As she endured the beating and ran through the litany of wrongs done to her, Lam noticed something strange; the blows, though just as heavy, just as measured, weren't bothering her anymore. She was breathing through her nose as she tensed her abdomen, absorbing the hits. A fierce, bloody smile spread beneath the crushing grip of her assailant, and she felt something else—an angry, smoldering heat at the center of her chest. They wanted to beat her into submission, but she wouldn't submit. She'd take the beating. She'd take the pain, the despair, the loneliness, and she'd chew it up.

When the punches and kicks or whatever they were raining down on her finally stopped, and the hand pulled away from her face, Lam lay still. As several booted feet walked away into the night, she breathed deeply through her nose and cataloged the pain, letting her mind mentally take stock of the aches. They hadn't broken any ribs. They hadn't even hit her in the face. Her stomach ached. Her thighs and groin were swollen with contusions, and she knew she'd struggle to stand, let alone march, in the morning, but, again, nothing was broken.

Her wrists were sore from where they'd been squeezed through the tent's fabric, but she slowly lifted her arms, wincing at the sharp pains in her elbows and shoulders. She brought her hands to her chest, tenderly pressing on her breasts and sternum, wincing with the agony of bruised, aching flesh and bone. She had a minor healing potion in her storage ring, and she was tempted to drink it down, but another part of her, the angry part, sitting in the warm glow of the fiery rage deep in her core, wanted them to see the evidence of their crime in the morning. She wanted them to see what they'd done, and she wanted them to realize it hadn't worked.

She closed her eyes and, still lying under the fabric of her collapsed tent, she tried to make herself sleep. She pictured the Beneset Steppes, and suddenly, the idea of being sent there didn't seem so bad. Maybe the men and women garrisoned near the frontier would be different. Maybe they'd recognize her potential and treat her as a fellow soldier despite her inexperience. Something about the idea felt right. She wasn't sure if it was the anger destroying her sadness and despair, but she suddenly felt like she wanted to go there. Like the next step in her journey lay in that direction. It almost felt like the person she was supposed to be would be waiting for her if she just started down that path.

When the horns blew the morning wake-up call, announcing the first duty, Lam opened her eyes to see that the fabric of her tent was no longer black with night. She could make out faint, gray light through its coarse material. With winces and shuddering gasps of pain, she wormed her way out of it. When she emerged on hands and knees, she could hear others moving around the circle of her squad's tents. She could hear whispers and curses, but none came over. No one asked what was wrong. It wasn't a surprise, but it still stung knowing they'd either been aware or active participants in the beating. Lam bit down on that sadness. She chewed it up and found that warm glow of anger.

When she struggled to her feet, barefoot in the dirt, her boots tangled in the tent behind her, she leaned over and coughed until a long string of bloody drool hung from her lips. She wiped the bloody saliva with the back of her hand, smearing it across her chin, and looked around the camp with bloodshot, furious eyes. Not one of her squadmates would meet her gaze. "Cowards," she grunted, then leaned forward and spat another wad of bloody phlegm.

She'd just turned to try to dig her boots, blanket, and pack out of her tent when heavy footsteps crunched on the gravel-strewn dirt behind her. She heard her squadmates clamber to their feet and get quiet, so she knew it was the sergeant. He stopped behind her and cleared his throat, so Lam turned and offered him a salute, slower than was appropriate but faster than she could move without pain.

"Recruit," he grunted. He eyed her up and down but didn't ask about her bruised and bloodied condition. Lam wasn't surprised. "Have you made your decision? We have a supply wagon leaving for Gelica in a few hours."

Lam narrowed her white-blond eyebrows and trained her bloodshot, bright green eyes on his, staring at him for several long seconds. When he blinked, she said, "I'll go to the Beneset Steppes, sir. Thank you for the opportunity."

#

"I believe she's doing well," Dar grunted, distracting Victor from his worry.

"What's it like for her?" he asked, glancing away from Lam's still, pale face to his mentor.

"The crucible will use memories from her mind to test her. It may change some minor details, but the overall goal of the ritual is to create an intelligent enchantment that will attempt to break her spirit in various ways. It's up to her to retain her focus and find her way back to herself. If she succumbs, well, she won't."

"Dammit," Victor groaned, hating the idea that he couldn't help her more than just holding her hand and urging her "be strong" and "keep fighting." He'd been doing so for what felt like an hour already. "If it seems like she isn't going to make it, can we stop this? Yeah, I know I should've asked that before we started."

"If she fails, we may be able to rescue a vestige of her spirit, but it might be less cruel to simply free the shard in her body, allowing her to pass on." Dar's tone

was final, and Victor stewed on that for a minute. He was distracted from his concern again when Dar chuckled and said, “She surprises me!”

“How?” Not for the first time, Victor was annoyed by Dar’s ability to see so much more than he could.

“I wove your rage into many of the crucible’s trials, thinking it would be another barrier, but she seems to be using it more often as a lever to break out of my other traps—despair and fear, mostly. Take heart in that, boy. With glory, inspiration, and hope mixed in, I believe she’ll find the breadcrumbs she needs to return to herself.”

“Fuck yeah, hermana,” Victor said, squeezing Lam’s slender hand again, willing his words to reach her. “You got this. Show them what you’re made of! Show them all!”

Book 8: Chapter 8: Fighting Spirit

Darren grinned with glee as his quarterstaff impacted the mudman’s stiff, clay-like flesh. It wasn’t the impact of hardwood against clay—that was nothing special. It was the discharge of crackling red electricity that coursed through the little creature, sparking out of its eyeholes and sending steam into the air, that did the real damage. The mudman collapsed, utterly devoid of the animating force that had driven it up to that point. Edeya’s frosty spear was equally effective, and though they both had to reapply the damage-boosting effects to their weapons every few hits, they were making short work of the swarm of little creatures as they emerged from the brackish, muddy water.

He’d learned the spell, just as Edeya had predicted, using her spell pattern. When he’d completed it in his pathways, the System had awarded him a boost of Energy and a congratulatory message, informing him that he’d unlocked a spell called Shocking Arms at the “basic” level. At first, Darren had thought he’d created a spell that would only affect his “arms,” but Edeya had quickly corrected his interpretation—by arms, the System meant weapons.

With his far more effective staff, they’d cleared another two chambers of frogmen, and now they were exploring a new area and battling their second wave of “mudmen,” as Darren had creatively named the four-foot-tall, bipedal people who seemed to be entirely constructed of animated mud and clay. He whipped his staff around, pounding another mudman on top of the head, allowing the volatile lightning housed in the weapon to do its work.

He’d already gained two more levels, and though he hadn’t allocated any stat points in strength or agility, he felt he was far more competent already, probably because the System had awarded him with “basic” staff mastery. That had been an experience that he’d never forget—it felt like warm liquid coursing over the contours of his brain as sudden understanding and weird, phantom memories filled his consciousness.

Out of nowhere, he realized he understood how to hold the staff properly, how to position his feet, and what muscles to tense when he blocked or swung the weapon. He knew about different guard positions, different attacks, how to follow through, and how to recover from overextension. He could, quite literally, fill a book with all the things he suddenly knew.

He laughed as he zapped another mudman and then recast Shocking Arms, recharging the staff as he whirled to check on Edeya. She was standing over a mound of mud and clay, grinning back at him. “Nice one, Edeya!”

“Dare! I think you killed more than me that time!” she crowed, scanning the wide, low-ceilinged cave for further threats. The only thing of note that Darren could see was a low, muddy passage on the far side leading into darkness. “I think we’re done with that fight; here comes the Energy.” He followed her gaze, saw the golden motes forming around the piles of mud, and braced himself. A few minutes later, as they both shook off their euphoria, he read the System messages:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 5 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.*****

“Level!” he said, grinning at his partner. She nodded, smiling, her face flushed with the rush of Energy.

“Me too, Dare,” she said with a happy trill in her voice. “One more level, and I’ll get my Class back.”

“You’re nine?”

“Yep!” She glanced at the dark tunnel and then back at him. “Take a break? Or keep going? Maybe there’s a boss nearby.”

“Let me spend my attribute points, then I’m ready.” Darren quickly pulled up his status page and put all five of his points into will—the second time he’d done so. He looked at his page with pride:

Status

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

-

Level:

5

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 1

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

113/113

Strength:

6

Vitality:

17

Dexterity:

5

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

9

Will:

13

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

-

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Wildarc Cultivation Drill

Basic

Staff Mastery

Basic

Spells:

Arclight Wisp

Basic

Shocking Arms

Basic

“My Energy went up a little, just like last time I put my points into will.”

Edeya nodded. “Yep, intelligence will make it go up even more. Will gives you some, but it mostly effects how fast you regenerate your Energy.”

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“How are you allocating your points? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I want to try for a more magic-focused Class. Unlike you, I was already level seven after, well, after that rotten witch took my spirit. When I leveled back in the day, I was trying to survive, so I put most of my points into vitality and agility. This time around, I’m going to put more points into will and intelligence. At eight, I put my points into intelligence, and this time, I’m putting all five into will. I hope it changes things for me at level ten.”

“Um,” Darren leaned on his staff, looking at the tall, slender young woman. “Do you mind me asking what your first Class was?”

“I don’t mind, Dare!” She smiled and continued, “When I reached level ten the first time, I still lived with my family in the Blue Deep.” She saw Darren’s narrowed eyes and added, “That’s a huge forest in the southern part of the Empire. I spent my free time exploring and scrounging for small game, so no one was surprised when my first Class was Hunter.” She sighed, shrugged, and said, “It’s a basic Class.”

Darren nodded and asked, “Do you think you’ll have different choices now?”

“Victor seems to think so. He thinks all my life experiences, all the skills and spells I’ve learned, my racial advancement, my fights, and even what I went through when Catalina stole my spirit will lead to the System offering me very different choices.”

“Does Victor know?” Darren knew better than to underestimate Victor by then, but still, the giant warrior hadn’t been away from Earth all that long.

“He’s learned a lot, but I think his master, that big, stone monster of a man, told him that.”

“Ah, yeah. You told me about him. Or I heard you and Lam talking about him . . . can’t remember.” Darren straightened up and pointed his staff, still faintly sparking with red-tinged electricity, toward the distant tunnel. “Shall we?”

“All right, Dare. Let’s do this!” Edeya shifted her spear so the tip was forward as she stalked along the muddy path toward the opening. As he usually did, Darren kept pace a few steps behind, and as they walked, he refreshed his Shocking Arms spell. It drained away fifty Energy points, but he regenerated five or so every few seconds. He supposed if he had more spells to cast, his small pool of

Energy could become a problem, but as it was, he never had trouble keeping the staff charged up.

His light spell would eat up a little bit of Energy, but Edeya was currently shedding light on the scene with a soft, blue orb that floated over her head. It was the same shade as the motes in her wings, but, like his spell, it turned more white than blue if she made it brighter. Darren watched the shadows retreat into the tunnel as she approached. She glanced back once, and he nodded, so she went in. He followed her but only took a few steps into the opening when he found her crouched low, unmoving. She looked back at him and held a finger to her lips.

Darren crouched and looked over Edeya's shoulder, immediately seeing what had alerted her. A flickering orange glow illuminated a large cave ahead. A big shadow slowly swayed on the far wall as though something moved in front of the source of the light. He leaned close to Edeya's ear and whispered, "Gonna scout?" She usually wanted to be the first to approach a new space, especially if there was evidence of enemies.

She kept her eyes on the cave opening but whispered, "We both will. Follow my movements."

Tension gripped Darren's heart like a vise, but he nodded, excited by her show of confidence. Edeya crept toward the tunnel mouth, hunched low, spear pointing forward, and carefully stepping on the smooth, hard, clay-like surfaces, avoiding the little pools of muddy water. Darren mimicked her movements and, despite his nerves, managed to avoid messing up. In just a few steps, they were both lurking near the opening and peering into the big, firelit cave.

That was the source of the light, a fire. It burned in a low depression on the muddy floor, and Darren could see the fuel source nearby—piles of dry, compact bricks of something like moss. It burned with orange, nearly smokeless flames and gave off quite a lot of heat; Darren could feel it from almost twenty yards away. Two large figures tended the fire, and Darren's hands tightened on his staff as he got a good look at them.

One was enormously rotund, sitting on the hard, dry clay in the basin, occasionally tossing bricks of fuel into the flames. It was a mudman, but different; it wore a headdress of beads that glimmered like dull jewels in the firelight, and though it made the same sort of warbling grunts as the other mudmen, Darren thought he could detect syllables and intelligent intonations in the sounds. The other figure moved back and forth, shaking a large, bone-yellow staff above its head as it paced, lifting its high, bony knees with each step; it wasn't a mudman. The weirdly dancing figure looked like a skeleton coated in mud with too little of the clay-like substance to cover its bones completely.

Edeya backed up a couple of steps, and Darren moved with her. Then she motioned for him to lean close, whispering, "I'm sure those are bosses. It could get pretty tough with just the two of us. What do you think?"

"I, um, well, I think we've beaten up all the minions really easily. We should try this!"

"That's the spirit, Dare!" Edeya grinned fiercely. "Which one do you want to take? I think the big mudman is a healer."

“So,” Darren licked his lips, thinking. “So, I think you should kill the healer. We should take him out fast! I’ll try to keep the big muddy skeleton busy.”

Edeya squinted her eyes, clearly playing the fight out in her head, before nodding. “Good plan. I’ll try to sneak close to hit him before he sees us. I’ll go right, you go left. If the skeleton sees you, try to get noisy so the big guy looks your way, too.”

“So I’m the bait?” Darren chuckled, shaking his head. “Sounds like a good plan!”

“Okay, let’s do this!” Edeya gripped her spear and crept back to the opening. She gave Darren one more look, confirming his readiness, and then she slipped into the cavern, hugging the right wall. Darren stepped in, moving to the left. There wasn’t much to hide him in the room, not even any shadows, thanks to the bright fire, but he still crept low, moving slowly, hoping that if he didn’t make any sudden movement, he might get close before they noticed him.

Somehow, Edeya didn’t suffer the same problem; even though nothing was between her and the fire pit, she seemed to find shadows to slink through along the base of the wall. Seeing that, Darren realized her idea was perfect; him going the opposite direction would give her the ideal opportunity to pounce once the bosses noticed him. He’d only covered about ten yards before they did, or more accurately, before the mud skeleton did.

It lifted its bone staff and whirled to face him, eyes like candle flames flickering from the dark depressions under its brow. It warbled a weird, coughing curse, and the ground under Darren’s feet instantly lost its firmness; he felt his feet sinking into cold mud as tendrils of ropy slime began to wrap around his ankles. “Oof!” he cried as he nearly fell onto his face, which likely would have sealed his fate. He caught himself on his staff, though, and then lifted it to swipe down at the gross, black, muddy tendrils.

If his magical electricity behaved like natural electricity, he would surely have electrocuted himself as the red sparks zapped into the tentacles wrapping around his ankles. Fortunately, just as he could grip the staff without discomfort, the electricity washed over him without any ill effect. As the tentacles of slimy mud burst apart, he jammed the butt of his staff into the soft ground and, using it for balance, yanked his feet free, one at a time, clambering onto firmer clay. He regained his footing just in time to receive a wicked, side-swiping blow from the mud skeleton’s ivory staff.

The length of hard, polished bone caught him in the shoulder, and as a testament to the monster’s strength, it knocked him off his feet and sent him sprawling. He slid sideways onto the semi-dry clay, thankfully not into the liquid section he’d just escaped. Darren could hear the monster begin to utter another mumbled spell, and he desperately scrambled to his hands and knees, favoring his numb left arm.

He glanced to the other side of the cavern where he’d last seen Edeya, but he didn’t catch sight of her. Then he felt the ground loosen under his hands and, in a panic, drove forward with his feet. He exploded like back in high school when he’d practiced football drills, trying to please his dad by signing up for a sport he’d had no interest in. Still, the instinct was in him, and maybe he had his

old, sadistic coach to thank. He caught the skeleton in its midriff with his right shoulder and, despite their size difference, knocked it sprawling.

Darren fell with the boss, getting tangled in its mud-covered bony legs, but he'd kept his grip on his staff. He thrashed the length of lightning-charged wood left and right, batting away the muddy skeleton's grasping hands and thrilling at the sight of sparks dancing along those bones. He fought like a madman, driving forward grimly as he repeatedly battered the monster with his staff. Even when the enchantment faded, and no more electricity aided his blows, the staff delivered noticeable damage, blasting mud away and cracking bones.

Darren couldn't believe it when he knelt in a pile of broken bones and dried-up clay. He'd won! He'd killed a boss! Somewhere in his frenzied, half-startled mind, Darren thanked Victor for the enchanted weapon. The sound of high-pitched grunts and repeated thunk sounds of something sharp impacting something wet startled him, and he looked toward the fire where the other boss had been.

He laughed and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Edeya standing upon its enormous torso, repeatedly jamming her spear in and out of the soft, muddy clay. Each blow sent tendrils of frost into the monster's body, and each time she drew the spear out and jabbed it in again, hunks of frozen clay broke off the boss's body. "I think it's dead!" he called after he'd gathered his breath.

"Better be! I've stabbed it twenty times!" she growled.

Darren stood up, wincing and rubbing his sore shoulder. He saw the ivory staff buried in the bones and mud and picked it up before walking over to Edeya, a staff in each hand. "Did that guy even get an attack off?"

"He was about to blast you with something when I buried my spear in his back." She breathed heavily, leaning on her spear, still jutting out of the muddy corpse. "Nice job, by the way, Dare!"

"You too, Dey," he'd never used the nickname before the dungeon, but with her calling him "Dare" constantly, he'd decided it was fair game. She smiled and gave him an appraising look.

"Seems like you made a real mess of yourself. Are you hurt?"

"Just my shoulder. That guy was strong!"

"Need a healing potion?"

"Nah, I don't think so. We're about to get some Energy." Darren gestured with the staff in his left hand to the glowing motes of bright gold Energy gathering on the mound of mud.

"Whew! Thank the Roots! I was afraid this guy wasn't really dead. That's why I kept stabbing him." She sat down on the clay of the monster's corpse and then slid down to stand before Darren. "Get ready; I think it's a lot." She wasn't wrong.

A moment later, a torrent of Energy, much larger than the ones Darren had felt before, surged into him, and he was lost in the euphoric bliss of it.

When he came back to himself, he was sitting on his butt before the corpse and the bonfire, and his shoulder pain was completely gone. Blinking, he squinted at the System message:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 6 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.*****

“Another level,” he said, looking around, wondering if Edeya got one too. He saw her sitting a few feet away, staring into space.

“Me too,” she muttered, clearly very distracted.

“New options?” he pressed.

“Oh, Roots, Darren! It’s amazing! I have two epic choices and three advanced!”

#

Victor lost track of the hours as he sat there holding Lam’s hand, gently encouraging her, constantly sending a thin tendril of Energy into her through that connection. Dar never told him to start doing so, but he never told him to stop. If it was cheating, he didn’t care; he’d do anything he could to ensure Lam’s spirit came through. Dar hadn’t spoken in a long time, and Victor noticed he didn’t always hold Lam’s hand. Sometimes, he’d let it drop, and sometimes, he’d pick it up, and Victor wondered what the master could see that told him when it was time to do so.

After he began to think it would never end, Dar surprised him when he cleared his throat, making a sound like gravel sliding down a concrete embankment, and rumbled, “She’s nearly through, Victor. This is a good time to learn. Just as you gaze upon your own aura, spread your inner eye’s awareness and watch her break through. Do it now!”

Victor felt the urgency in the command, and he immediately turned his gaze inward. Then, he expanded his awareness from his Core, seeing his pathways and his dark, roiling aura. He stretched his awareness further still, and then he saw what Dar meant. Could he have been watching this the whole time? He silently cursed the stoic Spirit Master for not telling him sooner.

From his inner eye’s vantage, he could see his Core, his aura around it, and then, beside him, the wall of his mentor’s aura, impossible to focus upon. However, between that deathly barrier and his own aura, he saw a split in the darkness, a breach between this world and that of the Spirit Plane, and when he peered closely at it, he could catch glimpses of Lam’s spirit as it fought to claw through that aperture. “Come on, Lam!” he urged, not yelling but whispering forcefully. “Come on! You’re almost there. Fight for it!”

He saw her face, different than when he’d stood with her naked, determined spirit on the Spirit Plane and different from her physical self. She had bright, determined eyes, her brows drawn down in a sharp V, and teeth bared in a grimace. There was something primal and visceral about her. She pulled and tugged, squeezing first one shoulder, then another through the rip, and Victor couldn’t help comparing the imagery to that of a birth, though Lam’s spirit was clawing her way out; there was no midwife there to deliver her.

Suddenly, it was over; she'd overcome whatever resistance held her back, and she streaked like a ghostly light out of the aperture. As the glow of her spirit faded, Victor assumed she'd made it back into her body, so he turned his attention away from his inner eye and looked upon her still form with his physical eyes. He squeezed her hand and felt an answering twitch. There was a warmth in her flesh that hadn't been present before. "She made it," he breathed.

"Aye, lad. She did, indeed, no small thanks to you. I believe you profoundly touched her spirit; there will be lasting effects." Dar's hand clapped his shoulder and gave it a comradely squeeze. "You're a loyal, big-hearted friend, and she's lucky to have you."

"What do you mean?" Victor asked, looking into the giant's blazing white-hot eyes. "I mean about lasting effects?"

"I think you altered her affinities. Her Core. Can't you see it? Can't you feel it? I believe a new Spirit Caster was born this day."

Book 8: Chapter 9: Ironheart

"Really?" Victor's eyes widened as he looked down at Lam's sleeping form. "You think I did that?"

Dar nodded, his blazing eyes staring intently into Victor's. "Aye. You and she. You fed her a near-constant stream of spirit Energy, but she was the one who embraced it, turning it to her purpose of pushing forward. I saw what you were doing and contemplated stopping you, but I was intrigued; I've done this ritual a dozen times over the years, and never has a subject made such use of the Energy I provided. I think—no, I know it has to do with your existing bond. She trusts you on an innate level. Despite the memory haze woven by the crucible, she recognized your spirit. Yes, this was quite an interesting turn of events, one upon which I'll need to meditate."

Victor stared at Lam, and though her body shouldn't have changed at all, he couldn't help but think she looked younger. Perhaps it was just that she was sleeping; all the worry lines she usually carried were gone, her face serene. "What level will she be?"

"Close to base, but perhaps still first tier. I tried to calculate the crucible to bring her just beneath her first Class selection, but it's a tricky thing. Your aid may have also reduced the cost of her own Energy."

"Can you see her Core? Her affinities?"

"Aye, lad. I see a blazing, red-gold Core of courage-attuned Energy. Did you feed her mostly rage and inspiration?"

"Yeah. Glory, too, but the others come more naturally to me; I've had them longer."

"She took what you offered and ran with it. She must have had some latent affinity for courage, in any case. Yes, I believe that's what happened. I wonder what else we might help her unlock as she progresses." Dar stood and gestured

down at Lam's sleeping form. "Carry her. We'll put her to bed; then you should also turn in. Your day with Lo'ro begins in seven hours."

"Shit! The whole day is gone?"

"Yes. She fought long and hard and will sleep a long while."

Victor nodded, stooping to lift Lam. He followed Dar out of the natural caves beneath his cellar and then up the steps into his kitchens. When they stood in the open sitting area bordered by the big glass windows that provided a clear view of the deck and lake, Dar turned to him. "I have much to contemplate, and I think I'd like some time alone. Lo'ro will fetch you in the morning, sometime after dawn. Be sure to show him the proper respect and learn well the lesson he will teach. When you return, I'll be here."

"What about Lam?" Victor shifted the sleeping woman in his arms. "She's going to be confused about her Core, don't you think? Will I have time to speak to her in the morning?"

Dar scowled, his eyes flaring slightly, but he paused momentarily before responding, and Victor wondered if he'd been about to snap at him. Was the master tired? Irritable? "You heard my words, yes? Lo'ro will come sometime after dawn. Don't sleep in, and you'll have time to speak with your friend." Without another word, he strode out the open door to the deck, and Victor watched as his flying spirit mount appeared out of a cloud of bright, sparkling Energy. It was probably thirty feet long and coiled around Dar like a great serpent until the giant straddled its luminescent back just behind its broad head. Then he streaked away, flying out over the lake on wisps of golden Energy.

"All right." Victor shook his head and walked toward the bedrooms. He deposited Lam on her bed, pulled off her boots, threw a soft, quilted blanket over her, and then left, crossing the hall to his own room. Lifedrinker was where he'd left her, leaning against the wall beside the bed's headboard. He lifted and rested her on his lap. "Hey, chica. Tomorrow, we have to spend time with a Death Caster and go into some freaky places. Are you ready?"

"Always!" the axe sang into his mind. "Every moment I don't dwell on my memories, I'm praying to enter battle in your hands!"

"Heh," he chuckled, "I love how eager you are." Victor kicked off his boots, shrugged off his shirt, and then lay down atop his blankets; the air was warm, and he liked the night breeze drifting in through his window. He cradled his axe and, as he tried to sleep, murmured, "Tell me about one of your memories. Tell me about the wolves that used to play in the vale where you grew."

"I have another memory I'd share! You know about the tree where my living wood was born, but have I told you of the time when I wandered the dark, deep depths, a being of fire and hunger?"

"What? No—"

“These memories are newly awakened! When I feasted on your recent foes, my increased Energy helped me to dig them from the depths of my dormant mind. Before I was a spirit, set loose to wander and find a home in the metal you now cradle, I was a primal being living deep beneath the surface of the world, content to gather the violent, primitive Energies from which worlds and stars are birthed. My existence was simple, and I knew but two things: hunger and a need for growth. I had kin, but we weren’t close. Something happened to me, but it’s not clear to me. Something released my spirit from my physical form, and somehow, I clung to the silver vein from which my blade was forged.”

“Was it just silver before you joined with it? Is that what made it Heart Silver?”

“I know not. With each answer, I find three new questions. The more I unravel my past, the more I realize I’m not a simple being born from a tree or a vein of metal. I’m both and more. You awakened me, Victor. Your Energy and spirit impacted mine. As you help me feast upon the Energy of your foes, my being solidifies, and I become more and, at the same time, less like I once was. It confuses me. Am I still me?”

“We all change, chica. I’m not the same person I once was, and it’s my connections to you, Valla, and all the others I spend time with that make me different. I know I’m oversimplifying things, but, well, as you remember more about yourself and change, do you want something different?”

“No! My heart yearns for battle and always to be in your hand.”

“Good, ‘cause that’s what I want. If something changes, just talk to me. We can work it out.”

“Before you sleep, will you share your spirit with me?” When Victor had been ejected from the challenge dungeon, the System had canceled his spells, including his Imbue Spirit, which he, more often than not, cast on Lifedrinker.

“Yeah,” he yawned, “of course I will.” He concentrated and sent a fragment of his spirit, imbued with inspiration-attuned Energy, into the axe. As she hummed softly, clearly pleased, Victor closed his eyes and drifted into sleep. He had wild dreams about wolves and magma flows, fiery volcanos, and fleeing game. When he woke, it was to a gentle tap at his door, and he sprang up with unnatural alertness, Lifedrinker already lifted high in his right fist.

The tap sounded again, and a soft, faint voice called, “Sir, your companion, Lady Lam, requests your presence.”

“Coming,” Victor grunted, sliding to the edge of the bed and pulling on his boots. He quickly emptied his bladder in the attached bathroom, then hurried into the

hallway where one of Dar's servants waited. The demure, green-skinned woman ducked her head and hurried toward the sitting room adjoining the outside deck. Victor could see the sun had barely risen, which he hoped meant he had some time before Lo'ro came calling. Lam sat at one of the couches sipping a large glass of peach-colored juice, and when she saw Victor, her eyes brightened.

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“Victor!”

“How do you feel?” he asked, hurrying over.

Before she could reply, the servant hastily asked, “Can I bring you some fresh juice and breakfast?”

“Bring him the same as I ordered.” Lam gestured to her glass, and Victor smiled, seeing some of her old aura of command asserting itself.

“As you say.” The woman bowed and shuffled toward the kitchen. Victor still had many questions about Dar's strange household staff, but he never seemed to think to ask when the moment was right.

“To answer your question, Victor, I'm well, but very, very, Roots-be-damned confused.”

“I take it you noticed your Core has changed?”

“Hah! What an understatement! I woke to about twenty-five System messages. Most of my spells have been wiped from my mind! ‘Incompatible with your current affinity,’ the System said!”

Victor chuckled, well aware of the limitations of Spirit-attuned Energy. “You wanted a fresh start, right? Don't worry, you're going to learn new, badass abilities.”

“Am I? Courage—it sounds wonderful, but Victor, all my life, I've learned to look down on Spirit Casters!”

“That's because of Ridonne propaganda. Do you think I'm weak?”

“Roots, no!” she cried. “I don't remember what I went through, not every detail, but I feel such deep gratitude to you, Victor. I know you were in here,” she laid her palm over her heart, “helping me. So, will you help me choose my first Class?”

“You're level ten?”

“Yes! I think I was brought down to something like twelve, but then the System removed my Leaf Warden Class, saying it wasn't ‘compatible with . . .’”

“Your current affinities,” Victor laughed. “So, it dumped you down to ten? I bet it loved stealing that Energy away.”

“I get the feeling the System isn’t exactly approving of the ritual Dar performed. Or, I don’t know; maybe that’s just my bias.”

“No, I think you’re right.” Victor sat beside her. “The System wants us to be stronger so we can harvest more Energy, and it can siphon off its percentage. You dropped all those levels, bleeding that Energy off into the universe. That’s, well, that’s kind of a gamble. If you don’t regain the levels, you’re a smaller, weaker Energy battery in the System’s eyes.”

Lam narrowed her eyes, slowly nodding. “I see what you’re getting at. When I go fight tier-one monsters, the System’s going to get a lot smaller cut than if I went into a tier-six dungeon with Valla and Lesh.”

“Right.” Victor looked Lam over, smiling as he did so. “You look good. The ritual didn’t mess you up, at least.”

“Mess me up?”

“I mean your head. You seem upbeat.”

“I told you; it’s all a blur. I think that’s by design, yes?” When Victor nodded, though he was just guessing, she continued, “I’m a little disturbed about the loss of my Core and its levels, but it was just a pearl-class Core, and those are so basic—I had no affinities. All of my spells were cast with pure, unattuned Energy. It was easy to level, and I’d learned some strong abilities, but I’m trying to keep an open mind, hoping this new spirit-class Core will have greater potential.”

“I’m sure that’s the case!” Victor nodded, taking a tall glass of juice as the servant returned and handed it to him.

“Your food will be out shortly,” she said, ducking away.

“Hey, hang on a sec.” Victor looked at the woman, at her pointy ears, yellow eyes, and smooth, green skin. “Are you all related? You and the other staff?”

“Indeed, sir. Lord Dar liberated our world, and now he offers employment to my people. It’s a great honor to work in one of his homes.”

“He liberated your world?” Lam asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, ma’am. A great demon conquered Wanxue many centuries ago. My people were slaves, bred for service and entertainment. Lord Dar visited our world in his travels and helped us to rise up, throwing off the yoke of our suppressor.”

“How long ago was that?” Victor asked, curious to hear little of Dar’s side-history.

“We celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of our liberation just a few years ago.” She bowed low and took a step back. “May I please be excused? My shift ends, and my daughter awaits.”

“Oh, of course!” Lam eyed Victor with wide eyes. As the servant shuffled out, she said, “Imagine that! How old is your master?”

“Not my master!” Victor growled, then shrugged. “Yeah, thousands of years old, I think. He hints at it sometimes. When he takes a ‘vacation,’ it lasts ten years. He acts like that’s the blink of an eye. Speaking of Dar, he was excited about your Core, I think.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. You know, I don’t have a courage affinity. He thinks I helped you form your Core because I sent a lot of rage and inspiration into you; those two can be woven into courage.”

“There are spirit affinity weaves?” Lam grabbed his wrist in excitement.

“Oh yeah. Also, you probably have more affinities; we just need to help you find them.”

“Find them? I can add more?” Lam’s voice had grown shrill with excitement.

“Yes!” Victor laughed. “When I first came to the mine, my only affinity was rage, but my Core was broken. I figured out how to rebuild it with a second affinity—inspiration. You know what?” Victor’s eyes widened, and he returned Lam’s grip, squeezing her much more slender fingers.

“What?”

“You were a big part of that! You inspired me so much when you first flew into the mine and beat the shit out of those little beetle monsters. I focused on that feeling, and that’s how I figured out I had an affinity for inspiration!”

Lam sighed happily and leaned back on the couch, throwing her arms behind her head and smiling broadly. “Imagine that! It seems lifetimes ago! Young, skinny Victor, fighting bravely against a horde of beetles!” She laughed, shaking her head. “Well, I won’t be flying to your rescue anytime soon.”

“Hah. Well, you can rescue Edeya and Darren instead.”

“Speaking of which!” She leaned forward again. “Help me choose my Class, though I think I’ve already made up my mind.”

“Okay. What are the options?” Victor could smell their breakfast by then, and his stomach gurgled in anticipation.

“I won’t bore you with the basic ones, but here are the two I’m struggling with: Ironheart Sentinel and Valor Striker. They’re both advanced!”

“Oh shit! Now you’re making me jealous! I can see they’re both based on your courage affinity, but how are they different?”

“Ironheart Sentinel gives will, vitality, and unassigned attribute points at every level, and it says members of that Class ‘emphasize endurance and resilience, drawing on their unyielding hearts to withstand enemy assaults and defend their comrades.’ The other one sounds more offensive. It gives strength, agility, and dexterity and says, ‘These warriors specialize in bold attacks, often turning the tide of battle with their fearless assaults.’ What do you think?”

“I mean, they both sound great. Personally, I’m partial to will as an attribute, and the Ironheart Sentinel also gives you some unassigned points. That would make up my mind. It sounds a lot more defensive, but you could pump those unassigned points into strength and agility. Who knows what you’ll get at twenty?”

Lam’s smile had grown broader as Victor spoke, and she nodded along with him. “I’m in agreement!” She got quiet, and her eyes unfocused, so Victor sat back and waited while she went through the process.

Two members of Dar’s staff brought steaming platters of food, some plates, silverware, and a basket of fresh buttered bread. He began tucking into the food and was chewing a large mouthful of eggs when Lam turned to him and grinned. “I’m a level ten Ironheart Sentinel! I gained a spell called Daunting Roar. It ‘boldens the hearts of my allies and strikes fear into those of my foes.’ Hah!”

“Badass!” Victor covered his mouth so she didn’t see his half-chewed eggs.

“Hey! I need to teach you how to cultivate. It’s different from normal Energy.”

“Oh?” She unfocused her eyes for a moment, then, in an alarmed tone, added, “Oh! I don’t have a cultivation drill!”

Victor chuckled, shaking his head. “Relax, I’ll teach you. I bet we can bug Dar for some pointers, too. I mean, I’m not sure how involved he’ll be with you, but anything he teaches me, I’ll pass on. I have a feeling, though . . .” Victor trailed off, remembering how distracted Dar had been after Lam’s spirit had made its way home. “I think he’s pretty interested in you.”

“Really?” Lam leaned back again, contemplating, and Victor reloaded his plate from the platter.

“Better eat something before I get it all,” he said around a bite of fresh, soft, buttery bread.

“Hey! I’m only level ten now. I need this food! You’re just a pig!” Lam commenced to load her plate, but before she started eating, she grew serious

and gave him a look. “Victor, what are we going to do about our lands back home?”

While he chewed, Victor thought it over. Not a lot had changed for him in that regard. Yes, he owed Dar some service as an apprentice, but he’d never intended to live full-time on Fanwath. Lam’s entire world and her future plans had been upended by, first, Edeya’s situation and then her own decision to “resurrect.” He swallowed and shrugged. “You’re going to have to find an outstanding governor. You can visit as much as you like, or, I guess, as much as you can afford to, but I think, just like Edeya, you’re better off in Sojourn for now.”

Lam folded a piece of bacon into her mouth, licking the grease from her fingers, and nodded. “I suppose that’s right. I just have to face the facts; my priorities have changed. Speaking of Edeya . . .” She summoned a Farscribe book from her ring and began leafing through it. “Roots!”

“What?”

“They’re out of the dungeon! Edeya got to ten and wants our help choosing her Class. They want to know where we are.”

At that moment, one of Dar’s servants stepped into the room. “Victor, sir?”

“Yes?”

“Master Lo’ro calls. His coachman awaits at the front door.”

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“Ah, damn,” Victor said, standing. “I guess I gotta go, Lam.”

She nodded, shifting to the edge of the couch as though she’d get up, too. “Should I stay here? Should I send for Edeya and Darren?”

Victor looked at the servant who’d come to summon him. “Excuse me, but is there a coach available to pick up some friends of ours?”

“Master Dar left Mister Qwor at your disposal. He can fetch your friends.” Victor had heard the name a time or two. Qwor was one of Dar’s drivers.

“Can you send him to speak to Lam? She can give him directions.”

“I’ll do better,” Lam said, standing. “I’ll ride along with him. Where will I find Mister Qwor?”

“At the carriage house. I’ll guide you, milady.”

“All right. See you later, Lam.” Victor wanted to get moving before he inadvertently upset Lo’ro; he had no idea how touchy the master Death Caster might be.

Lam and the servant walked with him toward the door, and the one-time Imperial Captain said, “Keep an eye on your Farscribe book! We’ll keep you updated on any developments. Speaking of Farscribe books, have you heard from Valla or Lesh?”

Victor shook his head, frowning. “Not since they entered their dungeon. I’m not too surprised, though; it’s supposedly pretty challenging. I’m sure she’ll send me an update sometime today.” With those words, Victor stepped through the lake house’s front door and saw Lo’ro’s coach.

So did Lam, and she exclaimed, “Roots, Victor! Be careful,” as she took in the weird, spectral carriage. It was a sleek, dark wood and metallic shape—it reminded Victor of some kind of luxury car from the 1940s, but larger. It glowed an unearthly silver-blue and had a faintly translucent quality. As he approached, Victor saw that it hovered over the cobbles on two discs of pulsing blue light, and he could feel the air being displaced by tangible waves of force. It had four doors like a sedan, but the rear ones were overlarge, and one of them opened as he stepped up to the strange vehicle.

“Get in, prodigy. We’ve a task to complete, and I’d prefer not to spend the whole day at it.” The voice that came out was rough but loud and clear, and Victor felt the words spur him to action. He nodded and slid through the opening, finding himself in a spacious compartment that reminded him more of a parlor in an old manor than the inside of a vehicle. Two luxurious blue couches faced each other over a plush black carpet. Dark wood paneling lined the walls, and matching wooden tables sat at the ends of the sofas. A man clad in a dark gray suit with a fancy round hat and short, silk-lined cape gestured for Victor to sit across from him.

He was clearly undead; the pale skin, black eyes, and rictus grin gave it away, but his eyes shone with amusement as he took Victor in. Seeing that, Victor reflected on the other undead creatures he’d met. Had any of them ever smiled or laughed? If so, he couldn’t remember it, not unless you counted Hector’s mean-spirited, mocking laughs as Victor had gotten trapped in the volcano’s caldera. He sat on the sofa across from Lo’ro. “Thank you for picking me up.”

“Oh! He has manners, too! I wouldn’t have guessed from the way you thrashed those mewling pups in the dungeon.” The coach lurched, and Victor felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, indicating they were moving upward and quickly. “We’ll travel to my research tower, and from there, I’ll guide you through the veil. Don’t worry; I made it sound like this would be a difficult job when I spoke to your master, but it won’t be so bad. We’ll be done by lunchtime.” He chuckled and cleared his throat. “For those of us who eat lunch.”

“I’m still not totally clear on what we’re going to—” Victor started to fish for details about their task, and Lo’ro chuckled, waving a hand.

“I’ll take you through the veil into a plane of suffering and woe, a place reserved for those spirits obsessed with darker emotions, overwhelmed by them, and lost to their pitiless embrace. You’ll capture one or two of them and bring them back to this plane of existence so that your master can teach you to cultivate from them.”

“Yeah, he kind of said that, but, like, why?”

“Why?” Lo’ro lifted a hairless brow. “You surprise me! I know you’re not a dolt, so I must assume you understood my words when I said that you can cultivate from them. That means you must question the act of cultivating itself. Hmm, do you have another way to strengthen your Core?”

Victor had not meant that, but now that Lo’ro asked, he found himself looking down, not willing to share his secret about consuming the hearts of his foes. “I have other ways to cultivate,” he said, trying to deflect. “I create constructs of my emotions, pure, essential memories of rage or fear, for instance, and reflect on them. Doing that, I slowly create Energy to add to and build my Energy pool.”

The deflection didn’t fool Lo’ro. “Ah, the lad has a secret!” His dusty words faded into a soft chuckle as he shook his head. “Keep it, young prodigy. You and I both know that, yes, you can cultivate a spirit Core through reflection and meditation, focusing on the powerful emotions your memories can harbor. We also both know that it will only get you so far. You must seek sources of Energy outside yourself if you want to master your cultivation. I can tell from the strength blazing in that inferno of roiling emotions you call a Core that you’ve broken through at least a couple of tiers, so you must have something more that you’re not sharing with me. Something to do with that Breath Core, perhaps?”

Victor looked up sharply, narrowing his eyes, hoping that if he looked defensive about his Breath Core, it might deflect from his real secret. It seemed to work because Lo’ro chuckled and waved it off. “Worry not. I have my interests when it comes to Spirit Casters, but such a strange application is too novel, too bloodline-specific to be of much use to me and mine.”

“Bloodline-specific?” Now, it was Victor’s turn to show interest.

“Not just anyone can grow a Breath Core! Draconic species, elemental beings, and just a handful of Elder races with the right constitution, I’d say. Still, I wonder how you did it. How’d you get that second Core to take root in there, hmm?”

For the second time in just a few minutes and from a completely different angle, Lo’ro began to pry at the edges of Victor’s biggest secret. How pissed would Dar be if he told this guy about his ability to consume hearts for his own gain? He had no idea, of course. The master Spirit Caster hadn’t told him not to mention it, but somehow Victor knew he shouldn’t. “It’s a long story,” he grunted, closing his eyes and leaning back on the couch. He decided it was better to be a little churlish than to spill his guts. He snorted as he thought of the word. Churlish—he must have gotten that one from Borrius.

Lo’ro rasped a soft chuckle, and when he spoke, Victor realized he’d made the right decision, “Keep your secrets, then, lad. I’m sure my old friend warned you about trading information freely among our kind. It’s not as though he didn’t pay dearly for what I will teach you today.”

Stolen story; please report.

They rode in silence for several minutes before Victor said, “Dar was trying to explain the realms beyond the ‘veil’ to me. He said something along the lines of how spirits are influenced by their

lives, by what they believe, when it comes to what happens to them after they pass beyond the Spirit Plane. Am I understanding that correctly?”

“Indeed. Consider the tortured spirits we’ll be seeking today—they lived lives obsessed with negative emotion to the point that it overcame their personality, their desires, and their dreams. When they died, they embodied that emotion. Passing through the veil, they find themselves drawn to kindred spirits. Their combined will and influence carved out a piece of the universe, a plane for them to haunt and wallow in their misery. Dar mentioned fear and rage and, as luck would have it, I’ve found a plane on which many such spirits roam.”

“What about my other affinities? Glory or inspiration?” Victor figured the Death Caster, being a peer of Dar’s, would at least know his affinities, so he didn’t bother trying to hide them.

“Ah, think, Victor!” Lo’ro squinted his eyes once again in genuine amusement. It was plain for Victor to see that he enjoyed teaching. “What will you be doing with these spirits?”

“Cultivating from them, right? So, I’ll be drawing the rage and fear out of them—”

“Correct!” He stared at Victor, waiting for him to make the next connection.

“So, if I found a spirit with an excess of Glory . . .” Victor trailed off, trying to imagine it. He snapped his fingers. “It wouldn’t be right. Draining a positive or even partially positive affinity would be wrong.”

“Yes! Now, many cultivators wouldn’t care. If you wanted to be evil, though—why, you could capture a living soul who exhibits great glory or inspiration and cultivate from them; far easier than finding such a being on one of the many planes of existence beyond our own. Your master believes in karmic bonds, debts, and merits, however. What we do today will be a net positive in his eyes. Can you imagine how?”

“I guess, when I take these souls consumed by anger and fear back to my cultivation chamber and siphon away those negative emotions, over time, I’ll be helping them?”

“Exactly so, lad! You’ll be doing your part to help those spirits move on from the folly of their previous lives. If you believe Dar’s preaching, the spirits we seek have built up a tremendous karmic debt. Using them for cultivation will help them pay it off, allowing them to move on to a new existence.”

“I get it. So, I’ll need to find different sources of Energy for Glory and Inspiration.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I’ll not be helping with that. Your master will have plans within plans, however.”

As the coach lurched, and Victor felt like he was riding in an elevator going down, he asked, “Have you known him long?”

“Oh yes. We’ve been friends and foes for more years than I care to count.”

“Enemies?”

“Certainly, though only for brief spats. Overall, we see eye to eye.” The coach shuddered to a stop, and he stood, walking toward the polished wooden door. “We’ve arrived.” When Victor followed him out, he found they were atop one of the many spires of the Arcanum where he’d first met Dar. This particular tower was black as coal and just as flat and non-reflective. Victor could only see the top fourth or so, looming above the dock where Lo’ro’s coach had settled, but it fit any preconceived notions he might have had about a Death Caster’s lair. Victor turned, scanning the dozens of spires within view, wondering if the one Dar used was in sight.

“Looking for your master’s tower?”

“Yeah. Just curious . . .”

“It’s that way.” Lo’ro pointed into the thin clouds toward an angular, pointed spire. “Past that tower a ways. I can’t see it from here at the moment, but if the sun’s just right and the clouds cooperate, sometimes I catch a glimpse.” He moved to the big, black metal door. “Come.”

Victor grunted in agreement and started after him, following the Death Caster through dark hallways, down winding iron stairs, and into a vaulted, black marble chamber about the size of a half-court basketball gym. Victor thought of it in that light because of the rows of tiered benches on either side of the smooth, black stone floor. The ceiling was vaulted, and strange, foggy, pale blue lights hung from the black stone arches holding the ceiling aloft.

“Don’t mind the extra seating; my students will not be attending us. Still, this room has wonderful resonance with the Spirit Plane, and I’ve already created a breach through the veil on the other side. Make yourself comfortable.” He gestured to the smooth stone floor. Victor nodded and sat down cross-legged in the center of the room. Lo’ro moved to sit before him and said, “First, the bulk of my debt to Dar will be paid in the form of a spell pattern.”

“Oh?” Victor hadn’t expected to learn a new spell.

“That’s right. I discovered this technique through many years of research and have only taught it to two of my apprentices. Well, and Dar, of course. The only

reason he's having me help you is because I did the same for him when he built his latest cultivation chamber. Still, this is valuable knowledge, Victor."

"Um, thank you, Master Lo'ro." Victor suddenly felt the need to show more respect. There was no denying the man before him was powerful, and, knowing that, it didn't rattle his Quinametzin pride to be a little subservient.

"Study this," Lo'ro wheezed, producing a paper-thin sheet of silvery metal stamped with the pattern for a complex spell. He set it on the floor between them, and Victor leaned forward, eyeing the intricate whorls mixed with sharp angles; it was a spell unlike any he'd ever learned, but nothing near as complicated as the Alter Self spell he'd learned from Tes.

While he stared at it, Lo'ro continued to speak, "I will supply two vessels in which you will capture the wayward geists."

"Geists?"

"A term I use to describe spirits consumed by emotion." Victor was smart enough, even when he was just a kid from Tucson, to recognize a word from Earth. He was also smart enough to know the System was probably choosing that word to fit whatever term Lo'ro used. Whenever he thought about the System and its strangely powerful language integration skill, he found himself falling down rabbit holes of contradictory evidence, so he forcefully turned his mind away from it. He, instead, continued staring at the pattern, trying to memorize its many shapes.

Meanwhile, Lo'ro had produced two polished bones, densely inscribed with runes. He glanced at them, noting the harsh angles of the runes, far different from those the System used on its many artifacts. One of the bones looked like a femur, and the other was curved and thin, like a rib. Victor wondered if they came from people or animals, but he didn't really want to know. "These took my apprentices many hours to prepare properly; understand that, and be aware that I will not teach you how to replicate them."

"Okay." Victor didn't know what else to say; did Lo'ro expect him to argue? To beg for the knowledge? If he ever wanted to learn how to make vessels that could hold spirits, he doubted Lo'ro was the only person with such knowledge; even Belikot back on Fanwath had been able to do it.

"Now, once you've learned that pattern, we'll step onto the Spirit Plane where my window through the veil awaits. I'll guide you to the unquiet geists, but it will be up to you to choose the right ones and capture them. Even though I've given you the spell to do it, you'll have to overpower their will, so it's important that you don't choose spirits that are too powerful. It's also important not to find one too weak; what good would that be for cultivation?"

“No, I guess that wouldn’t be much good,” Victor grunted, only half listening as he studied the pattern.

“I’ve promised Dar that I’d show you this much and guide you, but I’ve no obligation to protect you from your own folly. Attempt to bind the wrong spirit, and it could overwhelm your will and follow your tether back to your body.” That got Victor’s attention, and he looked up and frowned.

“They could take over my body?”

“There will be geists in the realm I lead you to who are far more powerful than you. I’ll protect us from their attention, but should you attempt to capture one, there’s not much I can do to keep them at bay.” Lo’ro reached up and took his fancy, round hat off, sending it into a dimensional container.

Victor noted his wispy white hair, and a stray thought came unbidden to his lips, “Do all Death Casters become undead?”

“Hah! Not easily daunted, are you?” Lo’ro shook his head, chuckling that raspy laugh. “Not all, Victor, though the paths to power through death-attuned Energy almost all lead to that road in one way or another. It’s difficult to walk the balance between life and death without the perspective undeath provides.” He gestured to the pattern in Victor’s hand. “Well? Are you ready? You needn’t memorize it perfectly; I’ll create a circle of relative calm where you can concentrate on your first casting.”

“Oh, in that case, yeah, I’m ready.” Victor nodded. He wasn’t scared off by Lo’ro’s warnings. If it was a matter of will, he was more than qualified. It sounded like he just had to avoid being stupid and trying to bite off more than he could chew. On the heels of that thought, another came to him, and he asked, “Will it be difficult to tell how powerful the geists are? Will I be able to gauge their strength?”

“Excellent question! You will have two jobs while I maintain our calm oasis— identify the geists with the proper affinity for you to cultivate and then determine if you can overpower them with your will. Some will be obvious, but others not so much, and it is those that you must target; pick something too weak, and it will be a waste of our time, and pick something too strong and . . .” he trailed off, opening his hands as he shrugged.

“Right.” Victor chuckled, and then he summoned his coyotes using inspiration-attuned Energy. They sprang out of white-gold clouds of Energy, yipping and whining as they paced around the two men. Their nails clicked on the marble, and one paused to lick Victor’s neck. “Good boy,” he laughed, unslinging Lifedrinker and laying her across his knees. “I’m ready.”

Lo'ro wore an amused expression, his black eyes gleaming from beneath his pale, bony brow. He watched the coyotes for several long seconds, then nodded. "Wise to have your companions guard you, though this room is quite secure. Nevertheless, I won't hold it against you." He lifted the two bones and nodded to Victor. "When you're ready."

"Here we go," Victor whispered, mostly to himself, as he formed the pattern for Spirit Walk. The world shifted, and he became aware of the Spirit Plane; he felt a baleful blast of death-attuned Energy and leaped to his feet, shielding his eyes from the brilliant, icy-blue rip in the fabric of reality that hung in the air before him. Lo'ro's tear in the veil reminded him of Belikot's half-formed one, though the Energy wafting off it was a thousand times more potent. Moreover, it reminded Victor of Hector's veil star. As dark thoughts and memories crowded for attention in his mind, he looked to the Death Caster, only to find a nightmare standing where Lo'ro had been sitting.