

Victor BK8: Ch11

Book 8: Chapter 11: Loaded Propositions

Darren sat on the bench, carefully nibbling the edges of the pastry, trying to savor the softer, sweeter, cream-filled portion at the center. Edeya had no such intention—she wolfed hers down in two big bites, groaning in pleasure as the hot, fresh dough melted in her mouth. “Now it’s gone,” Darren teased, taking another small bite.

“Worth it!” She licked her fingers. “How can you even enjoy such tiny bites?” They were waiting for Lam in the small park at the entrance to the network of trails leading to a few different dungeons, including the Grotto. When it had taken Lam nearly an hour to respond to their first message, saying they were out, Edeya had insisted on waiting for word, just in case she was already in the park, en route, or elsewhere. It turned out to be a good idea; the older Ghelli was on her way to escort them to one of Victor’s mentor’s homes.

“You think Lam will agree with you about your Class choice?”

Edeya shrugged, wiping her fingers on her pants. “I hope so, but I’m willing to consider the other option.” She’d narrowed her decision down to the two “epic” options she’d been offered, refusing to consider any of the “advanced” ones. Darren had to admit that the Class she preferred sounded decidedly fierce—Nimbus Reaver. Moreover, it seemed to focus on her strengths: her water affinity, weapon skill, and ability to fly. The other option was called a Cerulean Gale Summoner, and Edeya thought it was more of a caster Class. Both epic options mentioned her “Cobalt Wing” bloodline as being critical in their unlocking.

“Whatever your choice, it seems like you’re on a much different path than when you first gained levels.” Darren tried to be encouraging, but there must have been a hint of concern in his tone because Edeya looked at him more closely with those big, glittering blue eyes of hers.

“Something bothering you?”

“Oh, um, no.” Darren forced a smile. “I think I’m just a little worried about my first choice. I haven’t exactly been training my whole life for this sort of thing like you have. I also don’t have a fancy bloodline or—”

“Oh hush, Dare! You’re going to be fine. You have an amazing Core and powerful affinities. I bet you get at least an advanced option.”

“I hope you’re—” He cut his words short as he saw a slender, very human-looking young woman leaning close, slowly inching toward the two of them. She had pale skin and rosy cheeks, and she kept pursing her thin, pink lips in half-formed words as though she wanted to say something but feared interrupting. Darren pondered her, wondering if she was, in fact, human; her hair was a nondescript black, her eyes pale brown, and he didn’t see any wings or horns or other things that might set her apart. “Um, hello?”

“Oh dear! Excuse me! I didn’t mean to intrude, but I saw you two leaving the Grotto and meant to approach you. I got a bit turned around on the path and only just now stumbled upon you.” She had a melodic voice and spoke with a funny quirk, stressing the first syllable of seemingly random words.

Edeya regarded her coolly, her wings fluttering as she turned on the bench to face her more fully. “What can we help you with?”

“Um,” the girl—Darren didn’t think she could be much older than twenty—held her hand to her chest, gently touching the blue gem hanging from a loose, silver necklace. “I’m Trin, Trin Volpuré, and I’m seeking tier-one adventures to fill out my party.”

“Sorry.” Edeya waved her hand dismissively. “We’re good.”

“Hang on, Edeya,” Darren said, feeling a little sorry for the girl. She looked positively crestfallen as she turned away.

“Oh, fine,” Edeya sighed. “We’ll listen to what you have to say, but we’re a strong duo and not really looking for a party right now. We have our own friends we need to catch up to.”

“Is that so?” Trin took another step closer, standing so she faced both Darren and Edeya. “Well, you should know that a strong party makes leveling all the faster! Additionally, the reason I’m trying to form a party, rather than soloing as I have been, is that my father acquired a pass for First Clash Coliseum—I’ve heard of people gaining five levels into the second tier from a run through there. Of course, they likely went in at level nineteen; that’s the level limit for the place.”

“Really?” Edeya shifted her gaze from the willowy woman to Darren. “I just hit ten, and Darren’s only six. I think you should keep looking.”

“But you seemed so upbeat after exiting the Grotto; it seemed you had an easy time of it . . .” She trailed off, stepping back and looking Darren up and down.

“I mean, it was kind of a walk in the park, to be honest.” Darren wasn’t sure if he was trying to impress the girl or save face after Edeya outed him as a tier-zero neophyte.

“I, myself, am level fourteen, but we have two weeks! Surely you can gain the first tier by then—Darren, is it?”

“Right, Darren.” He held out a hand, a reflex from his recent years as a politician and a businessman before that. Trin regarded it for a moment with narrowed eyes, then clasped it. Her fingers were strong and warm, making him feel much more comfortable about her.

“Look, you only just met us, found out we’re kinda low-level, and you’re still pushing? Don’t you have some friends you could ask?” Edeya sounded suspicious, but Darren couldn’t really blame her; she made a good point.

“I have friends,” Trin replied, nodding, “but we compete more than we help each other. I’ve been a bit on the outs with some of them ever since they formed a party without me and completed Dagger’s Warf. The truth is that my best friend is now second-tier and won’t give me the time of day. I’m desperate to help her hone her humility!”

“We’re waiting for a ride, so listening won’t hurt.” Darren nudged Edeya’s knee. “Tell us about this First Clash Coliseum.”

Trin grinned, and suddenly, she was holding a canvas camp stool. She set it down so she could sit and face the two of them as she spoke. “It’s a dungeon set up like a series of arenas! You enter directly into the first arena, fight a wave of monsters, and then the boss. If you win, the door opens, and you progress to the next arena. It’s supposed to be amazing! The crowds are populated by dungeon-dwelling denizens, and I’ve heard stories about them throwing coins and trinkets into the arena if they like your performance. Each arena offers a unique treasure, and there’s even a title awarded to those who finish the whole coliseum.”

“A title?” Darren frowned at Edeya.

She shrugged. “It’s a special System award that usually gives you a feat.”

“That’s right! There are reports of several different titles being awarded in this dungeon.”

“And you have to be tier-one to go in?” Edeya clarified.

Trin smiled, and Darren noted a small gap between her front teeth. “Correct.”

Edeya sighed, shaking her head. She glanced at Darren, clearly annoyed that she was the only one being critical. “Look, it sounds great. I won’t deny that, but don’t you think it’s odd to come up to a couple of random strangers and ask them to do this with you?”

Stolen story; please report.

Trin nodded, but her smile didn’t falter. “It would be strange, but I haven’t been completely forthright with you. To me, you aren’t random.”

Edeya lifted an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“My older brother, Arcus, was in the recent challenge dungeon. A man—I believe it was your friend or patron or father—I don’t know—beat my brother. It was the happiest moment of my life!”

Edeya turned red and almost choked. “Victor is not my father!” She laughed, slapping Darren on the knee.

Darren grinned along with her at the idea; as far as he had surmised, Victor was quite a bit younger than he was. Still, he tried to diffuse Edeya’s sudden hysteria. “He’s kind of a patron, though.”

Trin smiled along with Edeya's laughter. She didn't seem insulted as she shrugged. "Whatever he is to you, I am forever in his debt. He took my prideful brother down a few notches and lightened the shadow in which I live."

Edeya finally relented, breathing deeply, smiling as she slapped Darren's knee again. "Well, that's neat, but how do you know who we are?"

Trin leaned closer and spoke softly, "My family is wealthy, and I have many employees at my disposal. When your, um, patron, Victor, beat Arcus, I immediately had my head of security research him. I was desperate to know more about the man who humiliated my brother in the first few minutes of the challenge. I'm sorry for the intrusion, but when I learned he had family or close friends who were near my level, it just felt like fate. You see, my father only gave me this dungeon pass because Arcus lost."

Darren leaned back, folding his arms over his chest. He didn't love the sound of the whole thing. It felt like scheming, and he was trying to get away from that sort of business. Edeya gave him a questioning look, and he said, "I don't like the idea of you using us as pawns to get at your brother. We don't know enough about the politics in this city to get involved in something like that."

"Pawns? Not at all! I want to be strong! I want to make allies of people who are, themselves, allied with the great Victor! Surely, you'd be boon companions; I wasn't lying when I said you seemed relaxed and unharmed by your time in the Grotto. Not everyone comes out of there so chipper."

She sighed and twisted her hands before her, looking deeply into Darren's eyes. "My brother has eclipsed my life. My entire existence is a mere amusement for my father, an excuse to spend money on pretty necklaces or dresses while he devotes all of his real resources toward building Arcus and my other siblings up to their tests of steel. When your patron thrashed him, it was an eye-opening experience in my household. Only minutes after Arcus was rescued, my father gave me this dungeon pass, and I believe it's a test; he wants to see what I can do with it."

Darren opened his mouth to respond, but then Edeya pointed and jumped up. "Lam's here!" She turned to Trin and said, "It's an interesting proposal. Is there some way we can get ahold of you?"

"Of course!" She, too, stood and produced a small, gold-leafed card, a bit larger than a modern business card. "My calling card." Edeya took it, turning it front to back, a puzzled twist to her lips as her upturned nose twitched. Trin quickly added, "Simply channel some Energy into it, and we'll be able to communicate for a few moments."

"Sounds good. Nice to meet you, Trin. Let's go, Dare!" Edeya practically skipped toward Lam and the waiting coach, her wings veritably showering the cobbles with sapphire motes of Energy.

Darren started after her, but Trin took his wrist, tugging until he looked back into her eyes. "It was very nice to meet you, Darren. I hope you'll consider my offer."

"Yeah." He smiled, rather enjoying her gentle touch. "Of course we will."

“I mean, even if your friend is uninterested, I hope you’ll still consider it. Here.” She handed him a calling card just like she’d given Edeya.

“Dare! Come on!” Edeya called, and he glanced back to see both of the Ghelli ladies waving at him to hurry.

“I gotta—”

“Yes, I’m sorry to delay you.” Trin released his wrist, and Darren smiled at her once more before hurrying away. He was interested, and he thought Edeya probably was too. Still, the whole family politics aspect was a little off-putting, and he thought it would be wise to talk to Lesh about things first. He chuckled at the idea; the old Darren wouldn’t have trusted anyone’s opinion over his own.

“Maybe I really am changing,” he muttered, smiling as he approached Lam.

“Are you ready?” Lam asked, grinning very brightly. “You two will love the house where Victor’s mentor has us staying. I’m not sure how long we’ll be allowed to stay, but we’ll enjoy it while we can.” She opened the coach door. “Come on, I have some rather big news for you, Dey-dey.”

“Really? Well, wait until you hear about my new Class options!”

Lam smiled and winked at Darren. “I’m breathless with anticipation!”

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Lo’ro the Grim had a terrifying countenance on the Spirit Plane. His form had stretched to match Victor’s, standing nearly ten feet tall, but his arms and legs were long and skeletal beneath his tattered, layered black robes. His face, though, was a thing of nightmares—great black hollows in which white, haunting flames flickered, sharp cheekbones, pulling free of the paper-thin gray flesh that struggled to contain his skeletal maw with its worm-filled jagged teeth, and a forked tongue that slithered along his rotten lips like a black, two-headed worm.

He coughed at great length as Victor stood to his full height, Lifedrinker humming in his hands, yearning to cleave the monstrosity before him. After a moment, Lo’ro gathered himself and said, “My aspect here reflects my Core more than I’d like; I’ve mastered some facets of the Spirit Plane, but it’s never been a comfortable place for me. Come, I’ll tune the aperture to the realm we seek, and we can step free of this vile place.”

Victor squeezed Lifedrinker, reining her in; Lo’ro might be a disgusting Death Caster on the Spirit Plane, but that didn’t make him weak. He nodded and watched as the master of death chanted an ancient-sounding limerick in a language the System didn’t translate, and then the blazing blue rend in space flared with black smoke and took on a gray hue. “Now!” Lo’ro cried, and he led the way, stepping into the light. Victor figured he was too committed to back out, so he followed him. It felt like his body flash froze as he passed through, and when he took stock of his surroundings, his spirit form’s teeth were chattering.

His eyes were immediately drawn to Lo'ro, who once again looked like his physical self, back on the Material Plane. The realm they stood in was a featureless gray plane, and Lo'ro's faintly translucent body bled black smoke into the gray air. Victor looked down at himself and saw that his usual form prevailed on this plane, too, though he was limned with faint white light that wisped away into foggy smoke. "What's with the smoke?"

"Our Cores bleed Energy to keep us solid in this place. Fear not. You're strong enough to last a good long while. Ware, now, while I craft a circle." Lo'ro summoned a long, thin black rod and began to trace it on the weird, gray ground. The white-gray light of the aperture through which they'd traveled illuminated their surroundings for nearly fifty yards in every direction, and Victor slowly turned in a circle, wondering what the denizens of that place might look like.

Lo'ro drew a circle and then began etching runes within it while Victor watched their surroundings. He didn't have to wait long before he saw his first geist. It floated in the air, a being of red light that twitched and flickered, occasionally giving Victor glimpses of its features—a skeletal hand, a yawning, silently screaming mouth, wide horror-filled eyes, or strands of wispy, ragged hair. The creature drifted past them, never coming close, and as it moved beyond the light of the aperture, it faded from sight. "How do I tell which geists share my affinities?"

Lo'ro grunted as he scrawled another glowing, white rune into the gray silty soil. "You'll feel it. Don't worry; they'll start to crowd around after I finish my circle; it will bait them close while keeping them at bay."

Victor stooped to touch the ground, noting it felt a lot like the wet sand near the lake back in the Free Marches. "What is this stuff?"

"No idea. The primal roots of the universe? The spirits who've carved this dimension out aren't concerned with scenery—this is a place to wallow in misery and hate." Lo'ro straightened, and his rod disappeared. "Done! Get that spell ready." Victor nodded, lifting the silvery sheet. He glanced at it, studying it while they waited. He was confident he could build the pattern in his pathways.

Proving that the Death Caster knew what he was talking about, a few geists drifted out of the grayness. They weren't all red like the first one Victor had seen; some were sickly green, others shades of gray and black, and still others in varying intensities of red, from pale, nearly pink to deep, bloody crimson. "Do the colors indicate an affinity?"

"Perhaps," Lo'ro chuckled. "Use your inner eye."

The geists began to drift toward them, hissing and moaning, their features obscured by the wisps of smoky steam drifting off their forms. Victor could catch glimpses, though, their faces flickering with expressions of fury and pain, agony and terror. He closed his eyes and looked in on his Core, expanding his view outside himself, and then he saw what Lo'ro meant—the various geists were like flames burning Energy. Victor immediately recognized some with fear and rage attunements; the Energy was too familiar to miss.

He began to understand what Lo'ro had meant about the geists varying in strength. Some of those flames flickered like candles, some burned bright like torches, and still others were like geysers of fire, difficult to look upon. Victor wondered if he could dominate such a spirit. He was concentrating on the red, rage-attuned geists, trying to choose a target for his first spell, when he heard a soft, sibilant whisper enter his mind, "I sense a kindred fear in your heart, bright one."

Victor looked toward the source of the sound, how he could tell, he didn't know, and saw a dark, purple-black flame, a powerful, overbearing one that roared up from the ground like a pillar of billowing black smoke. He stopped looking with his inner eye and saw the geist, a willowy, spectral woman sheathed in misty black and purple steam. The steam parted long enough for him to catch a glimpse of her horror-filled expression, wide eyes, yawning mouth. It flickered, and he swore she smiled, suddenly serene. It only lasted an instant before awful fear returned, clouding her eyes and twisting her face.

The voice came into his mind again, "Take me! Take me with you, and I'll whisper secrets your master could only dream of." Victor frowned, wondering if she meant Lo'ro. Surely that was the case; there wasn't any way the geist could know about Ranish Dar. The idea that this spirit could communicate bothered him. Lo'ro had suggested that the spirits or geists, as he called them, were driven mindless by their past lives, their over-cultivation of fear or rage, or whatever other negative emotional affinity they'd taken in.

He looked at the Death Caster and saw his dark eyes on him, watching intently. Victor cleared his throat. "Should they be able to speak to me?"

"What?" Lo'ro chuckled, shaking his head. "Are you daftly trying to communicate with them? They're mindless! Choose one and try the spell, lad; I've plans for the rest of my day."

"Your master knows little. Take me! I won't fight!" The voice came to him again, and Victor switched back to his inner eye, studying the powerful, dark pillar of midnight purple Energy. The geist was strong; if it was overwhelmed by fear, how could it talk to him? Why would he be foolish enough to listen? Again, she spoke into his mind, "Secrets! Bind me; take me from here! Help me!"

If the thing hadn't said those last two words, if it hadn't asked for help, Victor might have ignored it. He might have chosen caution for once in his life and picked a fear-attuned geist with a much smaller presence. How could he ignore the pleas of any being able to think and form words in a place like that, however? The smart thing would be to back away, not risk this thing trying to trick him, trying to overpower him, or trying to follow his spirit tether back to his physical form.

Regardless of what was smart, his Quinametzin pride wouldn't let him back down. Not from a challenge and not from a plea for help. That was one factor. The other was that Lo'ro didn't even know it was possible for a geist to communicate; how could Victor ignore such a development? How could he pretend it didn't happen and leave it behind? Carefully weaving a thick rope of

bright, glory-attuned Energy, he built the pattern for the spell Lo'ro had given him, and, focusing on the purple-black geist, he cast it.

[Book 8: Chapter 12: Unquiet Ancestors](#)

Next Chapter

As Victor meticulously completed the intricate pattern, the spell snapped into place, and a surge of Energy was drawn from his Core. Despite crafting the spell with glory-attuned Energy, a choice he instinctively believed would be most effective in subduing the will of a fear-attuned geist, the spell drew from all of his affinities, blending his various Energy types as it materialized. He could feel it flowing out of the pathway apertures in his hands, manifesting in the air. Mighty spectral chains burst forth, their clanking links resonating eerily as if the sound had to ascend from a profound abyss.

The black, fear-drenched geist jerked back at their touch, thrashing, but Victor could feel the tugs, and they weren't strong. It was almost as though the spirit was putting on a show, making it look like she was resisting while, in reality, she welcomed the embrace of the bindings. He could feel the spell working, binding her Energy and seeking a place to cage it. He glanced at Lo'ro and saw the Death Caster watching intently, a mad gleam in his eye, and the rune-inscribed rib bone held ready.

“That's it, lad. You've captured a formidable one—with such ease! I'm astounded! Now, direct the chains to this vessel.” Victor obeyed, exerting his will through the Energy-forged chains, guiding them toward the bone. The geist silently writhed and screamed, but he encountered little resistance as the radiant, spectral chains plunged into the bone and began to retract, drawing her in. Victor observed, pondering the enigma he had become a part of; he could perceive with his inner eye that the geist was potent, yet he barely had to exert himself to guide the chains into the bone. Was the ruse just meant to fool Lo'ro, or was he also being duped in some greater scheme?

As if reading his mind, the voice came into his head again, “Thank you for taking me! The bindings on this cage will keep me silent, but if you hold it, we can speak again. I will await your call, fear-brother!” With that, the chains lurched, yanking her spectral form into the bone with a final, baleful red flash of the many jagged, harsh runes.

“Well done! You made quick work of that one! Do you require rest before attempting the second?”

Victor took a deep breath and let it out slowly, glancing at the System messages he'd previously ignored:

*****Congratulations! You've learned a new spell: Greater Spirit Binding – Advanced.*****

*****Greater Spirit Binding - Advanced: You have learned to bind a bodiless spirit using spirit-attuned Energy. Once bound, you can draw it into a properly prepared vessel. This spell pits the potency of your Energy combined with your will against that of the spirit, though the greater nature of this spell offers a force multiplier in your favor. Failure to control the target spirit will give it access to your spirit's vessel. Energy Cost: 10000, Cooldown: minimal.*****

Victor's eyes widened when he saw the spell was at the "advanced" stage—not something he'd complain about. "I should be good for another," he grunted, noting he'd already gained back a quarter of the Energy the first spell had required. His high will attribute was proving to be quite a boon when it came to Energy regeneration. A thought occurred to him, and he asked, "The spell description specifies spirit-attuned Energy. Are you also a Spirit Caster?"

Lo'ro nodded, his thin lips pulling back in a sly smile. "I have some small talent, a specialized Core that harbors death and spirit Energies. I only tell you that much because it's not much of a secret, and I'm sure your master would explain it if you asked him."

"Ah, right. I actually know someone with something similar, though she's let her death affinity atrophy." Victor was thinking of Thayla, but what he didn't mention was that he was responsible for her affinity with courage-attuned spirit Energy.

"Intriguing, but not overly so; half a Death Caster's dealings are with the dead, and many of those are bodiless. It pays to learn a thing or two about the spirit. Still, it's not the same as you Spirit Casters; I don't delve into the deep secrets of my soul, seeking to harness the power of my psyche, my virtues, vices, and traumas. Hah! No, lad, I cultivate a particular brand of attuned Energy, and I do it from an external source. Now, you must be ready! Find your second geist, and we can be on our way, my debt to Ranish Dar paid in full."

Victor watched as the Death Caster shifted the rib bone to his other hand and held the long, rune-inscribed femur ready. He changed his view to that of his inner eye and surveyed the geists crowding the circle Lo'ro had drawn. He recognized a familiar heat, a similar smoldering anger in some of the geists. They were universally red-toned, though the darker, deeper, crimson-wreathed ones resonated most with his rage-attuned Energy. He narrowed his target down to a choice between two. Both had a clear rage signature, though one was significantly brighter than the other.

Victor studied the baleful spirit, watching with his inner eye as the fury roiled out of it in a towering flame that eclipsed the lights of the nearby geists. He could feel the furnace of that rage, taste the bitter hate that lingered along the edges of it. Was it too much for him? Could he master such a geist? He had no idea how hard it would be, thanks to the fear geist coming along willingly. The other geist that seemed a match for his affinity was half its size but still significant. Should he settle? Victor snorted, drawing a quizzical glare from Lo'ro, but he ignored the death master.

He'd snorted at his inner dialogue because he knew the question was basically rhetorical by now. It felt like he was a slave to his Quinametzin ego; if he saw a challenge, he felt he had to take it. Perhaps that was a challenge in itself. Was he in charge here, or was the blood coursing through his veins? Victor changed the focus of his gaze to the smaller yet still potent-seeming rage geist. There

was no reason his pride had to push him away from doing something smart. Hadn't he already risked enough by binding that powerful fear geist?

He formed the pattern for Greater Spirit Binding and grinned savagely as the spectral chains burst into being, immediately lashing around the smaller rage geist. From there, things became less amusing as the spirit thrashed and jerked, and this time, Victor felt it. His connection to the chains was palpable, a coil of Energy connected directly to his own spirit, and the creature's first wild, bucking pulls against the chains almost yanked Victor out of the circle! He wrapped his hands around the spectral links and pulled, but it did little. He was being drawn, one shuddering inch at a time, toward Lo'ro's carefully drawn lines.

“Don't pull with your hands, boy! Use your will as you did with the fear geist! What's gotten into you? The rage?”

Victor growled and, switching to his inner eye, focused on the flaming, flaring light of the geist. He bore down on it with all of his prodigious intent, willing it forward, willing it to calm, to settle, and accept its fate. “You're mine now!” Victor snarled, something rising in him, something ancient that knew what it meant to subjugate another's will. Victor didn't like it, but he needed it; he was still losing the tug of war.

As his will surged and his blood grew hot, he could hear Lo'ro chortling as the spirit bent to his demands, slowly, painfully, growing still and drifting toward the bone in the Death Caster's hand. Baleful hate and fury boiled off the geist as it crossed the circle, pulled in by the chains, but by then, it had grown sullen and quiet, and the chains sank into the bone, dragging it along with them.

As the opposition to his will faded, so too did the specter of Victor's bloodline. Was it an ancestor rearing his or her head? Had one of them come through the veil to help him, or was it just a dormant, remnant personality trait buried in his Quinametzin bloodline? He growled, annoyed to have one more thing to watch out for as he continued to grow in power.

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Lo'ro interrupted his musings, “I was impressed! That must have been a feisty geist!” He chortled again, then added, “Still, that wave of intent nearly had me wanting to crawl into that bone! Hah! Your master will be pleased to hear of it. Now, let's be gone from this realm. Step through the aperture and then end your Spirit Walk.”

Victor only scowled, his mind too crowded with dark thoughts to find amusement in the Death Caster's words. He stepped through the rip in the veil, and the frigid cold of the death-attuned Energy did much to cool his frustration. By the time he'd ended his Spirit Walk and found himself sitting among his coyotes, his mood had begun to lift. He let his coyotes lick his face while he waited for Lo'ro's return. Victor dismissed the pack when the Death Caster stirred, sending them home to the Spirit Plane.

He was slinging Lifedrinker onto his back when Lo'ro opened his eyes and stood, producing a polished ivory case with a silk-lined interior. He gently placed the two rune-inscribed bones into the case, closed it, and handed it over to Victor. “Don't store that in your cheap dimensional containers.”

Victor tucked the case against his side, holding it tight with his left hand and elbow. He nodded. "I won't."

"Any idea where your master's run off to?"

"None. He said he had to contemplate some things or something along those lines."

"So introspective, you Spirit Casters!" Lo'ro chuckled again, then beckoned Victor to follow him. "I'll deliver you back to his lake house. You've done me a favor by completing this task so quickly. You might be interested in knowing why I wanted to finish it so quickly." He looked back at Victor, raising one of his hairless eyebrows.

Victor nodded and quickly said, "Yes, sure."

"Recall, if you will, the young lady who nearly completed the challenge dungeon while you tussled around in that great cave."

"Arona?"

"Correct! Her master is Vesavo Bonewhisper, and we're rather friendly rivals. I'm trying to steal her from him." He began climbing the metal stairs that would take them to his tower's dock, and Victor followed, puzzling over his words.

"Steal her?"

"As an apprentice. She's too smart for Vesavo, and he's a cruel master. Well, so am I, but less so, I think." He laughed, that dry, raspy laugh of his, and Victor found himself scowling further. If he had Chantico's strength, he might burn the man on the spot to make the world a brighter place. He stopped in his tracks as the thought ran through his mind. Chantico? It took a second for it to click; she was the ancestor who'd gifted him with her fire when he faced the reaver army. He hadn't thought of her name in months, yet he'd just named her like she was as familiar as a friend or cousin.

Lo'ro continued speaking, but when he realized he'd moved ahead of Victor, he paused and looked back. "Something amiss?"

"I'm . . . not quite myself," Victor admitted.

"Ah! Not too surprising, considering the realm you just spent time in. Come now. Let's get you into the coach; you'll be feeling yourself in no time."

Victor grunted and began climbing the stairs again. "Right, sorry about that. What were you saying about Arona?"

"Yes! I'm attending a ball of sorts next week. Vesavo will be there, and I intend to steal his heart with my latest creation. He'll lose his mind when he sees her! He'll simply have to have her, and I intend to bargain for his apprentice." They

reached the landing, and he pushed open the heavy metal door, exposing them to the chilly gusts of the heights. Victor stepped out, inhaling the fresh air deeply and sighing in relief to feel the sun on his face. Something about the Death Caster's tower had definitely been rubbing him the wrong way.

As Lo'ro pulled the door closed with a heavy clang, Victor looked at the pale, skeletal man. "Your latest creation is a woman?"

"In a sense! She's not done yet, which is why I'm eager to get back to work today. She'll be a construct of flesh and blood, animated by my magic and infused with spirit fragments. It was quite the puzzle to find enough complementing shards, ones that harmonize and strengthen each other. It's been a labor of love for decades." He led the way along the docking spire toward the coach as he continued, "You see, I take more pleasure in the process than the final product, but Vesavo won't be able to say the same; I've crafted her to resemble his first love, a woman we both knew as young men."

Victor thought the whole thing sounded macabre and, frankly, disgusting, and the only thing he could manage to feel other than that was sympathy for Arona. He grunted in a way that he hoped Lo'ro might interpret as him being impressed, and then he climbed into the coach, walking over to sit on the sofa where he'd ridden before. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with his thumbs, feeling a headache in the back of his skull, something he hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"That rip in the veil was deep, lad. I have incredible torrents of death-attuned Energy feeding it from my tower. Your exposure to that, and also your spirit's travel beyond the veil—I'm sure, for someone with a sensitive spirit Core, it threw things out of balance. You'll be fine after a bit more time out in the sun. Dar's lake house is just what the doctor ordered." He paused and added, "Do you have a way to communicate with your ancestors?"

"Um," Victor was surprised by the question and wasn't quite sure how to answer. "I guess sometimes I talk to them. I don't know if they hear. Oh! I can also send them gifts."

"Do so again soon. It may be that they sensed you beyond the veil, which may make them unquiet." Lo'ro sounded sincerely concerned about him, and Victor forced himself to dial back some of the disdain or perhaps just dislike he was feeling for the man. Yes, his magic was creepy, and Victor wasn't on board with it, but he had just taught him a spell and helped him gather two powerful sources for cultivation. Not only that, but he seemed pleasant enough, though Victor would have bet money his joviality was a side effect of doing a favor for Ranish Dar.

He nodded and forced a smile, then closed his eyes, letting his mind wander, thinking about the sun—visualizing its orange-red reflection on Dar's lake. Soon, the image wavered in his mind's eye, and he pictured himself on the ziggurat's steps, the great sky-metal altar behind him, the sun

glowing orange-red overtop the thick, hazy jungle canopy. It felt glorious on his face and chest, soaking into his muscles, blood, and bones. He savored it, pulling the potent Energy into his pathways, letting it run through its cycles . . .

“Dead gods! Wake up, lad!” Victor felt a viselike, frigid grip on his shoulder, jostling him, and he opened his eyes, bleary with disorientation. He smelled smoke, and when he jerked fully awake, leaping to his feet, he saw that Lo’ro’s couch was blackened and smoking, and he, himself, was wreathed in red flames.

“What the fuck?” he grunted, slapping himself, but the flames were cool to the touch and hadn’t burned him or his clothes. Still, the couch . . .

“What the fuck, indeed!” Lo’ro laughed. He still gripped Victor’s shoulder, and Victor could see his sleeve was scorched, but his hand was unharmed.

“Channeling spirit flames through the Spirit Plane, if I’m not mistaken. You were dreaming?”

“Yeah. Shit, I’m sorry, Lo’ro!” Victor looked down at the couch, relieved to see the fire flickering and fading away from his body. “I was . . . I was one of my ancestors, I think.”

“They’re worried about you. It seems one of them made a connection, in any case. That should put them at ease. Still, if you have something worth giving them, I’d do so. Your connection to the realms beyond ours is profound; I don’t think Dar quite realizes how much so. Is this something you want me to keep between us?”

Victor opened his mouth to respond but paused, weighing the words. Was Lo’ro offering to help him keep a secret from Dar? Was it a trap? Surely, the Death Caster valued Dar’s friendship more than whatever he had with Victor. Victor sighed and shook his head. It didn’t matter; he had no reason to hide his connection to his ancestors from Dar. “It’s nothing I’m trying to hide. Thanks for your concern, though. Can I pay for that couch?”

“It’s nothing. The damage will be repaired in an hour’s time, and I’ll have this carriage cleaned; it was due in any case. Luckily, we’re just now arriving, and you can get some fresh air and water—things I’m told the living much prefer to an undead lord’s crypt-like accommodations!” He laughed, and Victor found it easier to forget his earlier disgust.

Victor held up the ivory case containing the two bound geists, trying to shake off the strange thoughts, feelings, and, apparently, manifestations that had been plaguing him. “Thank you for all of your help today, Master Lo’ro.”

“It was my pleasure. Never doubt I got something out of this little endeavor. I do have a small proposal for you, though, my young friend. How would you like to earn a favor of your own?”

Victor paused by the door, eager to be gone from that strange coach but also intrigued. Lo'ro was a powerhouse; having him in his debt wouldn't go amiss. "I'm listening."

"The ball I mentioned—I'd appreciate it if you attended. I'm certain I can convince Vesavo to make the trade, but Arona might be unwilling; she's grown used to his tutelage and might find the prospect of a new master daunting. If she saw you there as my guest, I might mention that your master and I are rather close and that there may be opportunities for joint training ventures sometime soon. I believe she'll be intrigued. Well, if I were honest, I might say that anyone who witnessed the events in the Vault of Valor would be."

"You want me to help you convince her to switch, um, masters?" Victor hated the word and hated how Dar was constantly being labeled as his master, but it seemed very ingrained in the culture of Sojourn and likely most worlds with powerful cultivators.

"Exactly so! As I said, I'd owe you a favor."

"Um, can I bring a guest?" Victor was missing Valla and figured she might enjoy a party.

"Certainly! Never fear; I'll arrange things with Dar. It's settled, then?" He pulled the door to the coach open, and Victor felt the sun on his face like air to suffocating lungs.

"Sure. I can do that." Victor smiled, respectfully nodded one more time, and then ducked out of the coach and into the bright sunshine. It was glorious. Lo'ro waved and closed the door, and then his ghostly carriage silently streaked away in a hazy cloud of gray, spectral smoke. Victor squinted down the drive toward the front of the house, but before he walked toward the door, he fished the Farscribe book he shared with Valla from his ring and flipped to the last page. He was suddenly desperate for some word from her. To his relief, a new message awaited him:

Victor,

All is well, though we are exhausted and drained. More battles await us after our rest, and I'm on watch. Lesh already snores nearby. I'll share more news when we're out, but for now, I'll give you this good news: We've each gained two levels!

I love you,

Valla

Victor smiled and closed the book. He'd write her a response once he was sitting in the sun with a big glass of something fresh and still full of life, something like orange juice. He clutched the ivory box and started for the house, wondering when Dar would make his next appearance.

When Victor entered Dar's lake house, it was quiet, and the servant who opened the door for him said, "Your guests are down at the lake, swimming, I believe."

He nodded, smiling at the woman. He tried to look her in the eyes while he spoke, but she kept looking down, and he didn't want to press the issue; he couldn't tell if she was trying to be respectful or if it was some cultural thing. "I'll join them soon." He gestured with the smooth, ivory case, "I'll stop by my quarters first. Any word from Dar?"

"Lord Dar has indicated that he'll be here for dinner. He does not expect you to join him. I'm sure he'll communicate his expectations. Do you share a Farscribe boo—"

"Shit!" Victor slapped his head, interrupting her. "I do. I better check it. Thanks!" He hurried to the rooms Dar had given him to use and closed the door. He sat at the suite's study desk, pulled out the Farscribe book Dar had given him, and flipped past the several dozen pages he'd written in already. On the furthest, script-covered page, he found a short note from Dar:

Victor,

Lo'ro has indicated to me that you were successful. He has reported that the experience was hard on you and that your connection to the Plane of Spirits and your ancestors is particularly sensitive. Given your history, I should have anticipated that. Do not be alarmed; when you stepped through the rip in the veil, no doubt your ancestors sensed it and grew concerned. If they weren't trying to guide you to join them, they certainly, at least, wanted to know where you had gone. Perhaps they sought to aid you. In any case, their unrest will ease knowing you are back among the living.

Take the next few days for yourself. See to your prizes from the competition, consume that monster's heart—I see no reason to delay that process. I've made the decision to allow you and your guests to stay at my lake house until such time that you've built up your fortune and can afford a home more suitable to your stature. At first, I thought it was too much, that I'd spoil you, but I believe the natural environment is vital to your spiritual development. That said, if you need funds, sell your home in the city.

To avoid my ire, check this book each day at sunrise and sunset for my instructions. When we next meet, I'll guide you to a proper location in the caves beneath the lake where we can begin the construction of your cultivation chamber.

Congratulations on your success,

Ranish Dar

Victor read the text twice, feeling strangely comforted by the Spirit Master's words and concern. He looked around the room and smiled; it was a damn sight nicer than the one he and Valla had claimed in his townhome. She was going to love it at the lake house. "How the hell did he find all that out so fast? Lo'ro just

left!” He chuckled at his muttered words. He supposed he could assume the two masters had some way of communicating that he didn’t understand. Maybe Lo’ro spoke to Dar while Victor had dozed, having his ancestor’s dream. “Before I burned up the couch!” he laughed.

He reached up to his chest, feeling the vault pendant under his shirt. He supposed Dar’s idea of building his cultivation chamber in a cave was smart for now. Victor liked having the vault with him, storing his treasures and secrets, apparently keeping them safe even from people as powerful as Lo’ro and Dar. Nodding with purpose, he left the room, still clutching the ivory box, and made his way out onto the deck. Before he descended the stairs to the pier, where he could hear laughter and splashing, he took his necklace off and opened his vault on a clear section of the deck.

The tiny metallic ball rapidly expanded with clicks and gouts of steam. The deck groaned a little under the weight, but Victor figured Dar had built it to accommodate people of his stature. How much would a dinner party of giants weigh? He chuckled at the image that conjured and opened the vault, stepping inside. His ivid royal jelly, wrapped in the ivid silk, still sat in a satchel against the wall, and Victor set the ivory box containing his two trapped geists down a few feet away from it. That done, he stepped out, closed the heavy vault door, and twisted the key until it began to shrink again.

One of Dar’s household staff had approached, a look of concern on his face, but he relaxed and offered a quick nod as Victor bent to pick up the pendant, hanging it over his neck. “Just had to put something away.”

“Of course, sir.” He gestured toward the stairs leading down to the lake. “Would you like us to prepare refreshments?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” When the man nodded and turned back to the house, Victor started down the steps. As he walked, he pulled off his shirt, sending it into the ring where he kept most of his clothes. The sun and lake air felt terrific against his skin, and he let it soak in while he took in the sight below.

Lam and Edeya sat at the end of the pier, wearing garments that looked more like underwear than swimsuits. Their wings were spread wide, fluttering in the warm breeze while they dipped their feet in the water. A splash drew Victor’s eyes out to the lake, and he saw Darren floating on his back, his long black hair splayed out in the water behind him like a fan. They were certainly enjoying the setting.

None of them had noticed him yet, and an evil grin spread on Victor’s lips as he silently sat on the steps and reached down to send his boots, socks, and pants into his dimensional ring. He stood, wearing just his boxer-like underpants. With an effort of will, he clamped down on his aura, ensuring none of it leaked out, and, like a hulking, musclebound barbarian sneaking up on a foe, he stalked down to the pier. He crept over its twenty-five-yard length until he was just a few feet behind the two women. He then bunched his thighs and leaped over them, cannonballing into the water.

Screams and curses greeted his ears when he surfaced, and Victor laughed, shaking his head and wiping the water off his face. He looked up with glee, observing the chaos he’d caused. Lam was on her feet, a hammer much smaller than the one she usually used in her right hand. Edeya was hovering in the air behind her, her ivory spear in her hands. Her wings hummed and shed thousands

of motes of blue-tinted Energy, and both women scowled, dripping water onto the drenched decking. “What?” he asked with mock innocence.

“Victor!” Edeya screamed, diving toward him, swinging the spear like a club, intending to clobber him. Lam chuckled, shook her head, and sent her hammer back into her ring. Of course, Victor knew more about horseplay in a pool than Edeya was prepared to handle. He snatched the spear haft as she swung it close, and with just a fraction of his titanic strength, he used it to launch her toward the center of the lake.

Edeya howled, her wings humming with effort to correct her flight. She almost succeeded, righting herself and slowing her descent, but not quite enough; she splashed into the water a dozen yards beyond where Darren floated. Victor laughed and reached the spear toward Lam so the other woman could take it and lay it on the pier.

“She’s going to be angry!” Lam said, shaking her head.

“Nah,” Victor chuckled. “She enjoyed that. See?” He was right; Edeya’s wings buzzed and splashed, and then she shot out of the water, streaking back toward the pier. He wasn’t sure, but he thought she was flying faster than she used to.

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“Bully!” she cried as she settled onto the pier, then plopped down again beside Lam. Victor flopped onto his back in the water, letting his momentum carry him a little further away from them.

When he surfaced, he chuckled, “I’m going shopping soon; I’ll buy you all some swimsuits.” He stared up into the hazy sky, amazed by how many stars he could still see, even in the middle of the day.

“What?” Edeya asked, but then Lam laughed, and Victor heard her whisper.

“He thinks our impromptu swimming garments are too immodest!”

“Well,” he said, trying not to sound like a prude, “I mean, when they got wet, I could see through ‘em.”

“Creep!” Edeya howled, and when he smiled her way, he saw she and Lam were both shrugging into loose-fitting shirts.

“He’s not a creep,” Lam said, lifting an arm over Edeya’s shoulders. “He’s just a man. He didn’t have to say anything.”

“I know,” Edeya sighed. “You know he and I like to tease. Don’t fret. Besides, when I tell Valla . . .”

“Hey!” Victor splashed a wave of water her way. “Don’t make me pull you down to the bottom!” She kicked water back at him, and when he finished laughing, he

said, "So? What did you think of Lam's news?" Victor heard splashing behind him and turned to see Darren slowly swimming back toward the dock. He had a smooth way of moving in the water like he'd done a lot of swimming in his life.

Meanwhile, Edeya gushed, "It's amazing! We're going to level together! Can you think of anything more wonderful?" Victor had expected her to be a little upset with Lam, considering the risks involved in the process. When he peered at the older woman, she narrowed her eyes and ever-so-slightly shook her head. That clarified things: Lam had omitted some of the facts. Victor figured she'd give Edeya the details as time passed and the younger woman grew more and more comfortable with the idea.

He considered Edeya's question and shook his head. "No, I really can't. I want to do the same with Valla; I wish circumstances allowed us to do more together."

Lam looked at Edeya and sighed. "I keep trying to tell her that I wanted a second go at leveling, at Classes, skills, and rewards. It's not all about you, Dey-dey." Victor could see Edeya wasn't buying it.

"Of course, of course." She grinned, eyes twinkling. Then she gasped and turned to face Victor. "You gave her a spirit Core! And we both have new Classes!"

Victor knew what she wanted, so he asked, "Well? Tell me about your Class, then."

"I'm a Nimbus Reaver, and as soon as I chose it, I gained a skill! Improved flight!"

"I thought you seemed faster. Nice one, Edeya. Nimbus Reaver, huh? Sounds tough." He nodded in approval. "You can still use the spear?" He'd given her one of the finer, though not overly heavy and powerful, spears that had belonged to Karnice, the one-time champion of Coloss. He knew the question wasn't necessary; hadn't he just flung her with that same spear? But he knew she wanted to talk about the Class, so he thought it was a good opening.

"Yes! It's a Class that will take advantage of my water affinity while nourishing my bloodline development and combat abilities."

"Should go nicely with Lam's new Class, too." Victor nodded and turned to look at Darren, who'd been treading water nearby for a while. "Getting close to ten, Darren?"

He nodded. "Level six, but close to seven, I think."

"Cool. Nice job, man." Victor wanted to go for a swim, but he figured he should share some of his news. "Dar gave me permission to live here, and he explicitly said me and my 'guests,' so I think I'll head into town and pick up our belongings from the villa. I think I might sell it."

“Really?” Edeya squealed, and Victor saw her grasp Lam’s hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Yeah, he thinks it’ll be good for my development.” Victor shrugged. “Speaking of development, Lam, I have a few spell patterns I should teach you.”

“You’d do that?”

Her surprise caught Victor off guard. He nodded and shrugged. “Of course I will.”

“Well,” Lam squinted down at him between the fingers of her hand, fighting to make eye contact in the bright glare of the sun’s reflections, “I really appreciate that, Victor. We’re talking about heading into another dungeon soon. If Lesh and Valla get out in the next day or two, do you think Dar would be okay with us having a dinner party here? Edeya and I want to cook for you.”

Victor grinned at the idea. “He said I could live here with my guests, so there’s no way he’d say we can’t have a dinner party. Besides, who knows how many houses that guy has? I’ll write it into the Farscribe book when I make my report tonight.”

“Yay!” Edeya said, throwing an arm around Lam’s neck and squeezing her close. “We want to invite someone for you to meet. She asked us to join her party to go into a kind of exclusive dungeon, and we want your opinion about her.”

Lam held up a hand. “That’s Edeya’s idea. I haven’t met this girl.”

“It’s fine with me. Maybe I could invite a friend, too.” Victor was thinking of Sora. He flopped back and kicked his legs, moving further into the water. “I’m heading to town in an hour or so if any of you want to come. For now, I’m going to try to swim across the lake.” With that, he turned and struck out, swimming over the surface, face down, marveling at how good it felt to exert himself in the cool water with the sun on his back.

While he swam and considered the idea of hosting a dinner party, he pictured a few other potential guests. Would Drobna, the turtle-like berserker, want to come? Victor thought it would be fun to chat with him about the things they had in common. He grinned as he imagined inviting Cam, too, just to put him on the spot to see how he acted toward Sora. Would he hold a grudge? Then, there was the giant armor-plated warrior and his wife—they’d be fun to talk to, wouldn’t they?

When he realized he was thinking of inviting the people he’d thrashed in the dungeon, Victor rolled onto his back and laughed. Was he so eager for some drama? Was he trying to stir shit up, or was he trying to clear the air? He liked to think it was the latter.

He stopped halfway into the lake, not because he was tired but because it was taking too long. He didn’t want the whole afternoon to slip away while he swam. When he returned, the others were already on the deck, comfortably dressed and enjoying a light lunch. Victor’s stomach rumbled, but he knew it was just habit; he felt amazing after the swim and knew the rich ambient Energy on

Sojourn was doing plenty to nourish his body. Still, he sat down with the others and ate a plate of cold meats, each marinated or cured with different seasonings and spices.

The meats were rolled and skewered with toothpicks, along with complementing cold, crisp vegetables, and he wished he had some kind of guide to explain what each of them was. “This is so good,” he mumbled around a mouthful. “Valla would love this.”

“Lesh wouldn’t,” Darren laughed. “He’d take a tray, pull out all the toothpicks, and then eat the meat in one or two bites.”

Victor laughed and raised an eyebrow at the guy. He was a damn sight different from the suit-wearing politician from First Landing that he’d been. He wore a loose, button-up linen shirt, the collar hanging wide, over soft-looking gray slacks. His feet were bare, and his long, black hair hung loose over his shoulders. The guy looked like a lounging movie star. “You’re looking better, Darren. Just a few levels, and you already seem more . . . solid, I guess.”

“Dare was great in the dungeon, Victor!” Edeya said, licking her fingers after a bite.

“Yeah?”

“Yep. I was worried he’d be, you know, maybe a little hesitant, I guess, but he was positively brave. He fended off a toad boss that was twice his size!”

“Dare, huh?” Victor nodded. “I like it. Well, good job.” Victor stood and walked toward the house, pausing on his way to clap Darren on the shoulder. He was careful not to knock him out of his seat, and he could see the man’s smile broaden at the gesture. “Anyone going with me?”

“I will,” Lam said. “I want to shop for new hammers and a shield. I’m going to try to be a front line for these two.” She looked at Victor. “Will that be all right? Are you going to a weapon shop?”

“Better, I’m gonna check out the auction house. Sora mentioned it to me while I was in the dungeon. I’m pretty sure we can find you what you need.” Victor planned to try to trade one of the five set-piece items he had for a pair of pants in the set; he was tired of his pants getting shredded all the time. He also had his prizes from the campaign back on Fanwath to look into—the magma attunement gem and the lava king hide. “After that, I want to speak to my realtor and stop by the house.”

Edeya gestured a toothpick toward Darren. “I’m going to help him cultivate.”

Victor nodded. “When you get to level ten, Darren, if that staff isn’t going to be ideal, I have a shitload of other weapons. We’ll make sure you’re ready for the next dungeon.”

“Thank you!” Darren stood, and it looked like he was about to bow, but he just nodded respectfully. “I wish there was a way to level without going into a dungeon. Wouldn’t it be great if I were ten before then?”

“A level or two from cultivating and learning spells isn’t unheard of,” Lam said, “But four levels in just a day or three won’t be likely.”

“Speaking of spells,” Edeya said, leaping up. “Victor, will you see if you can find any cheap, lower-level spell patterns for water or lightning affinities? I mean, chaos, too, but that sounds scary, so . . .”

“Uh,” Darren said, holding up a hand, “don’t go out of your way or anything . . .”

“Relax,” Victor chuckled, “I’ll check the auction house.”

Lam gestured to the door. “Come on, Victor. Before our shopping list grows any more. You can talk to me about courage affinity spells while we ride in the coach.”

Victor shrugged and waved at Edeya as he followed Lam through the door. It was nice to have friends around him, but he missed Valla. While he followed Lam to the coach house, he thought about the Gargantuopod heart in his dimensional ring. Should he eat it that night? He had Dar’s blessing but didn’t want to get knocked out for days. What if Valla came home, and he missed her? He didn’t think that was all that likely—he’d eaten a few potent hearts, and none of them had knocked him out for all that long, unlike the bloodline evolution treasures he’d consumed.

“Yeah,” he said, though all he got from Lam was a puzzled look. He winked at her, adding, “I’m going to have a busy night.”

Book 8: Chapter 14: Upgrades

“So,” Victor said as Dar’s coach pulled away, sending his stomach sinking as it lurched into the sky, “Edeya seems happy.”

“She is! Thanks, Victor, for not mentioning the risks of the ritual. I’ll let her warm up to the idea and put a little distance between us and what I did before I give her those details.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Victor smiled and leaned back, enjoying the comfortable ride; like Dar’s other coach, this one had plenty of room for him at his normal stature. “So you need a new hammer?”

“My current favorite requires a good deal more strength than I can muster. Oh! Speaking of equipment, though, I got you something.” She produced a small, flat, circular stone and handed it over. Victor took it, feeling a slight warmth and a tiny tingle of Energy. It felt good.

“What’s this?”

“I met a girl by the path to the lower-level dungeons. She claimed to have a luck affinity and sold these stones for extra money. “Do you think it’s real? I already gave one to Edeya and Darren.”

“There’s definitely something in here.” Victor narrowed his eyes. “Luck, huh? Is that a spirit affinity?”

“You’re asking me?” Lam laughed but nodded and added, “She said it was. I liked the way it felt, and I think mine already brought me some luck. I was rubbing it when I asked Dar to help me.”

Victor chuckled. “Well, thanks, Lam. I won’t turn down a bit of luck.” He tucked the little stone into a pocket. “How about I give you a spell to study? From what I’ve been able to figure out, it’s a courage affinity’s version of Berserk. I don’t use it much, so I only have it at the basic level, but I bet it gets better and better as you improve it.”

Lam leaned close and gripped his wrist in her much smaller hands. “That would be amazing!”

Victor smiled and produced a sheet of paper and one of the magical quills he’d picked up while browsing curio shops. “I have this pattern memorized and could probably draw it blindfolded.” As he began to trace the lines, he continued, “It’s called Heroic Heart. The basic level of the spell will give you immunity to fear effects and make it hard for anyone to affect your mind with spells that might confuse or even control you. Your will is important, of course, but the spell gives you a massive boost to any resistance you put up.”

“That sounds incredible!”

“Yeah, this is the basic pattern I used to create most of my most potent spells; I just try it with different affinities as I gain them. My first was Berserk, then I gained my inspiration affinity and learned to weave that with rage to create courage-attuned Energy. That’s how I figured this one out.”

“So, mixing other spirit affinities can create a different one?”

“Yep! It’s not just mixing, though.” Victor finished the pattern with a flourish. He had to admit that his higher dexterity and intelligence were really starting to show in his control of the pen; his lines were straight, his curves perfectly formed, and his artistic flair matched what he imagined in his mind. He’d added shading and contours without even thinking about it. He handed the sheet to Lam. “When you combine different spirit Energies, you have to use the right weave, which takes some guidance to learn the first few times. I’ll help you, but first, we need to find a second affinity for you.”

Lam took the pattern almost reverently, and her eyes widened as she studied it. “This is so different from the other spell patterns I’ve learned. It resonates with me somehow!”

“It’s meant to use the Energy in your Core, which is now a reflection of your spirit. I bet that’s a lot different than learning spells for generic Energy.” Lam only nodded, her eyes glued on the pattern. “I have a few other spells I should teach you before you go getting into fights. When we get back to the house, I’ll write ‘em out for you, okay?”

Lam nodded, blinking her eyes and laughing, looking away from him. “I’ve been so stupidly emotional ever since the ritual. Thank you, Victor.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. If you think you’re emotional now, wait until I show you what cultivating is all about as a Spirit Caster.” Victor chuckled ruefully. “Be thankful your first affinity isn’t rage.” He left it at that, and Lam was too engrossed in the spell pattern to dig further into his meaning, so Victor sat back and enjoyed the rest of the short ride into the city.

Their first stop was the Sojourn Auction Hall, something he’d heard Cam and Sora talking about during their initial, meandering trip through the ruins toward the stairs of the competitive dungeon. When they arrived and the coachman opened the door, Victor looked at him and asked, “Mister Qwor, should we find another ride back to the lake house?”

“No, sir. My latest instructions are to serve as your coachman until Lord Dar instructs me otherwise. I’ll remain in the vicinity. If I’m forced to move the coach while I wait, simply tap your signet ring three times, and I’ll locate you.”

Victor looked down at his ring and frowned. “It can do that?”

“Oh yes. Three taps for your coach, two to summon a servant in the house. It has other functions, but I’m sure Lord Dar has given you those details.”

“Not exactly.” Victor shrugged, adding it to the list of things to write to Dar about that evening. He nodded to the driver, then turned, joining Lam near the steps leading up to the auction house. “Quite a building.” She only nodded, staring up at the massive, blue-crystal rectangular edifice that soared into the sky before them. The crystalline walls were dark blue at the base, in the shadows of the other towers of Sojourn, but grew progressively lighter as they gained altitude and were exposed to more and more light. Near the top, high in the sky, the building blended with the sky to become almost invisible.

“Incredible,” Lam said, finally gathering herself and looking to Victor to lead the way.

“Right. I’m not sure how this place works. Like, I wonder if there’s always an auction going on or if there’s some kind of listing. Let’s go in and check things out.”

Quite a crowd walked by at the street level, and a constant stream of people climbed the steps to and from the building. Victor had also noticed entrances in the clouds on the crystalline walkways of the elite. “Popular place,” he remarked, nodding to Lam and starting up. When they entered the open archways in the crystal walls, the ambient temperature dropped a few degrees, and the lighting reflected the blue of the structure. It wasn’t a deep, off-putting color but a calming tint that fell on the pale gray marble floors.

Beings of gas and light operated hundreds of kiosks in the big, open hall. They were members of the same alien species Victor had seen in other official capacities around the city. He’d heard Dar mention their species name when they’d had to go to the “inquest” after his dungeon run, but Victor had already filed it away somewhere too difficult to retrieve. He picked a kiosk without a queue and approached, smiling toward the floating, pulsing ball of yellow light.

“Greetings, Sojourner. I am V-eleven. Are you here to access the auction listings?” The creature spoke directly into his mind, or so it seemed, but Lam’s body language indicated she’d heard the voice, too.

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“I’d like to learn more about it. Is it difficult to put something up for sale? When are the auctions held?”

“Ah, my apologies,” the smooth, genderless voice replied. “When I saw the signet of Ranish Dar upon your finger, I assumed you were more familiar with Sojourn. This auction house is, essentially, a large, never-ending silent auction. You can access the items listed for sale using a menu on your city tablet. I’ll gladly take any items you’d like to list on the auction and store them in this building. I’m sorry to say that we cannot list items that aren’t in the custody of the Sojourn Auction House.”

“Oh, that’s even better than I’d hoped.” Victor looked at Lam, raising an eyebrow, wanting to ensure she’d heard everything the helpful being had said. She nodded.

V-eleven pulsed, and Victor felt as though it exuded pleasure at his words. “If you would like, I’m happy to help you search through the listings. Is there anything you’re interested in finding?”

“Yeah, we have a few things. Can we start with this?” Victor fished his Cloak of Sojourn out of his storage ring and set it on the counter. “It’s really nice, and I like it, but I’ve never been a guy to wear a cape or a cloak, and, honestly, I never get cold. I was hoping to sell or trade it for some pants in the set.”

“Direct trades aren’t offered through the auction house. However, we can list this item. Similar items have an average list-to-sale time of four days, rounded up. I can see nine different ‘pant’ variations of items for this set. Would you like me to elaborate?”

“Are the pants different?”

“There are seven cloth variations and two leather. My database indicates that materials, regardless of their starting variety, can be altered by purchasing set upgrades at the Sojourn City Stone.”

Lam helped Victor move things along, “What are the prices?”

V-eleven pulsed and said, “The cloth variations range in price from 15,000 Energy beads to 27,000. The leather variations are 20,000 and 24,000.”

“What about this cloak? How much can I expect?”

“Seven others are listed for an average price of 18,000 beads.”

Victor nodded. If he'd known there were so many set pieces in the auction house, he wouldn't have bothered Sora for the cloak. He shrugged and said, “List it for me, will you? Put it up for 17,000. Also, I'll buy the leather pants for 20k.” Almost before he finished his sentence, the cloak disappeared, clearly snatched away to some dimensional container, perhaps the building itself.

V-eleven pulsed again and said, “I've listed the cloak with a 20,000-bead buyout and a one-month auction period with a minimum bid of 10,000 beads. If that's not acceptable, I can change those terms.”

Victor thought about that, having never really dealt with an auction house of any kind. It sounded like anyone could bid as little as 10,000 beads, and if no one else bid, they'd get the item in a month. However, if anyone bid 20,000 beads, they'd get the item immediately, just as he would for the pants. “Is someone likely to get it for the minimum bid?”

“Minimum bids for such items have a sub-one-percent chance of success on items in the Sojourn City set.”

“Okay, I'm fine with those terms.”

V-eleven pulsed several times, then said, “I'm sorry, but unless you'd like to open a credit account with the auction house, I'll need to collect payment for the pants before taking them off the listing.”

“No problem.” Victor dug around in his bag, frowning at his dwindling hoard of Energy beads, and pulled out a large sack of them.

“May I?” the pulsing light asked.

“Yeah, sure.” Victor watched as the sack shrank in on itself, the proper number of beads pulled away by some magic. A couple of seconds later, a pair of fine, supple, chocolate-colored leather pants appeared on the counter. Victor collected the remainder of his beads and the pants, sending them into storage. “Thanks. I have a few more things to shop for, but talk to my friend here first. This is Lam, and I believe she's in the market for a warhammer.”

He listened while V-eleven helped Lam narrow down the thousands of options, settling on a hammer that could be wielded one-handed by someone of her current strength while also providing two magical combat bonuses—reverberating impacts and a paired ring that allowed her to recall it, if thrown, at the expense of Energy from her Core. Victor liked that idea and wondered if there was any way to add such functionality to Lifedrinker. He almost felt like he should be able to talk to her about it and, as he'd been doing a lot lately, added it to his list of things to do. Lam also purchased a sturdy round shield, and it was Victor's turn again.

He spent more time than he wanted to, if he were honest, trying to find spell books or just single spell patterns for Edeya and Darren. There were a lot of possibilities, but spell patterns weren't so blithely traded away, it seemed, and there were a lot of restrictions on some of the cheaper ones—exacting affinity requirements, Class prerequisites, attribute prerequisites, and even disclaimers of potential harm if used “incorrectly.”

In the end, Victor decided to try to buy some well-known, stable offensive spells for each of them. He almost bought a Lightning Strike spell for Darren but stopped when he considered the sheer foolishness of spending nearly 40,000 Energy beads on a spell that Valla could probably teach him. So, he asked for any chaos-attuned spells, and that's when he had a much more difficult decision to make: only one chaos-attuned spell was on the entire auction house and it was selling for 95,000 Energy beads.

“Fractured Reality?” he asked, frowning.

V-eleven pulsed rapidly and said, “The listing describes the spell as ‘causing distortions and illusions that disorient and confuse enemies in a targeted area.’ It’s listed as rare.”

“I’ll buy it,” Lam offered. Victor opened his mouth to argue, but Lam pressed, “No, really. I’m going to be spending time in dungeons with him, and I can afford it. Let me get this one. You buy one for Edeya.”

Victor thought about it and nodded. He didn’t know how much money Lam had squirreled away, but he knew it was probably more than he did. “Okay, cool. In that case, V-eleven, I’ll buy the Frozen Aura spell you told me about.” It was a spell that would persist as long as Edeya fed it Energy and was supposed to slow enemies she engaged in melee range, at least at the “basic” level; it might become even more effective if she could rank it up. He handed over another 33,000 beads, and Lam paid for Darren’s spell.

“Where now, Victor?” she asked as they stepped away from the kiosk.

“We’re near the building that houses the System Stone. Let’s go there next; I want to check out what I can do with this armor set I’ve got.” She nodded, and Victor led the way. When they passed by the coach, he let Mister Qwor know where they were going, and the driver said he’d be waiting outside.

Victor enjoyed watching Lam’s reaction walking around downtown, especially when they stepped into the hall where he’d claimed his prize from the dungeon. Her mouth fell agape, and she marveled at Sojourn’s enormous, massively upgraded System Stone. “Imagine the millions of beads they’ve put into that!” Her neck craned back as she sought the highest point of the stone with her eyes.

“More like billions, I’m pretty sure.” The hall was busier than when he’d come there with Dar. Hundreds of people milled about and moved to and fro, and lines of citizens led up to each side of the stone, waiting for their turn. Victor led the way up to the shortest queue on the far side of the stone, and they waited for their opportunity to interact with it.

They made small talk about spirit Cores, Energy weaves, spell patterns, and how Victor had learned what he knew. He found it sort of cathartic to talk about Gorz and Old Mother. He spent half an hour or more talking about the old Shadeni and how she’d reminded Victor of his own grandmother. When he finally got around to mentioning Khul Bach, though, he felt a surge of guilt and hastily changed the subject; he didn’t want to think about how annoyed the sleeping Degh spirit would be when he finally got around to filling him in on everything that had happened in Sojourn.

When it was his turn to approach the stone at last, Lam accompanied him up to the dark surface with its hundreds of drifting golden runes. He navigated a simplified menu offered to the public until he came to a section titled **EXCLUSIVE, SYSTEM-GRANTED EQUIPMENT SETS**. He selected the option and found five options:

1.

2.**IRON-RANKED, FIVE-PIECE ARMOR SET**

3.**IRON-RANKED, TWO-PIECE WEAPON AND ARMOR SET**

4.**IRON-RANKED, THREE-PIECE ARMOR SET**

5.**IRON-RANKED, THREE-PIECE JEWELRY SET**

6.**LUSTROUS SET**

“Huh,” Victor said, a little surprised that there were several different sets. Only one option said “five-piece,” so he figured that was the one. He selected it, and a prompt appeared:

Please remove the set piece items from storage and place them before the stone.

Victor did as prompted, pulling out the helmet, belt, gauntlet, boots, and pants and setting them on the smooth marble floor next to the stone. Another System message appeared on the weird, floating display that, apparently, only he could see:

This five-piece armor set can be upgraded with Energy-rich materials and enchantments prior to choosing set bonuses. If you wish to do so, place the materials before the stone.

Victor thought about it for a moment, then dug through his rings until he found the “legendary-tier, magma-attunement gem” and the “master-artisan-grade hide of a lava king” he’d won during the conquest of the Untamed Marches. He set the heavy, incredibly dense, red, smoldering gem on the ground beside the thick roll of supple, deep crimson, mottled leather. Another message appeared:

Analyzing.

“Can it use those treasures?” Lam asked, finally unable to maintain her silent observation.

Victor grinned at her. “I’m about to find out.” He watched the word pulse for several seconds, and then another message appeared:

Lava King Hide is of sufficient Energy density and size to imbue all five items as follows:

Helm of Sojourn: Infused with the resilience of the Lava King: Immunity to fire damage, enhanced density, and rapid damage regeneration.

Belt of Sojourn: Infused with the volatile Energy of the Lava King: Once-daily activation to boost the wearer’s agility and dexterity. Partially infused with the resilience of the Lava King: Immunity to fire damage and rapid damage regeneration.

Gauntlet of Sojourn: Infused with the resilience of the Lava King: Immunity to fire damage, enhanced density, and rapid damage regeneration.

Boots of Sojourn: Infused with the swiftness of the Lava King: Permanent movement speed boost to the wearer. Partially infused with the resilience of the Lava King: Immunity to fire damage and rapid damage regeneration.

Greaves of Sojourn: Infused with the stability of the Lava King: Enhanced stability and balance for the wearer, regardless of terrain. Partially infused with the resilience of the Lava King: Immunity to fire damage and rapid damage regeneration.

Magma Attunement Gem is of sufficient Energy density to imbue one of two items. Please make a choice:

- 1. Helm of Sojourn: Flame Control – Channel Energy of any type into this helmet to gain the ability to manipulate and control any existing flames.**
- 2. Gauntlet of Sojourn: Magma Lash – Channel Energy of any type into this gauntlet to create a whip of stable magma, usable as a melee weapon capable of extending to strike even distant enemies.**

Once you have made your decision, these items will be imbued, and then you may select and purchase the Sojourn set bonuses.

“Holy shit,” Victor laughed. “I’m about to get some massive upgrades, Lam, but let me run some options by you. I could use a second opinion.”

Book 8: Chapter 15: A Need for Funds

As he eagerly explained his choices to Lam, Victor's eyes gleamed with anticipation. He glanced over his shoulder at the line of people waiting, his annoyance at the rush fading into the background. This was a moment of significance for him, and he saw no reason to feel guilty about utilizing a service the city provided. He reasoned that the city must benefit from the transaction, and if it took him a few minutes, that was just the way it had to be.

“I’ve heard you say that you wish you had a weapon to use when Lifedrinker isn’t handy,” Lam said, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “The ability to control flames is nice, but what if there aren’t any?”

“I guess I could make some,” Victor chuckled, thumping his chest.

“Ah! That’s a good point. Still, a lash that can stretch to hit ‘distant’ targets might be just the thing you need. I’ve seen you fight. You’re a terror up close, but you do have to get close.”

Victor nodded, smiling at her a little sheepishly. “I wanted the whip, so I’m glad you’re not convincing me otherwise. One time, I channeled one of my ancestor’s powers, and she gave me a magical whip to use. God, it was incredible. I’m not saying this will be the same, but the idea that I might recapture that feeling even just a little . . .” He shrugged, trailing off, as Lam reached up to squeeze the meaty part of his shoulder.

“Do it then!”

Victor turned to the stone and selected the second option, choosing to put the power of the magma attunement gem into the gauntlet. Suddenly, a new message appeared:

Imbuing items with selected treasures in 5 seconds. To cancel, select the option now.

Victor didn't cancel it, and he watched the items lying at his feet, wondering what the process would look like. As he mentally counted out five seconds, a shimmering cloud of gray and yellow fog erupted around the items. He heard crackles and pops and felt a wash of potent System Energy, and then the cloud dissipated, and he saw the objects had changed drastically.

“Roots!” Lam breathed, suitably impressed. Victor grinned, studying the set. The gauntlet and helmet had changed the most; they weren't leather any longer but seemed to be made from a lustrous, deep red, almost black metal. Was that because they'd gotten the full “resilience of the Lava King?” More than their material, they'd changed in form. The helmet looked like a scowling monstrous reptile's head.

“It's almost like a dragon's head. Even more than a wyrm.” He could only say that with any authority because he'd seen Tes's draconic form. It looked like his face would peer out between the metallic fangs that stood out from the draconic snout. The beast's angry eyes would be on his forehead, and the long, black horns would sweep back from there. It was an intimidating countenance. The gauntlet was similar in style, made of the same dark red metal, and would sheath his entire arm up to the elbow in reticulated scale plates. Spikes protruded from the knuckles, and he could see it was, like the helmet, lined with supple, red leather.

The pants, belt, and boots retained their original leather material but underwent a transformation in appearance, mirroring the deep red-black hue of the metal components. The leather now appeared sleek and supple, as if infused with the essence of the lava king's hide. Each piece was meticulously tooled with intricate patterns and adorned with small, gleaming studs that caught the light with a faint, fiery shimmer.

“Fancy,” Lam said without a hint of sarcasm.

“It's not done,” Victor said, studying the System display:

Treasure imbuement complete. Sojourn five-piece set enchantments are available. Note: This set may be imbued with up to three Class A enchantments, two Class B enchantments, one Class C Enchantment, and one Class D Enchantment. Prices are based on material imbuement and enchantment value. Options are dependent on material imbuement. Set bonuses do not have to be purchased at this time and can be purchased separately at different times. Set bonuses cannot be removed or changed.

Class A:

1. Resizing Enchantment – 5,000 standard Energy beads

2. Self-cleaning & Repairing Enchantment – 5,000 standard Energy beads
3. Enchantment Toggle: Disguise Armor as Clothing – 25,000 standard Energy beads
4. Feather Fall Enchantment – 40,000 standard Energy beads
5. Water Breathing Enchantment – 55,000 standard Energy beads

Class B:

6.

7. Ten-Percent Bonus to a Physical Attribute. Choose one:

- Strength – 50,000 standard Energy beads
- Vitality – 75,000 standard Energy beads
- Dexterity – 50,000 standard Energy beads
- Agility – 50,000 standard Energy beads

7. Fifteen-Percent Resistance to a Damage Type. Choose one:

- Fire – 5,000 standard Energy beads
- Cold – 500,000 standard Energy beads
- Electricity – 25,000 standard Energy beads
- Poison – 25,000 standard Energy beads
- Acid – 25,000 standard Energy beads
- Slashing – 10,000 standard Energy beads
- Piercing – 15,000 standard Energy beads
- Crushing – 20,000 standard Energy beads

8. Ten-Percent Enhanced Damage Type. Choose one:

- Fire – 5,000 standard Energy beads
- Cold – 500,000 standard Energy beads
- Electricity – 25,000 standard Energy beads
- Poison – 25,000 standard Energy beads

- Acid – 25,000 standard Energy beads

- Physical – 25,000 standard Energy beads

9. Enchantment Toggle: Reflective Shielding – 90,000 standard Energy beads

10. Enchantment Toggle: Fire Aura – 125,000 standard Energy beads

11. Minor Regeneration Enchantment – 150,000 standard Energy beads

Class C:

12.Enhanced Mass Enchantment – 150,000 standard Energy beads

13.Lava Blast Enchantment – 250,000 standard Energy beads

Class D:

14.Lava Domain Enchantment Toggle – 1,000,000 standard Energy beads

15.Roar of the Lava King Enchantment – 1,250,000 standard Energy beads

16.Flight of the Lava King Enchantment Toggle – 1,500,000 standard Energy beads

“Shit,” Victor sighed, looking at the overwhelming list. He glanced over his shoulder at the queue of citizens waiting for him to finish and shrugged, offering a quick, apologetic wave. He pulled out a notebook and pen, and, as quickly as he could, he scribbled down all of the options. “I’m going to need to think about this and probably raise some funds to get what I want. As usual, the System doesn’t give enough details for me to feel confident, but maybe Dar will have an opinion.”

Lam watched him writing, nodding. “Lots of options. I bet the enchantment ‘toggles’ require a certain amount of Energy to activate. Otherwise, I bet low-tier rich folk would load up these sets with the most expensive options.”

“Yeah,” Victor muttered, finishing his work. “Though a lot of these are clearly tuned to the hide of the lava king I put in there. I wonder how rare that shit was? What the hell even is a lava king? Judging by the helmet, it’s related to dragons.” He chuckled, amused and a little chagrined by his impulsive decision to put the hide into the mix. He picked up all the items, stowed them away, then turned away from the stone. “I’ll come back.”

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He and Lam walked down the steps, and Victor winked at the lady who’d been waiting to go next as he passed. “You’re up.” To his surprise, she smiled pleasantly, reaching up to preen her black, feathery plume of “hair,” blinking her overlarge, avian eyes at him while smiling coyly. She clearly wasn’t a full avian; she didn’t have a beak or wings, and Victor idly wondered if she was some mix of species or a different type of person entirely. It seemed like he saw a new kind of person everywhere he looked, and he despaired at the idea of ever getting them all straight. He’d struggled in Coloss with only a handful of different species.

“C’mon, flirt.” Lam pulled his arm, guiding him to the exit. “You’re going to sell the house, right? Seems you need some funds.”

Victor nodded, and that’s what they did. First, they visited the realtor who’d helped him find the place, and then, with her guidance, he put it back on the market, asking pretty much the same price he’d paid, which was just a bit more than 800,000 beads. Even if he got his asking price, he’d still be sitting at less than a million beads, and he could already predict he’d want to spend at least twice that much on his armor enchantments.

As he and Lam rode in the coach, heading to the house, intent on cleaning out the personal items they'd all left behind, he occupied himself thinking about the armor options. He felt like the three "class A" enchantments were going to be ones of necessity. He needed his armor to be able to resize, and he wanted it to be able to clean and mend itself, even though the lava king hide seemed to have given it regeneration capabilities. Finally, he really liked the idea that he could make it look like regular clothing; it would be a game changer for social activities.

Of course, the feather-falling and water-breathing enchantments seemed great, too. How much did he need those, though? He could fall from enormous heights without getting hurt, and when was the last time he'd needed to breathe underwater? It sounded cool, but he could already hold his breath a ridiculous amount of time, and if he ever needed more, couldn't he buy a potion or item for that?

The hard choices started with the "class B" options. He could only pick two, and he liked them all. Should he boost an attribute? Ten percent of his maximum was a big boost. Still, he liked the idea of buying two damage boosts—fire and physical. He grinned at the thought but then shook his head. Maybe a ten-percent strength boost would outperform a ten-percent physical damage bonus. Considering his enormous strength when Berserk, he had to admit the choice wasn't a clear-cut one.

Then there was the "class C" choice—enhanced mass or lava blast? What did enhanced mass even mean? Was it like his old Kethian Juggernaut helm? Would all of his armor impart extra density to him? If so, that might be better than being able to "blast lava," but again, Victor didn't know. How big was the blast? How often could he do it? Did it drain a lot of Energy? The System loved to be vague, and he hoped Ranish Dar would have some insight, especially when he considered the "class D" options.

Of course, the Flight of the Lava King was immediately tempting. How great would it be to fly like Valla? What if it wasn't like that, though? What if it just gave him short, hovering spurts of flight? It would help if he had any idea what a real lava king could do. The roar was the least interesting option to him. He already did plenty of roaring. A lava domain, however? Would that change his surroundings? Would it give him boosts, thanks to his Class? "Too many damn questions," he muttered.

"Dwelling on your armor?"

"Yeah. Hey, after the house, let's visit an enchanter I know. I've got a few questions for her. Her shop's not far away."

She shrugged. "Sure. I've got nothing else to do, and so far, these errands have been very interesting. I'd like to look into alternate means of travel back to Fanwath. There's got to be a cheaper way than paying the System at the World Hall."

"Yeah. Should I ask Dar about it? He might point me in the right direction, but he might just tell me to figure it out. If we have that dinner party, though, maybe one of our 'friends' will have some ideas."

“Oof! Thanks for reminding me! Let’s see if there’s a stationary shop nearby.” She produced one of the crystal guide tablets and began flipping through it.

“You’re cooking? Or should we look for a caterer?”

She poked his knee. “I’m cooking! I told you that.”

“Right.” Victor smiled and relaxed, waiting for the coach to arrive. When they reached his house, he spent a few minutes going through each room, collecting furniture, art, and odds and ends into his storage rings. His bedroom took longer because he tried to carefully separate Valla’s things from his so he could hand them over more easily. When he was done, he went out to the courtyard and collected his travel home, clipping it onto his belt.

While he waited for Lam to go through the grounds one more time, ensuring he didn’t miss anything, he looked at his wrist and the bracer where Khul Bach’s gemstone sat. He really needed to talk to him and fill him in on everything that was going on. While he thought about it, he considered the gauntlet from the Sojourn set; it would go on the same arm. “I guess I could put you into the vault,” he said, idly tapping the pink gem. “Probably safer in there, anyway.” He liked the idea, though it did make him worry he’d go even longer between his visits to the Degh spirit.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel walkway leading into the garden, and Lam appeared, carrying a copper sculpture of roses that Valla had purchased. “Don’t want to forget this.”

“Shit, right.” Victor reached out and claimed the item into his storage ring.

“Thanks, Lam.”

She winked at him, and, smiling, they left the house. Victor looked back at it and contemplated the wrought-iron gate. He wondered if he should be upset about selling the house, but nothing stirred in his chest. He decided he hadn’t spent enough time at the house to feel anything—it hadn’t become “home” to him yet. Lam caught him looking back and reached up to grip his shoulder.

“Sad you didn’t keep it longer?”

“Nah, the opposite. Maybe I should feel something, but I don’t. I guess I didn’t spend enough time here.” While he spoke, he pictured the night before the competition dungeon. He remembered walking through the little courtyard to the gate, looking back to see Valla in the doorway to the house—“Ah! There it is,” he said as a little pang of nostalgia hit him. “Just had to add Valla to the picture.”

“Home is where the heart is. Just picture her at the lake house waiting for you.”

Victor laughed and nodded, “Yep, that’ll do it. C’mon.” He turned down the sidewalk and began walking, but he waved at Mr. Qwor and called, “We’re going to a nearby Artificer’s shop.” The driver nodded and got into the coach. Victor was fairly sure he’d be waiting outside Tria’s shop when they finished.

Ten minutes later, he opened Tria’s shop door and guided Lam inside. When he saw the yellow-feathered avian woman at her counter, he waved. “Tria. How’s it going?”

She made her strange trilling, cooing pleasure sound and said, “Hello, sir! Welcome back. I’m quite well, thank you.”

Victor grinned as he approached the counter. “You forgot my name, didn’t you?” It felt wonderful to be on the other side of that problem for a change.

“I . . .” she sputtered, tilting her head to the side. “I apologize, but your name escapes me! It’s something distinctly violent-sounding, if I’m not mistaken. That’s right! It starts with a ‘vvvv’ sound.” She drew out the consonant like she was revving a motor. “I should know it! I saw you battling in the Iron Challenge! Another patron bought me a round when I said I knew you. Oh, drat! Put me out of my misery! What is it?”

“His name’s Victor, and I’m Lam. I’m pleased to meet you, ma’am.” Lam grinned and took the avian woman’s softly feathered hand.

“Too easy, Lam,” Victor sighed. “I could have tortured her a bit longer, don’t you think?” He chuckled and leaned on the counter, causing it to creak ominously. “Anyway, I promised I’d bring you more business, and here I am. Do you know anything about the Sojourn item sets?”

“Bah! Of course! They’re stealing a lot of my business with those damn things.”

“Really?” Lam asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tria clicked her tongue and shook her head. “Oh, not really. All of us Artificers like to complain, but not enough people are completing those sets for it to impact us much. What’s your question, big fellow?”

“Well, one of the enchantments you can purchase for those items is to have the armor ‘disguised’ as clothing. Do you know anything about that?”

“Of course! It’s not so much a disguise as it is a kind of altered state. Each armor piece is imbued with a dimensional space. The space is very limited, and it can only contain the item in question or the alternate version of the item, which, in this case, is a piece of clothing. If you had a breastplate, for instance, it might share a dimensional space with a fine shirt. As you toggle the enchantment, they will swap places.”

“So, I won’t actually be armored unless the armor is showing?”

“Correct.”

“But it’s instant? The change?”

“Yes, quick as a thought.”

“Do you know how to do that enchantment?” Victor brought out his wyrm-scale vest and laid it on the counter. The scales rasped against each other, and the

weight of the vest was palpable in the way it thunked onto the wood. “I mean, to something like this?”

Tria sucked in her breath, causing it to whistle through her beak as she leaned close, gently tracing her fingers over the wyrm scales. “So fine! So perfectly cured, cut, treated, and imbued! A true master crafted this! What wonderful scales! A truly ancient wyrm, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yeah. He was a big son of a . . .” Victor trailed off, for once recognizing his cursing might not be appropriate.

“These scales are imbued with something exceedingly potent! It hurts my Artificer’s sight to peer at them! The blood of something mighty, something well into the lustrous veil. Was it given freely? Did you slay such a creature?”

“It was a gift,” Victor said, smiling. Some bittersweet memories of Tes ran through his mind at the memory. Did she know where he was? She had his blood, after all. What would he say to her now? How much had he changed since he’d last seen her? Would she be proud? Disappointed?

“This armor is beyond me. I could add the enchantment you asked about, however. The materials won’t mind the extra weight of such a simple working.” She looked up from her study of the armor and blinked her big, round eyes at him. “You’ll need to provide the alternate clothing item, and it will take me a few hours.”

“And the price?”

“A few thousand beads. Nothing much. It’s basically the same as crafting a simple dimensional container. Oh!” She held up a finger. “If I were you, I’d buy an enchanted shirt! One that can change its style and color. Then, when you switch to it, you can make it fit your outfit!”

Lam laughed and elbowed Victor in the ribs. “She’s smart. You know, I’ve been wanting to buy some new clothes.” She turned to Tria, “Is there a tailor with such items nearby?”

Book 8: Chapter 16: - Worthy Fights

It was well into the evening before Victor and Lam returned to Dar’s lake house. Victor hadn’t intended to be out so late, but they’d spent hours at a tailor Tria had recommended. Victor had been focused on buying a single, good shirt that could change its color with a gentle nudge of Energy into a stitched rune pattern, but Lam had spent a lot more time shopping, buying half a dozen garments. Victor would be hard-pressed to describe any of them; he’d gotten his shirt and then waited outside, watching the people of Sojourn while she shopped.

After she was done, they’d stopped by Tria’s shop again so Victor could give her the shirt and his wyrm-scale armor to enchant, which she promised to have ready first thing in the morning. Victor was a little leery about leaving the armor, not because he worried Tria would steal it, but because it bore special meaning to him. It was priceless because Tes had crafted it for him, and she’d literally

put her blood into it. He resolved to wake up at dawn and wait outside for Tria's shop to open in the morning.

Of course, they hadn't been done even after dropping off Victor's armor. Lam, brimming with excitement about the upcoming dinner party, had wanted to buy some fancy stationery for their invitations. This led to a lively discussion about how they had no idea how to address or deliver them. When Lam mentioned the problem to Mr. Qwor upon their arrival at the house, the coach driver had the answer. Apparently, Dar's staff at the lake house was managed by a man named Mr. Ruln, who acted as the household steward. Mr. Qwor said Mr. Ruln would "be happy to see the invitations delivered."

Walking down the cobbled path from the coach house to the front door, Victor's curiosity was piqued. "I wonder if I've met Mr. Ruln. I need to start paying attention to people's names," he mused aloud.

"It's not like they go around introducing themselves," Lam replied, nodding toward the servant, who was standing ready to open the door for them as they approached. When they reached the stoop, she said, "Excuse me, will you please let Mr. Ruln know that I'd like to speak to him when he has a minute?"

"Of course, ma'am." He turned to Victor and added, "Sir, your other guests await you in the central parlor."

"Thanks." Victor nodded and stepped into the home, leading the way back to the large sitting area that adjoined the outside deck. Darren and Edeya sat together on one of the couches, both reading. Edeya's nose was buried in a thick, leather-bound tome, and Darren was flipping through one of the crystal guidebook tablets.

Darren didn't notice them and spoke almost idly as they approached, "Yeah, I'm not finding anything on that dungeon Trin mentioned. Either it's too exclusive to be in the guidebook, or she was making the whole thing up."

"Mrs. Woy said there was a lot about Sojourn you won't find in that guidebook," Edeya sighed, idly rubbing at something on her chin. She glanced toward Darren, caught sight of Lam and Victor standing there, and leaped to her feet. "You're back!"

"Hey." Victor walked over as Lam hurried to sit beside Edeya. "Who's Mrs. Woy?"

"One of your, um, mentor's staff. She made us dinner."

"We missed dinner?" Lam's voice rose in a near whine. Victor chuckled, shaking his head. Though he felt like he could eat, he wasn't hungry. How would he feel if he were only level ten with a fraction of the Energy coursing through his body's cells, though?

“I’m sure they’ll fix you something—” he started to say, but Edeya was already producing plates of steaming food from her storage ring, arranging them on the coffee table in front of the couch.

“I saved you plenty.”

Lam grabbed a hot, buttered roll and started eating. Victor chuckled and shook his head. “I’m going to go to my room and eat something else.” Everyone, even Darren, stopped what they were doing and looked at him strangely. He shrugged. “I’ve got a monster’s heart I want to consume, and the damn thing is massive.”

Darren blanched a little and looked at Edeya. “I thought you were teasing me.”

“I told you!”

“Anyway,” Victor groaned, starting for the hallway leading to the bedrooms, “I’m going to write a note to Valla, too. I’ve got an early start tomorrow, so goodnight.”

“Night!” Edeya chirped.

Lam cleared her throat, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and said, “I know you want to retire, Victor, but when can we talk about more spell patterns?”

“Ah, shit.” Victor paused near the hallway. “Tomorrow, when I return from picking up my armor. Promise. Oh!” He fished through his storage ring for the spell pattern he’d purchased for Edeya. “This is for you.” He tossed it to her and winked. “Lam has one for Darren.”

“Thank you!” Edeya cried, snatching the rolled-up parchment from the air.

Lam met his eyes and gave him a quick nod. “See you tomorrow, then, Victor. Thank you for everything.” She didn’t wait for a reply, turning to watch as Edeya scrambled to unwind the scroll.

Victor watched them for a moment, then left. He was halfway down the hallway when his excellent Quinametzin ears picked up Darren’s hushed whisper. “Is he angry?”

“No, dummy,” Edeya laughed. “I think he’s probably missing Valla.”

Victor sighed and went into his room, locking the door behind him. Edeya was right on target. He felt like it had been months, not just a bit less than a week, since he’d seen Valla, and he was missing her. He sat on the side of the bed and opened the Farscribe book he shared with her. Nothing had been added since her last short message earlier that morning. He looked over the words again, frowning, wondering if there was something to them other than their face value.

She said all was well, but they were exhausted, and more battles awaited after their rest. That was normal, wasn’t it? They were in a dungeon, after all. She said Lesh was snoring, so things couldn’t be that dire. He shook his head, forcing himself to stop worrying, to stop imagining nightmare scenarios that weren’t at all likely. Instead, he drew a line and wrote a message:

I miss you, Valla. I hate that we aren’t together, and I hope you’ll be home soon. I hate the circumstances that keep us apart, but, on the other hand, this time away makes me appreciate you

more. It makes me realize how damn lucky I am. Let's do something together, just the two of us, when you're back. I'll be waiting for you.

Victor paused, tapping the pen on his chin while he thought, imagining Dar or the Sojourn city council sending him to complete some quest or task before he got to wrap Valla in his arms again. Grinning fiercely, he added:

If someone tries to stop me from welcoming you home, I'm going to fight them. I don't care. I really don't.

I Love you,

Victor

He put the book away, then stood up, moving to a large open section between his door and the foot of his bed. He almost summoned the gargantuopod heart from his storage bag but stopped, thinking things over. What if something crazy happened? What if he started bursting with flames like when he'd eaten the wyrm's heart? He doubted that would happen, but something might. Did he want to risk Dar's house? His decision made, he walked into the hallway and, rather than turning right and going back the way he'd come, he walked the other way.

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There was a small library at the end of the hall, just before the big double doors leading to Dar's suite. He headed that way because the library also opened onto a small deck connected via a wooden walkway to the main one. Victor hoped to make his way down to the lake without being noticed; he didn't want to explain his actions or risk getting waylaid by a side conversation. A few minutes later, having succeeded in avoiding everyone except for a single member of the house staff tidying the main deck, he padded down the steps to the long, starlit pier.

The lake was placid and beautiful at night, as it usually was. Its dark, deep waters reflected the stars, making Victor feel like he was standing on a wooden platform floating in space. He moved to the very end of the pier and stripped off most of his clothes. The air was a little chilly, but Victor was always warm, and he figured it would be nice to jump into the water when he was done with his task.

He took a deep breath and cast Iron Berserk; there was no way he was going to try to consume the gargantuopod heart without the size boost of the spell. As the power of rage-attuned Energy flooded his body, tinting his vision with crimson, he stood there basking in the furnace of his heart, the cool night air a profound contrast to the heat radiating from his flesh. He reached into the storage pouch hanging from his belt and summoned out the enormous, still-bloody heart. It steamed in the night air, and the hot blood dripping from the great, severed arteries sizzled on the decking, splashing onto his bare toes.

Even standing twenty feet tall, with hands the size of serving platters, the heart was enormous. Eating such a great organ would take time and effort, but Victor's mouth salivated at the idea. Another reason he wanted to be in his full titanic form was that more than his size changed with the transformation.

Instincts that were becoming ordinary for him in his usual state were far more profound in his rage-engorged body; he hungered for the flesh of the organ in his mighty hands. He yearned to bite into it. He wanted to taste that hot blood and chew the tough flesh. He yearned to swallow it and let his body sift through it for the secrets of his fallen foe's strength.

Grinning madly, he gave in to his instincts and took a massive bite, his great Quinametzin teeth slicing the powerful flesh with ease. After that first coppery, tangy bite, there was no stopping him. He lost himself to the feast, gorging himself, bite after bite. He could feel the Energy buried in the meat of the heart in his stomach, churning and gathering. Despite the size of the organ, despite the need to take bloody bite after bloody bite, he never felt full, never felt like stopping. He couldn't have if he'd wanted to—the gathering Energy was like the pleasure of a scratched itch, and each bite brought the metaphorical fingernails closer to the perfect spot.

Even when he swallowed the last morsel, he lifted his hands and licked the bloody remnants from his palms and wrists. As he did so, he felt the ball of Energy in his gut begin to expand like a slow-motion explosion. It spread through his body, a wave of ecstasy that ignited the dense, potent molecules that made up his Quinametzin anatomy. A tiny voice in his mind wondered at that; if he hadn't been so thoroughly Quinametzin, if he'd failed to advance his titanic race so far, would the heart have affected him differently? Would it have burned his flesh rather than refined it?

The tiny voice was banished as the wave of Energy reached his mind and all thoughts were blown from his consciousness. Victor arched his back, and while the pulsing Energy of his mighty, vanquished foe coursed through him, he roared his triumph to the stars.

#

Lam was licking sticky honey from her fingers, and a member of the kitchen staff was taking away dirty plates when Darren looked up from his tablet and pointed to the windows facing the deck and the lake beyond. "Is it getting brighter out there?"

Lam stood and turned, looking over the back of the couch to where he'd pointed. Sure enough, a bright glow was starting to illuminate the darkness, and it seemed to be coming from the lake. She looked at Edeya, who'd stood to look with her. "You don't think anyone would attack Dar's home, do you?"

"I hope not! That's definitely Energy, though!" Edeya spun toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms. "We should get Victor."

The servant, Mrs. Woy, Lam had learned, cleared her throat and said, "Nothing to be alarmed about. Lord Dar warned the staff to stay inside; he and his student are working on something by the lake."

"Dar's here?" Lam asked, noting the brightness was still growing. It almost looked like a false sunrise.

"Yes, Lord Dar arrived at dinner time but has been in his quarters. His warning came just moments ago. At his bidding, I was just about to advise you all to stay inside."

Lam nodded to the woman and then walked around the couch to press her forehead against the glass. That's when the ground trembled, and a roar shook the night, rattling the glass and vibrating the curios in their cabinets.

“What the hell?” Darren cried, scrambling off the couch and ducking down with a wide stance as though an earthquake were imminent.

“Is that?” Edeya asked with wide eyes, her voice hushed.

“Victor.” Lam nodded. The roar was deep and animalistic, like something from the mouth of a great monster, but it had a certain familiar note that brought back memories of battlefields back on Fanwath. She'd seen and heard Victor roar into the night in triumph too many times not to recognize his voice, even though it was louder and deeper than ever.

“That's Victor?” Darren hissed. He hurried closer to the two of them and then, surprising them both, nodded. “I'm not surprised, I suppose. I heard him screaming like that when he destroyed my war machines in First Landing. Well, not quite like that, but he was further away . . .” As his words trailed off, so did the roaring, and the light began to dim. “What was he yelling about? Is he angry? Is he battling something?”

In the sudden stillness and absence of light, Lam shook her head, chuckling. “No, that sounded more like victory to me. He must have liked the heart.”

#

When Victor came back to himself, he was floating on his back in the lake, a good fifty yards from the pier. He was immediately aware of two things—one, he had some System messages clouding his vision, and two, he felt amazing. Grinning, wanting to laugh at his circumstances, he quickly read through the notifications:

*****Congratulations! You have advanced your Quinametzin Bloodline: Epic 2.*****

*****Congratulations! You have earned a new Feat: Behemoth's Regeneration.*****

*****Behemoth's Regeneration: You have gained the uncanny resilience of a behemoth. Given enough time, your flesh will recover from even the most grievous wounds. This ability will complement and magnify similar benefits gained from other sources.*****

Victor, for once, was stupefied, unable to say anything, even “huh” or “cool.” He just stretched out on his back, floating in the cool water, staring up at the stars and smiling in wonder. He knew all about regeneration; his berserking abilities granted it to him, at least a limited form of rapid healing. This felt different, however. It sounded like he could regenerate all the time now, and it might extend beyond rapid healing. It might be genuine regeneration—like, he might be able to grow back limbs.

A tiny part of him, some remnant from his old, human-boy self that grew up in Tucson, was freaked out. It felt like he was moving further and further away from

that seed of himself. He wasn't just a human with "titan blood" anymore. He was entirely Quinametzin. He'd accepted that. Now, though, he'd absorbed some part of that giant, pinché monster from the dungeon. Was he straying away from his bloodline? Was he less Quinametzin now?

That couldn't be, could it? Hadn't the heart also boosted his Quinametzin bloodline? After all, the whole reason he could steal the gargantuopod's ability was because he was Quinametzin. His further thoughts were interrupted by a deep, rumbling voice.

"Something troubling you, lad?" Dar asked.

Victor straightened, switching from a back float to water-treading, and turned toward the pier. Dar sat there, his bulky, dark form like a hulking shadow with blazing eyes. "Hello, sir. I didn't realize you were here."

"A dozen creatures like the one you ripped that heart from could have approached unnoticed during the din you stirred up." He chuckled and moved away from his original question, letting Victor off the hook at least momentarily. "I've been eager to watch you go through that process. My eyes see much; would you like to hear my thoughts?"

Victor nodded, knowing the man could see him clearly despite the dark. Even so, he added words to the gesture, "I would."

"Your bloodline is incredibly potent. You know this, of course, but I don't think you quite understand the scope. The ability to gain strength from your foes—that ritual you just completed—is something I've never seen before, not on that scale. I saw your body harness the Energy of that gargantuopod. You ripped it apart on a cellular level, subsuming some essential part of it—some piece of its bloodline. More than that, a piece of the creature's spirit lingered in that dead heart! How that's possible, I'm not sure. It must have something to do with you taking it from the corpse; it must be part of the ritual whether you realize it or not."

"Ritual?" Victor frowned. "I don't do any kind of ritual—"

"Hah! Says the man who rips the hot hearts from his foes and eats them bloody and raw. It's a ritual whether you label it so or not." Dar waved a hand in the air. "That's not important, in any case. I could do the same thing but wouldn't gain what you do. All I'd get is a raw, rather under-seasoned meal. Well? What did you gain? Shall I guess?"

"I don't mind telling you—"

"Some advancement to your bloodline? Some Energy for your Core? Or something more? That was quite a flare of Energy that tore through your body."

“My bloodline advanced, and maybe my Core got some Energy, but it didn't advance. I, uh, gained a new feat, though.”

Dar leaned forward, and his eyes flared brighter. “Is that common? What feat?”

“It's not all that common, though I have gained something unique from most of the more powerful hearts I've eaten.”

“And this one?”

Victor tried to shrug, which was not a natural movement while treading water, and said, “I gained regeneration.” The Spirit Master grew quiet and leaned back, staring at the stars.

“Dead gods, lad. This changes things. Such an ability . . .” He let his voice trail off, and Victor floated for a few moments while Dar stared at the stars. “There are those who would do terrible, terrible things to gain that ability. We must keep the nature of your ability a secret. It would be one thing if all you gained from a heart was some Energy—a bit of a cheat on cultivation. Absorbing aspects of other bloodlines, though—wars have been fought for less.”

Victor stared at the man who was meant to be his mentor and couldn't help the dark thoughts that nibbled at his mind. Could he trust him? Was he, even now, trying to plot a way to steal Victor's bloodline? If the Warlord of Coloss knew a way to do so, surely the great powers of Sojourn knew of methods. Dar chuckled, a deep grating sound like wet stones sliding against each other. “Relax, Victor. I take my role as your mentor very seriously. It weighs on me. Knowing your secret, protecting it and you, will do much for my karmic balance sheet.”

“I'd feel better if you, you know, wanted to.”

“Hah! Of course I do! Fear not, lad. Having a desire to build karma in my favor only helps me tune out the dark whispers everyone hears occasionally. My waking mind is set on teaching you, fostering your spirit, and building you into a true conqueror.”

“Conqueror?”

Dar leaned forward and growled, his voice carrying sharply over the still water, “Of course! Did you not come to me with such desires? I recall tales of a warlord who needed slaying, an undead world that needed to feel the fire of your wrath, and a certain history of righting injustices. Do those things no longer appeal to the rage burning in your heart?”

Victor felt chills on his spine and a growl building in his chest as he answered, through a throat thick with emotion, “Yes!”

“Good. It's clear to me that your ancestors were a potent people, and I'm not surprised they moved beyond this realm. You should be proud to carry their bloodline, proud to remind this universe of who they were. If hearts can advance your power so, then you should claim more. We need to pick some worthy fights for you.”

Book 8: Chapter 17: Echoes of Insecurity

When Victor woke up, he had a message from Valla in the Farscribe book:

Victor – We failed the boss fight but escaped without serious injury. We’re resting at an inn near the entrance. We’ll return to the house after breakfast.

“Shit,” Victor grunted, sliding out of bed and pulling on his clothes. A glance at the window told him it was still early; the sky had yet to brighten with sunrise. He summoned a pen and wrote a quick reply:

Valla – We’re all staying at Dar’s lake house. I’m coming to pick you up. Wait there!

That done, Victor went into the kitchen and asked the staff, the only people already awake, if one of them could wake Mr. Qwor to let him know he wanted to leave even earlier than planned. When a young woman nodded and hurried away, Victor went outside and stood by the cobbled drive, waiting. The coachman was quick to arrive, and Victor had a feeling he was an early riser because he was dressed sharply in his uniform, looking alert when he pulled the levitating vehicle around.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Hey, Mr. Qwor. Sorry to change things up, but I just found out some friends are out of a dungeon and need picking up. Do you know about a dungeon called ‘Desperation Gap?’ They’re waiting at an inn near the entrance.”

“Of course, sir. It’s southwest of the city near the Opal Sea. I’ll have you there in an hour.” So, Victor climbed into the coach, wrote Valla another message saying he’d be there in an hour, and then leaned back in the cushions, comfortable and relaxed, knowing he’d soon be with her again.

The Opal Sea wasn’t as big as the lake on Dar’s property. Victor looked out the window to watch as they approached, and that was his first thought. Not only was it smaller, but the shoreline was rocky, barren, and lined with hundreds of piers, all crowded with fishing boats of varying sizes. The sight gave Victor a new perspective on Dar’s power and influence. Clearly, this “sea” wasn’t privately owned and was in high demand for fishing, if nothing else. How much would the working-class folk of Sojourn love to gain access to the beautiful, clear, fish-filled waters on Dar’s vacation property?

The inn at the mouth of a narrow canyon where the Desperation Gap dungeon was situated was a tall, five-story, asymmetrical building that looked like only the force of Energy-fueled enchantments was keeping it upright. Victor stepped out of the coach amid a busy little market square. They’d flown over many homes, and it was evident that this area near the Opal Sea was sort of a smaller town center away from the larger city.

Victor wondered if it was still considered part of Sojourn, which made him wonder just how things on the “city world” were structured. The world and city were called Sojourn, but was every other community part of that? Were they all ruled by the same council of powerful beings?

He'd reduced his size to that of the majority of the local populace—something close to an average human—so he didn't have to duck when he stepped into the tavern on the inn's ground floor. Valla had yet to respond to his messages, but he hoped she and Lesh would be waiting there.

When he pushed open the door, still clad in regular clothes but with Lifedrinker on his back, it looked to him like the inn was still waking up and that breakfast was being served. The space was noisy and crowded, and Victor had to stand there for several seconds before anyone gave him any notice. He didn't care, though; he was scanning the crowded tables for Lesh's hulking form or Valla's silvery wings.

To his relief, he spotted them in the front, far corner by a window, and when he started toward them, Lesh caught sight of him first and stood up, knocking his chair back with a clatter. "Lord Victor!" he roared, which got Valla's attention, whose back was to him. She shifted to look his way, and Victor almost fell over when he saw her face. She had a bandage over her left eye and, above and beneath it, on her forehead and cheek, was a deep, fresh scar that stood out, red and swollen, on her beautiful silvery-blue flesh.

Victor rushed to her, indiscriminately shoving people, chairs and all, out of his way. He hadn't realized he was doing it, but by the time he stood before her, he'd released his size-altering spell and easily lifted her into an embrace, gently cradling her head onto his shoulder as he held her. "Pobrecita! What happened?"

Valla squirmed in his embrace, and he heard her muffled reply, "Victor! Put me down!" He did as she asked, gently lowering her, oblivious to the outraged clamoring of the customers he'd left in his wake. He had eyes and ears only for Valla.

As for her, all she could see was Victor, his giant form looming before her. She sighed and reached out to take his left hand with both of hers. "I knew you were going to overreact! I got hurt; that's the whole story. Nothing more to say. It's a risk that comes with the territory—"

"Fuck, Valla!" Victor reached toward her bandage, but then he was jostled, and a heavy hand gripped his biceps, pulling with enough strength to turn him.

A deep, guttural voice growled, "You owe me a gods-damned breakfast, you great oaf!"

Victor released Valla and whirled, rage rushing into pathways primed by his shock at seeing Valla wounded. His vision turned red, and he laid eyes on the man accosting him and . . . fought to get himself under control. The man was old and gray with a bent, hunched back, but judging by the size of his forearm and powerful grip, Victor knew he was someone who'd worked hard his whole, very long life. More sobering than that was the mess he saw behind the old fellow. In his haste to get to Valla, Victor had overturned several chairs, sent a few folks sprawling, and even upended an entire table.

"Shit," he said, his eyes widening. "I'm sorry about that. I, uh, saw my—"

"He saw me, sir," Valla said, stepping around to get a look at what Victor had done. "He saw me and my injury and lost all sense. We'll pay for the damages, of course."

The old man released Victor's arm and nodded. "Shoulda guessed. Well, I've lost my head a time or two for a pretty face." He nodded and turned, stooping with a grunt to lift his table upright.

"Help him!" Valla hissed, and Victor, his rage utterly washed away by his embarrassment, cast *Alter Self* again, reducing his size so he could more nimbly help pick up the mess he'd created. He was still worried about Valla, but the initial, instinctual need to get to her had been banished by shame, especially as he watched her, injured as she was, helping to clean up. When the innkeeper came around to see what the fuss was about, she was the one who handed him a pouch full of beads and said that she wanted to buy everyone's meal.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Lesh, too large to help efficiently, sat back down and continued to eat while he watched. When all was righted, Valla urged Victor to sit at the table. She gave him a long look, staring into his eyes with her single, unbandaged one. Victor tried not to stare at her bandage, forcing himself to peer into her silvery-turquoise iris. "I know this looks bad, and I know how upset you are, but I will recover. My eye was damaged beyond a healing potion, but a regeneration mixture will probably restore it. I have one, a treasure from the war, but Lesh and I also won racial advancement elixirs, and my hope is that the process will mend my eye."

"You did?" Victor glanced at Lesh and saw the big dragonkin grinning a toothy, reptilian smile.

"Aye, Lord Victor. We gained three levels, too, and a great many minor treasures. We got far, much farther than the guidebook said we would as a duo."

"The truth is, we went too far!" Valla chuckled. "We should have stopped before the boss encounter."

"You got to the boss?"

Valla shook her head. "Only of the section we were in. The dungeon is strange; it's not arranged in levels but rather like a long beach along a stony cliff. There are inlets and coves, caves, and beached ships—all swarming with scaly, water-breathing men and women. Some are small and come in great numbers, while others are huge and monstrous and fight alone, too savage for even their own kind to approach. It was one such that seemed to be the 'boss' of the area we were exploring, and it was he who took my eye and forced us to retreat."

Victor found his vision clouding with red again and clenched his fists until his knuckles noisily popped. Valla grabbed his hand. "Stop it! Stop acting like I'm a doll you have to protect. I'm an adventurer, Victor." He could hear real frustration in her voice, which, more than anything, allowed him to push the rage out of his pathways. While Lesh continued to feed his bottomless hunger and Valla looked away, perhaps trying to think of the right thing to say, Victor struggled with his conflicting emotions.

Part of him wanted to tell Valla it wasn't worth it. What was she trying to prove? He loved her and didn't care if she was as powerful as he was. Didn't she understand that? She didn't have to go into

dungeons and push her limits; he wouldn't leave her. Their relationship was based on more than that. Of course, Victor wasn't stupid, not if he really tried to think through a problem, and he knew that saying those words would only infuriate her. He knew they weren't fair. If he didn't think Valla had anything to prove, then what was he doing? How was it fair for him to constantly push himself if he didn't want her to do the same?

Worse than the hypocrisy of his feelings was the knowledge that he had another objection that would only hurt and alienate Valla if she ever knew he harbored it: he didn't think she would be able to catch him, so what was the point of risking her life? It was a shameful thing to admit to himself, but Victor knew he wasn't normal. He'd thrashed not one but several tier-nine combatants in the challenge dungeon. He sparred with Valla frequently—she wasn't a match for those folks.

Victor knew that if he wanted to challenge himself, he'd be doing things that she couldn't participate in, whether she was level sixty or a hundred. Would things be different if they both broke through the "iron ranks?" Would it be different once they passed their "test of steel?" He wanted to hope so, but that would also mean that other people at that level would be a risk to him and, by that virtue, a risk to Valla. Would they be safer at that tier of power, or would they simply have more dangerous enemies? After all, the only thing keeping Victor safe from the masters of Sojourn was their self-imposed code of conduct—the rules and laws of the city-world.

Would that even matter if he didn't have Dar's backing? He supposed the city's laws stood for something, even to those without an influential mentor. While he sat there, lost in thought about his self-centered ambition and desire to keep Valla safe, he must have worn a look that betrayed his disgust because she eventually said, "I've upset you." Before he could deny it, she scowled further and pushed back her chair. "Amazing. I'm the one who should be irritated, but you've somehow made me feel like I've done something wrong!"

"No, I—" His objection died on his lips as she walked stiffly past him to the door and out.

"Deep thoughts?" Lesh rumbled, wiping his toothy maw with a napkin.

"Unpleasant ones."

"Valla grows powerful, Victor. She has more than one solution for the eye."

"It's not the eye. It's . . . I guess it's my own insecurity. She's trying so damn hard to catch up to me, or, if not that, at least keep up. What will she do if she can't? She's not a housewife, Lesh." As he said the words, his real fear clicked into place, and sudden understanding dawned on him. The root of all of his angst wasn't that he feared leaving Valla behind or that he was already too far ahead; it was more that he was afraid she'd figure it out and realize she couldn't catch up. Would she be willing to live a life in his shadow? Before Lesh could respond, he said, "Don't repeat that."

"No, I wouldn't. You speak to me from the heart and seek advice; how could I even consider betraying that trust?" He made a face, and Victor wondered if he'd

alienated yet another person. Lesh didn't storm off, though. He took a moment to consider and then said, "Why do you worry about something you can't control? You are what you are. Valla is what she is. You both love each other, and, at least for the moment, you're together. Enjoy that."

Victor knew Lesh had a strange perspective on love. He'd given up his life with his actual wife to follow Victor. Thinking about that and realizing they were talking about personal things, he voiced a question that had been on his mind since he'd learned about the man's wife. "Will your wife wait for you? Are you planning to return to her someday?"

"Yassa is my mate. I suppose it's similar to a wife in your culture, but . . . it has some nuances. She will wait for a time, but if I tarry too long, she will seek another." Lesh's words were matter-of-fact, but Victor could feel some emotion behind them.

"I mean, do you hope to get back to her?"

"Ah, Victor, I know you mean well, but this is a topic I've settled my mind about. I'd rather not dwell on what may have been or what may be; I've set my course for different shores. Fate's winds move me now."

The dragonkin's mild rebuke stung more than it should have. Victor realized he'd been harboring some hope for wisdom or advice to see him through this, hopefully, minor conflict with Valla. As he had the thought, he wondered if the conflict was really with Valla or with himself. Sighing, feeling like nothing had been resolved, he pushed his chair back and stood. "I better go after her."

"I'll be right behind. I need to visit the toilets." Lesh stood and lumbered toward the back of the restaurant, and Victor silently wished the plumbing luck. He went outside to find Valla sitting on the edge of the wooden boardwalk that lined the row of buildings. Her feet dangled toward the cobbled street, and she held her wings slightly open to make it easier to sit down. When Victor hopped down to the cobbles and turned to face her, she scowled and pointedly looked to the side.

"That mad? Won't even look at me?" A corner of her mouth quirked up, and he knew he had her on the ropes. "Come on! I'm sorry I reacted that way." He reached out to take her chin and turned her face toward him. "Let me see that cut. I bet you look tough as hell." To his surprise, her cheeks flushed, and she looked away again. "Are you being shy?"

"Stop it, Victor!" She slapped his hand, and he sighed, turning his hand so his palm was facing up.

"Well, take my hand at least. I'll walk you to the coach." She relented at that and put her hand in his, and he pulled, making it easy for her to slide to the edge of the boardwalk and hop to her feet. "You're going to like Dar's lake house."

“How long will we stay there?”

Victor paused, looking back at the inn. “Let’s wait a minute so Lesh can follow us. The coach is over there.” He pointed to the oval, black-lacquered vehicle, where it floated a few feet over the cobbles on the other side of the square. “Dar said that we can stay at the lake house until I’ve got enough money to buy a house that, uh, ‘suits my station’ or something like that.”

To his further surprise, Valla sighed and shook her head. “I like our little townhome. It’s cozy, and it, well, it’s ours—” She was looking up at him while she spoke, and Victor’s guilt must have been apparent because she cut off her words and took a step away, turning to look at him more directly with her single eye. “Why do you look like that? Did something happen to our house?”

“I . . .” Victor had that feeling he’d had too many times in his life when he realized he’d been stupid, and it seemed so obvious after the fact that he couldn’t quite believe the extent of his mind’s betrayal. Of course, he should have spoken to Valla before emptying the house and putting it up for sale. They’d picked the place together. They’d moved in together. What would it say about his opinion of her that he’d just undone all of that without so much as asking her what she thought?

“Is that the coach, Lord Victor?” Lesh asked, once again being overly formal for some damn reason. Victor nodded, his mind still on Valla and how hurt she looked. He hadn’t even told her what he’d done, but she was more than clever and could read his face like a book. She slipped her hand from his and walked with Lesh to the coach. Victor followed, trying to think of a way to smooth things over. Nothing brilliant came to him. When he climbed into the vehicle’s spacious interior, he wasn’t surprised to find Valla sitting in one of the bucket seats rather than the longer benches, so he sat alone.

“I have to go to an enchanter’s shop to get my armor. Should I take you two home first?”

Valla nodded. “Yes, please.”

Frowning, almost scowling, Victor slid open the little window to the driver’s compartment, “Back to the lake house first, Mr. Qwor.” After a few minutes of silence, Victor looked at Lesh. “Tell me about the dungeon.”

“Ah, my pleasure,” the big man rumbled, and Victor tried to relax, sitting back in the cushions, listening to Lesh recount their experience, describing the dungeon, the denizens, and the fights. Every so often, Victor would glance at Valla, but she refused to meet his gaze, and he decided the best thing he could do was give her some space. There wasn’t always a quick fix, some magical combination of words, that would end a fight, and he figured he just had to give her some time to cool off.

If their differences were just about the house and his unilateral decision to sell it, he wouldn't have felt so troubled as he sat there listening to the dragonkin. His earlier thoughts, though, his admission to fearing Valla would grow tired of being in his shadow, weighed heavily on him. He wondered if she also suspected there was more to the anger she felt. He wondered if she was sitting there drawing her own conclusions, finding rifts where before she'd thought things were smooth.

He hated how he felt. He hated that Valla was upset with him. He hated that he hadn't said or done the right thing when he'd seen her injury, and rather than make things better for her, he seemed to have made them worse. He tried to listen to Lesh, nodding along and acting impressed at the right moments, but he was only half-present as he replayed one conversation after another, trying to think of the right things to say. When he failed, he finally closed his eyes and leaned back, hoping he was right and that a bit of time was all it would take.

Book 8: Chapter 18: Trust and Paranoia

Victor was heartened when Valla looked at him and smiled as she exited the coach at the lake house. Even so, he found his tongue sluggish when he tried to think of the right words. The moment passed, and she stepped away from the coach, briskly walking toward the waiting staff member by the front doors. Lesh clapped his shoulder on his way out. "You don't mind if I rest? I'd go with you if you need someone to watch—"

Victor waved him off. "Nah, it's nothing. I just need to run a couple of errands." He watched the dragonkin turn to close the coach's door, then signaled Mr. Quar to leave. Once he was flying toward town again, alone in the coach, Victor sighed and leaned back. Feeling Lifedrinker press into his back reminded him that he wasn't really alone. He smiled at the idea and almost reached up to pull the axe free of her harness but stopped himself—he wanted his mind clear, and he knew Lifedrinker would just take his side in any sort of conflict. She was wonderful for her fierce loyalty, but she didn't give impartial advice.

He rode in silence, and though he tried to think about Valla and their issues, his mind wouldn't stay focused, and he thought about other things. His thoughts often wandered toward Coloss and their time in that strange, savage city. Victor wondered about the Warlord and how far beyond level one hundred he'd reached. Had he completed his "test of steel?" Had he honed his Class to the point where he'd entered his "lustrous veil?"

He knew the Warlord wouldn't call those stages of progression those names; they were unique to Sojourn and the worlds under its influence, but he imagined the process was the same no matter what someone called it. Remembering his fight with Karnice, Victor wondered how small the Warlord kept his little club of enlightened people. Karnice had been a common iron ranker, somewhere in the eighth tier. Were the Warlord's "War Captains" beyond the iron ranks? Were they "steel seekers," or were they beyond that point?

Victor remembered feeling War Captain Black's aura and his power. He remembered bowing to it, knowing the man far outstripped him, but he'd changed a lot since then. Still, the man had been stronger than Karnice; there wasn't any doubt of that in Victor's mind. "So, maybe I'll have to deal with some people beyond the iron ranks." He nodded to himself. Then, realizing what he'd said, he wondered what had made him contemplate returning to Zaafor. He had to admit that maybe he was looking for a way to get away from things, to give himself something else to focus on.

When the coach arrived, and Victor stepped out to collect his armor from Tria, he resolved to meet with Khul Bach when he returned to the lake house. Considering all he'd learned since coming to Sojourn, he and the Degh spirit had much to discuss. Tria didn't fail to deliver on her promise; his wyrm-scale vest was in perfect condition, and the new enchantment worked flawlessly.

When he put the vest on and trickled a little Energy into the new rune, he felt a flicker of Energy over his skin, and then he was wearing the shirt he'd purchased the day before. The shirt was made of a blend of fabric that breathed like cotton and hung luxuriously like silk. The fabric was dyed a rich gray-black, but Victor knew he could make it match just about any color he could imagine with a simple focus of his will and touch of Energy.

“This is great, Tria.”

“Well, the shirt is lovely, but I didn't make it.”

“No, I mean the enchantment. It's nice to walk around in comfort, knowing I can have my armor on in an instant.”

“Yes. Invaluable for a man of action, I'm sure.” She made a funny chirping sound after her words, and Victor wondered if she was laughing at him.

With a wave and a promise to return soon, he left and had Mr. Qwor take him back to the Sojourn City Hall, where the System Stone stood. He didn't want to empty his pockets by purchasing any of the massively expensive set bonuses for his new armor, but he figured he'd buy the “class A” enchantments so he could wear the new armor in comfort. He especially wanted to equip the gauntlet so he'd have the option of using the magma whip if he got into a fight.

Either the early hour proved fruitful, or his luck was better that morning because not a single person stood in line when he arrived. He went straight to the Stone and selected the three class-A bonuses he wanted: the resizing enchantment, the self-cleaning and self-repairing enchantment, and, of course, the enchantment to disguise the armor as clothing. Altogether, it cost him 35,000 standard beads, which he paid for using some of those he'd won in the challenge dungeon.

When he returned to the coach, Victor took a minute to put the armor on, switching Khul Bach's bracer to his right arm until he had a chance to stow it in his vault. The armor was comfortable, and even the dense, metallic gauntlet and helmet felt like they were made for his body, flexing and moving easily when he twisted and turned his wrist and neck. Still, he activated the disguise runes and was pleased to find that everything morphed into clothing that wouldn't be out of place among the finely dressed individuals he'd seen around Sojourn.

The red leather pants seemed to take a cue from the shirt he wore, becoming dark, narrow-legged slacks of fine material and craftsmanship. The boots changed from heavy, combat-oriented adventuring boots to fine, polished leather ones, easily the most comfortable Victor had ever worn. The belt went from a girdle-like piece of heavy “lava king” hide to a supple leather strap that matched his boots. Even the bracer and helmet changed to something far more comfortable—soft leather bands that looked almost stylish on his wrist and around his forehead. Looking closely, he saw that they were stitched with angular designs in a faintly metallic thread.

Pleased, Victor closed his eyes and tried to relax during the short flight back to the lake house. Upon arrival, he walked through the house and onto the deck, looking for any sign of Valla and their

friends. Following sounds of splashes and laughter, he looked down the steps to the pier, where he saw Edeya, Lam, and Darren playing some convoluted game of keep away with Lesh. Darren leaped out of the water, something bright red clutched in his hand, and Victor could hear the breathless, almost panicked nature of his laughter as Lesh erupted like a damned crocodile, roaring as he gave chase. Edeya's high-pitched cackle was too much, and Victor turned away before he jumped down there and joined the fun.

Of course, he wanted to, but he wondered where Valla was, and he'd also made a promise to himself to meet with Khul Bach before he found another excuse to put it off. So, he returned to the house and proceeded down the hall to his bedroom. He found Valla inside, sound asleep under the covers, her left eye still covered by a thick white bandage. He knew she didn't need the bandage, that she was just hiding the damaged eye, either because she was self-conscious or because it was unpleasant to look at. He wanted to pull it aside, wanted to see what some pinché monster had done to her face, but he knew it would add to her list of grievances with him.

Victor quietly passed through the room into the adjoining study. It was a relatively large space with a big round table and chairs at the center, a large desk on the left-hand wall in front of a window, and built-in bookcases lining the right-hand wall. Victor carefully paced across the room and determined that if he removed the table and chairs, he should be able to open the vault.

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Rather than drag the furniture around, moving it to the other room, he just pulled the table and chairs into one of his storage rings; he didn't think Dar would mind as long as he put them back when he moved out of the house. He closed the study door, then, on the big woven carpet, he twisted the key in the marble-sized vault and watched as it hissed with steam, slowly expanding to fill most of the empty space in the room.

Victor opened the door and removed the key; he would be inside for a while and hated the idea that someone might lock him in. Inside the vault, he regarded the ivid royal jelly and the ivory box containing the geists. He worried that Ranish Dar, or anyone, really, might step into the vault while he was in there talking to Khul Bach, so he contemplated the door and noticed a keyhole on the inside. "Huh." He inserted the key, ensuring it fit. He pulled the door shut and then turned the key until it clicked. He was reasonably sure the keyhole hadn't been present before. Was that because the key had been on the outside?

He wondered if he could keep turning the key, shrinking the vault down with him inside it, but the idea sent shivers down his spine, and he refused to try it. Instead, he took a step back and sat down in the middle of the spherical chamber. He removed the bracer he'd made to hold the seventeen Ancestor Stone shards and touched the only occupied slot. After a moment to clear his head, Victor sent Energy into it, summoning the crystal's weird, white-gray, angular landscape.

"You've changed much, student of mine," Khul Bach rumbled, suddenly sitting a few feet away, his countenance creased in its usual glower. He sat with his legs folded before him, his big, scarred knuckles resting on the ground at his sides.

“Hello, Khul Bach. I’ve changed a bit and learned a lot. Have you been doing well?”

“You know how things go for me—time passes, and I hardly notice. How long has it been? A year? Twenty? More?”

“Nah, not all that long. Less than a year.”

“Yet you have a gravity about you that speaks of great advancements. Tell me, then, lad, what have you been about?”

Victor nodded, and, slowly at first, but then, in a rush of words, he told the old spirit about the Free Marches and all about his mistakes and triumphs in the war. He told the giant about First Landing and how he’d smashed the human-made constructs before traveling to Sojourn. The giant grew quiet and very attentive when he described the power of the great masters of the city and then about his journey to the ivid hive world. When he mentioned Ranish Dar and his bargain with the Master Spirit Caster, Victor thought he saw a flicker of something odd on the giant’s face—doubt? Fear? Worry? He supposed any of those reactions would be reasonable.

“So,” the giant said, resting one elbow on a knee and placing his chin in his palm. He looked almost depressed.

“So?”

“So. You’ve no need for me and my backward ways.”

“Oh, come on!” Victor chuckled. “You’re still old as hell; you’ll always have things to teach me.”

“My age?” the giant roared. “Of all my qualities, you choose my age as my saving grace?”

“Khul Bach! Come on, I still plan to talk to you regularly, and yes, I intend to fulfill my promise to you. I’m going to free your people from the Warlord.”

The Degh spirit nodded, somewhat mollified, and lifted his chin out of his palm. Sitting up, his backbone rigid, he said, “You’re stronger, but I still think Thoargh will beat you. He was strong when the Degh were yet whole.”

“I know I’m not ready yet. Well, no, I don’t, but I’m not planning to go back soon. I have a lot to learn here. Khul Bach, do you know about what happens after level one hundred?”

“Aye. Endless, slow cultivation. Years spent in meditation to eke out a bit more Energy at glacial paces. A rare level here and there that seems a hollow echo of those in the lower tiers.”

“You don’t know anything about something that might be described as a ‘test of steel?’ A custom Class that you need to improve and refine?”

“I know people who reach level one hundred are given a new choice of Class based on their earlier experiences. I don’t recall anything about refining and improving that Class. Victor, very few Degh reached such a level, and few lingered on Zaafor; most are in the Ancestor Stone.”

“Well, there’s more to the process of advancing after level one hundred, Khul Bach. I don’t know the secrets yet; I’ve only heard hints, but I’m going to learn them before I go back to Zaafor. The Warlord might know the secrets; he might have advanced past his ‘test of steel,’ or whatever he called it. He might not, however. He seemed pretty damn frustrated with his progression . . .” Victor trailed off, letting the implications of his words speak for themselves.

Khul Bach nodded. “You should pass that milestone before you return.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll see what Ranish Dar thinks. Is that all right with you? Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine, lad. I’ve languished for millennia. My people await, but another year or twenty won’t change much. No, I’d rather you were ready and met with success than attempt to take on Thoargh ill-prepared and fail.”

Victor nodded. “I have another question for you. Have you ever heard of the idea that some people who become obsessed with or overwhelmed by a negative affinity like rage or fear might carry that Energy with them into the Spirit Plane when they die? That they might go through the veil with it, driven mad, wandering in a kind of purgatory with their delusion?”

“The lure of a strong emotion is powerful. You should know this. Haven’t you tasted the power of fear? Of rage? Imagine you succumbed to the call of your fear and never gave it up. Imagine you feasted on the emotion to the exclusion of all else. Now, imagine doing that for hundreds or thousands of years. What would be left of Victor when you died? Your spirit would be twisted and shunned. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen Degh who lost themselves to greed or envy, to vengeance or lust. Their spirits were pushed away from the Ancestor Stone and driven through the veil. Such poison couldn’t be allowed to fester among us.”

Victor folded his arms and frowned. “Ranish Dar sent me with a death caster through the veil. He had me capture two such spirits. One full of rage and the other with fear. He wants me to use them for cultivation, to gather their attuned Energy.”

Khul Bach frowned, rubbing his prodigious jawline with a thick thumb. “It may be my ignorance speaking, but that sounds like a dark dealing to me, Victor. Use caution.”

“He says that we’re helping the spirits by pulling their rage and fear off, helping them to recover faster than if we’d let nature take its course.”

“An optimistic outlook. I won’t pretend to know as much as this man, this Ranish Dar, who has lived for thousands of years and reached pinnacles of power unheard of on Zaafor. No, learn what you can, but please be cautious, Victor.

You are a gifted warrior. A man with potent blood and deep potential. It wouldn't be the first time, nor even the millionth, that a powerful man promised great knowledge to a protégé who had something he coveted. Perhaps my caution is misplaced, and your new mentor is so far beyond you that anything he may gain from your abuse would be too small, too trifling, to warrant such betrayal, but . . ." It was Khul Bach's turn to let his words die out, leaving Victor ruminating on them.

"All right. I appreciate the advice, Khul Bach. I'll try to keep a clear head and not get overwhelmed by the wonders I see." Victor chuckled, trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Do that and keep working on your skills and spells. How many have you lifted into the epic tier?"

Victor sighed, wishing he'd said goodbye just a little quicker. "Only two. My Iron Berserk and Inspiration of the Quinametzin."

"What? All this time? All this advancement in power, and you've neglected your Sovereign Will?" The giant Degh spirit leaned forward, his eyes boring into Victor's.

"No! I haven't neglected it. I use the damn skill all the time, but it won't move past advanced."

Khul Bach stared into his eyes for several seconds but finally relented, nodding with a grunt. "I see you speak the truth. Well? Ask your new master for insight. There must be a way to push it forward, and push it forward, you must; it's a central, defining skill of yours. Don't let it languish." Victor nodded, opening his mouth to reply, but Khul Bach waved him off. "I must rest and think on all that you've revealed. Come again soon, Victor."

Victor felt Khul Bach's push and relented, pulling his Energy back into himself and slipping out of the domain of the Ancestor Stone shard. He looked around the curved, rune-inscribed walls of his vault and let his eyes drift toward the vivid royal jelly. The fact that he was hiding it in there said a lot; he clearly didn't fully trust Ranish Dar. Was there something to Khul Bach's warning? He sighed and stood. Moving over to the satchel, he slipped the bracer with the Ancestor Stone shard inside next to the silk-wrapped jelly, and then he stooped to pick up the ivory box containing the geists. Dar would want to see them when he helped set up Victor's "cultivation chamber," and he didn't want to have to awkwardly try to sneak them out of the vault, exposing the jelly.

He turned the key counterclockwise until it clicked, pushed the door open, and stepped out. He was still alone in the study. Victor locked up the vault, and when he had it hanging from around his neck, tucked under his shirt, he breathed a sigh of relief, letting go of some stress he hadn't even been aware of. Was he being paranoid? He didn't think so. He didn't know what the royal jelly would do, but he knew it was powerful, the most potent stuff he'd ever laid eyes on. Dar might be a good man who wanted to do right by him, but Victor didn't see any reason to tempt his good nature.

When he opened the study door and walked into the bedroom, he tried to move silently, but he saw the light streaming through the window reflected in Valla's eye as she peered at him from her nest of blankets. "Hey," he said softly, almost a whisper. She didn't reply, but she pulled the blankets down, revealing her naked chest, and then gently patted the sheet beside her. Victor wasn't stupid enough to question such an invitation.

Book 8: Chapter 19: The Pull of Glory

Sometime later, Victor lay on his back, one arm behind his head on the pillow and the other outstretched, cradling Valla. She lay on her side, looking at him, and after several minutes of silence, reached over and began to trace little circles on his chest. Her fingertip felt cool to his hot Quinametzin flesh, and he loved it. While he luxuriated in the attention, Valla softly asked, "You know why I was upset, why I'm still upset, right?"

Victor inhaled deeply through his nose. "I guess 'cause I was impulsive and didn't ask you about selling the house."

"You guess?" The finger stopped moving, pressing into his breastbone.

"No, Valla, I know. I also know that's not the only thing that got you pissed at me. I shouldn't have freaked out in the restaurant when I saw you. I shouldn't have, but," Victor turned slightly so he could look down into her good eye, "I worry about a lot of things, and I'm not good at explaining what I'm feeling."

"So try. Just tell me what was going through your mind." Her finger started moving, gently tracing the outline of his pectoral muscle.

"If I say it, you're going to think I'm an even bigger asshole. It's a feeling I'm not proud of."

"Whatever kind of asshole you are, however big you are," she chuckled, "I still love you. So?"

Victor's mind raced, and he wondered if he should be honest. It wasn't that he wanted to hide his feelings from Valla, but in this case, he honestly thought his feelings made him seem like a prick. "Even if I know my thoughts make me seem, I don't know, conceited? Full of myself? Insecure?" Valla's thumb joined her finger, and she squeezed his skin between the two—a clear threat of a wicked, incoming pinch. "Easy! Easy," he laughed. "Let me gather my thoughts."

"Just say what you're feeling. Don't spend time twisting words to hide the truth!"

"Really? Well, get ready to be pissed again." Victor took a deep breath, then began letting his thoughts fall out of his mouth in a rush, "When you were telling me how you got hurt, I couldn't stop thinking about how I wished I'd been there, that I could have killed that *pinché* boss. Of course, that made me think about how you and Lesh were just about my level, so why was I so sure? I *am* sure, though, which makes me sound like a conceited asshole, but, shit, Valla, I've beaten several tier eights and nines *at once*."

Valla was quiet, and she released his flesh and started to withdraw her hand, so Victor rushed to try to explain, “It’s not that I was sitting there thinking you guys are weak or anything. I was worrying about how you might not be able to catch up to me. Ever. It’s not just about levels, it’s about . . . shit, I don’t know. My bloodline? My Class? The goddamn freakish synergy of everything that makes me into some kind of monster. What if you get tired of trying? What if you decide it’s not worth it? What if we grow further and further apart? I hated being away from you for just a few days, but honestly, it looks like there’s more time apart than together in our future.”

“Oh, Victor,” Valla sighed, flopping over onto her back with a huff and a faintly metallic rustle of feathers. “Do you think I only want to gain levels and strength to ‘catch up’ to you?” The blunt question drove home the point so clearly that Victor, as usual, felt like an idiot.

“No. I guess not. But, even so, Valla, what about,” he reached out and gently touched the scar on her forehead, just above her bandage, “the rest of it. What about me getting pulled into more and more situations where you’d be at risk if you were with me? What about me, during my downtime, sitting around missing you ‘cause you’re doing your thing?”

“Well, what did Lesh tell you?”

The question seemed to come out of left field, surprising Victor and putting him even more off balance. “Huh?”

“You sat at the table for a while after I walked out. My hearing’s not as good as yours, but I heard your voices. What did you tell him?” Something told Victor she’d heard much more than she was letting on. She’d been sitting right outside the window, after all. Was that why she’d made the peace overture after her nap? Had she heard him stumble upon the truth of his self-centered concern?

“Well, he basically told me that I should be happy for the time I have. I should be happy for what I can grasp and stop trying to control what I can’t.” He sighed. “I don’t remember the exact words.”

“So?” Valla turned toward him again, reaching to gently scrape her nails through the rough, short stubble on his jawline. “Aren’t you happier having grasped this moment?”

“Yeah. Of course. I don’t like feeling like you’re angry or that I’ve messed things up. I just also wish I could count on some stability in our future together—”

“Victor!” She spoke sharply, but her lips and eyes smiled as she leaned closer, pressing her forehead against his. “The only way that will happen is if we both decide we’re content with what we have, if we both stop going out and risking ourselves. We’d have to decide we don’t need more levels, more knowledge, or more strength. We’d have to admit that we’re okay with a huge portion of the

population being stronger than us and having power over us. Even if we returned to Fanwath, we'd need to worry about the next threat that might come through a gateway. Could you do that?"

His voice was quiet and a little thick with emotion when he eventually responded, "No."

Valla smiled and leaned close, kissing him softly. "I have to confess that I was feeling a similar way. It's why I got upset about the house. For a tiny moment, when we first moved in there, I could picture a life with you, making a home together. I'm not saying we won't do that. I'm not saying it's impossible, but I think when I realized you sold the house, I recognized the fantasy for what it was. So, let's do our best. Let's find ways to improve while spending as much time together as possible. Let's try not to be irritated with each other and spoil our precious time with fights."

"All right." He moved his hand to the side of her face, gently stroking her cheek with his thumb. "You know, it's not sold yet. I could tell the realtor to stop trying —"

"No. You made the right decision. A home isn't the right place to tie up our money right now. Besides, if we want to spend time in a place that's truly ours, we can visit home." Victor smiled at the words; having a place to think of as home was nice, and the Free Marches fit nicely. She grasped his hand, halting his gentle exploration of her injury. "Don't worry about the scar. I'll consume the racial advancement elixir I earned in the dungeon. If it's not enough to repair my eye, I'll use the regeneration tonic I saved."

"I'm not worried. I don't give a shit how many scars you have!" Victor growled, his voice gaining some volume and a bit of a rumble. "You're the most beautiful woman in the universe. Any scars you get only make things a little fairer for the other goddesses out there."

That brought a giggle burbling out of Valla's throat, and she bounded atop him, her wings spreading wide. "Did you just call me a goddess?"

"Obviously—" Victor started to say, but then a knock at the door interrupted his further efforts to earn her good favor. "What?" he barked, more harshly than he intended.

A muffled voice came through the door, "Victor, sir, Lord Dar would meet with you. He awaits you in the library."

"Shit," Victor sighed. "I hope I'm not in trouble. I wrote in the damn Farscribe book like he asked—"

"Go!" Valla rolled to the side and nimbly off the bed. She padded, barefoot and naked, toward the bathroom. "I'll be here. I'm going to consume the racial advancement! Check on me later."

“I will.” Victor sat up on the side of the bed and quickly began pulling on his hastily discarded clothing.

He thought she was gone, out of sight in the bathroom, but after a few seconds, she spoke up from the doorway, her voice very sweet and almost a little plaintive, “I love you, Victor.”

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He jerked his head up to lock eyes with her and immediately replied, “I love you too.” She smiled at that and pulled the door closed, and then Victor finished getting dressed and hurried out.

When he stepped into the brightly lit Library, shielding his eyes from the sun reflecting off the lake shining through the enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, he found Ranish Dar sitting at one of the study tables, thumbing through a text so thick that it would have put his abuela’s old-school dictionary to shame.

“Thank you for hurrying, Victor. I hope I didn’t interrupt your nap.”

Victor tried to hear sarcasm or wry humor in the man’s deep, grating voice, but the words felt sincere. “No, I was awake.” He strode over to the table and gestured to the empty seat across from Dar. “Should I sit down?”

“Yes, by all means.” Dar closed the thick book with a thud and turned his smoldering eyes toward him, watching Victor take a seat. “You’ve made yourself small again?” He chuckled, clearly finding Victor’s human-sized form in his oversized chair amusing.

“Well, I was with Valla,” Victor mumbled, reaching into his Core to cut the connection to the Alter Self spell. As he surged in size, filling the chair out and putting himself eye to eye with Ranish Dar, he shrugged. “It makes things easier.”

“Yes.” Dar rubbed his stony chin. “No doubt it does.” He leaned back, causing the dense hardwood chair to creak. “I read your reports in the Farscribe book. I appreciate you asking if I mind you and your friends hosting a gathering here, but, as I told you before, I want you to consider this your home for now. I generally don’t entertain, so you needn’t worry about my schedule. Once I get you started on some rigorous practice routines, I will return to the tower and give you some space.”

“Oh. Well, thanks.” Victor smiled, knowing Lam and Edeya would be pleased.

“I’ve been thinking about your ritual. The heart, I mean. We spoke only briefly after you consumed it, but I was serious about finding you some worthy opponents, enemies whose hearts might be worth claiming. I believe I’ve

stumbled upon a solution in the most unlikely of places—a letter from one of my grandchildren.”

“Your, um, grandchildren?”

“Have I not mentioned that I’m old, Victor? Some might say ancient.” He chuckled. “When a man conquers worlds, a few dozen children here and there are to be expected.” He looked hard at Victor, and his stony brows lifted in amusement. “Unless his heart is claimed, perhaps. Love? I’ve had love, Victor, but centuries tend to pull even the most desperate lovers apart.”

Victor was silent, contemplating Dar’s words. Was it a coincidence? It felt strange to be hearing about love and centuries “pulling people apart” directly after the discussion he’d just had with Valla. Was Dar teasing him? Offering him advice in a strange, roundabout manner?

Despite Victor’s preoccupation, Dar continued speaking. “When I was younger, I conquered a kingdom in a world called Ruhn. I lived there for quite some time and built up a rather extended family before my yearnings for knowledge, adventure, and power called me away. My wife was gone, and my children had either left to seek their own glory or had become elderly due to their lack of ambition. I didn’t feel compelled to stay.”

That got Victor’s attention, and he pushed away his unquiet thoughts and tried to pay attention to the master Spirit Caster. Dar noticed his renewed focus and smiled as he continued, “These days on Ruhn, you can find many high-tier individuals in the iron ranks and even a few hundred working through their tests of steel. However, only a very few have entered their lustrous veil. According to my granddaughter’s letter, ten such individuals watch over the world, and they are, to put it simply, hands-off.”

“Yeah?” Victor liked the sound of that, but probably only because he was still an “iron ranker.” He didn’t enjoy having hundreds or even thousands of people at Dar’s power level hanging around, reminding him of his insignificance.

“Yes. Ruhn is, in effect, ruled by an empire of which the kingdoms, like the one I left to my descendants, are member states. The kingdoms are often vying for power and influence. The most influential will occasionally force a war of succession, changing the empire’s rulership. I’ve lost touch with the world and my children’s children, but this letter surprised me recently. Well, it was recent to me—something like four years ago. It was after our discussion last night, following your ritual, that I was reminded of my granddaughter’s plight.”

“Her plight?” Victor was trying to keep track of Dar’s rambling tale and how it might impact him. He’d yet to figure that part out.

“Yes, the point of her letter—my kingdom, well, hers now, is beset by hostile neighbors who’ve been putting tremendous strain on her economy and infrastructure. She fears they’ll soon challenge her and lay claim to her lands, destroying my descendants’ legacy.” Dar spoke matter-of-factly, betraying no

emotion at all, and his uncaring demeanor brought storm clouds to Victor's narrowed eyes.

"She wanted your help? Four years ago?" He couldn't keep the snarl out of his words.

"That's right." Dar nodded, drumming his fingers on the table, ignoring Victor's evident judgment. "At the time, I contemplated a walk back to Ruhn, but that would throw me into conflict with the ten veil walkers of that world. No, someone of my stature could not aid her. So, I set the letter aside with plans to find a solution, and now I have!"

"But . . ." Victor started to object, wanting to chastise his "master" for taking so long to help his descendants, but something else had caught his attention. "What do you mean you were thinking about a 'walk' back to Ruhn?" He quickly followed up with, "And what's a veil walker?"

"Ah, that's right." Dar looked at him with an even expression, and Victor got the distinct impression that he was pitying him. "I let slip my mind your lack of formal education. Fear not; I'll spend some months giving you lessons before I send you on your way."

"Send me—"

"But, to answer your questions." Dar held up a finger, interrupting Victor. "When I 'walk' somewhere distant, I use the Spirit Plane. Yet another lesson I must add to your long list of study topics."

"You can—"

Dar brandished his finger again. "Veil walker is a general term for those who've completed their test of steel and moved into their lustrous veil." He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. "Now, to the point: I told you we need to find you more hearts from worthy foes. On Ruhn, wars are decided by battles between two kingdoms' champions. The fools pressuring my distant granddaughter won't be worthy hearts for you, but after you've vanquished them, you will champion my granddaughter as she begins a war of succession. You and she will conquer Ruhn."

"Seriously

? When? How long will that take? Why wo—"

Dar held up a hand. "Victor! Such panic from a titan? Calm yourself and think. There are more than a hundred kingdoms on Ruhn. Of those, twenty-two are formidable and will have champions that will truly test your mettle. When you face the seven great houses, you will earn hearts that will make the one from the behemoth seem a mere snack! Of course, those champions will likely all be steel seekers, so you'll have your work cut out for you."

Victor opened his mouth to reply, but Dar pressed on, “There are several ways to gain raw power for a standard cultivator—vanquish foes for their Energy, cultivate Energy from other sources, and improve one’s species or bloodline. You have another method that does all three and more!”

Dar’s passion broke through to Victor, and he nodded, his eyes narrowing as he scowled in determination. Dar was right. He gained a lot of Energy from every heart he consumed, sometimes improved his bloodline, and often gained traits from his enemies. Even his breath Core came from eating a heart. “Are the fights always to the death?”

“Always. It’s meant to deter conflict.”

“So, I have to win a hundred duels?”

“Once the war of succession has begun, other kingdoms will likely seize the opportunity to remove enemies, claim weaker neighbors, or even unite in mutual defense. Many may kneel to my granddaughter, accepting her claim.”

Victor’s scowl deepened. He wanted to have an idea of what he was up against. “How many? Will I have to win fifty? Twenty?”

“There’s no telling. The last champion to lead a claimant to the imperial throne won sixty-four duels.”

Victor shook his head, baffled by the strange custom. “So that’s all it takes? One champion kills another, and they lose their kingdom?”

“Not quite. Wars of succession are much more complicated. You’ll be dealing with shifting alliances, resource management, and political intrigue. A kingdom is not required to accept a duel, and should they refuse, my granddaughter will need to coerce them. That’s what has been happening to her. Her hostile neighbors have been putting pressure on her in myriad ways—cutting off food supplies, severing communication with the greater empire, destroying resources, assassinating members of her court, and even kidnapping civilians.”

“How do you know she hasn’t fallen?”

“Because I used a treasure to scry her this morning. Her current champion yet lives; she’s close to breaking, but her neighbors feel no hurry; they slowly bleed her of resources and know she’ll be forced to accept the challenge eventually. A year or ten is nothing for people who count their lives in centuries.”

Victor sighed and reached up to run his fingers through his short, stiff hair as though he could stimulate his brain by pulling on it. “You said her neighbors are weaklings. Now you say they count their lives in centuries.”

“Few people push much past the middle of the iron ranks. Why would they? They feel not the pull of glory! The competition for resources becomes deadly, the grind of cultivation becomes an all-consuming obsession, and the pace of

progress becomes glacial.” He snorted softly, amused by some private thought, as he eyed Victor knowingly. “For most. Nevertheless, reaching level thirty or fifty greatly extends a natural life, yes? So, most people in worlds like Ruhn will gain levels while it is easy or entertaining and then fall back into rather mundane lives, enjoying the gains they’ve accumulated for hundreds or thousands of years.”

Victor slowly nodded, lowering his hands to the arms of his chair as he thought about that. His perception of the worlds he’d visited was badly skewed; he was always seeking to advance, so he encountered other people on that path, whether it be in arenas, on monster hunts, in wars, or even in dungeons. Still, he encountered seemingly mundane people daily—servants, officials, merchants, and countless people on the street about whom he knew nothing. Suddenly, Valla’s point that he and she would need to agree that they were content before having real, quality time together took on a new light.

The truth was, Dar was out of touch. Victor knew that it wasn’t just people who no longer found gaining levels “easy or entertaining” who stopped. He knew that life wasn’t fair and that on many worlds, maybe most of them, the people with power actively worked to keep others from acquiring it. All he had to do was remember the Wagon Wheel and the Greatbone Mine to cement that point in his mind.

He turned his attention back to the topic of their meeting. “So your granddaughter needs to force the other kingdoms to accept her challenges before I’ll need to fight?”

“That’s right. She may need your help with some of her strategies, but, for the most part, you’ll remain in her court, training and making yourself available for duels. If a kingdom bends the knee to her rather than having their champion duel you, you’ll receive a portion of the tribute they pay—a tariff for your formidable intimidation value. I’ll instruct my granddaughter to demand growth items as payment for your services.”

“How long?”

“Before I send you? Two to six months, I’d say. There’s the matter of your education—etiquette, the laws of succession on Ruhn, and some general knowledge about advancement. More than that, I want to get you started on methods of training that you can practice while away.”

“And my companions?” Victor already felt like he knew the answer before Dar shook his head.

“They must remain here. I will extend my hospitality to each of them; I know their safety is important to you and won’t have you distracted with worry. Besides, I rather like Lam, and I’m eager to see how she advances. I can see you formulating an objection, especially with regard to your lady love, but Victor, she will languish on Ruhn. There aren’t easily accessible dungeons, and once it begins, the war will turn the countryside perilous with lurking assassins and

saboteurs. She'd have to stay at court and watch as you grew ever more powerful, winning duel after duel. No, I think it best you leave her here with your dragon-blood friend."

Victor felt that earlier dread, that cold, hard grip on his heart, slide back into place. Had he somehow felt this coming? Had he known Dar would be sending him places for God knows how long? He must have suspected it on some subconscious level. "Shouldn't she have the option?"

"Yes. Talk to her. Explain that Ruhn is four jumps away via a System Stone and that when I help you make the journey, you'll use the Spirit Plane—a method unavailable to anyone without a sufficiently sturdy spirit Core." Dar pushed his chair back and stood. "Go now. I have things to arrange." He scowled at Victor, but the slight tilt of an eyebrow made it clear he wasn't really upset. "Primary among them, I must negotiate with the Sojourn Council in an attempt to release you from your debt of three tasks."

"So that I can leave?"

"Exactly. Now, enjoy some time with your friends. Come dawn, we will build your cultivation chamber and begin your training in earnest."