

Victor BK8: Ch21

Book 8: Chapter 21: Renewed Focus

“Have you seen a cultivation chamber before, Victor?” Dar asked, looking around the small cave. He’d brought Victor down beneath his lake house again, not far from where they’d performed Lam’s ritual.

“Yeah. The Warlord in Coloss had one. He let me and Valla use it for a little while before I figured out he was going to try to steal my bloodline.”

Dar nodded. Victor had given him most of the details of his adventures on Zaafor, back when he’d written in the Farscribe journal and recently when they’d spoken about his ability to claim power from the hearts of his defeated foes. “From what I’ve surmised about this ‘Warlord,’ I think it’s safe to say that he’s steel-bound. His frustrations sound like those of a man who hasn’t been able to break through.”

“Does that mean I might be able to take him?”

“Perhaps, but I think caution is advisable. Someone who’s been steel-bound for centuries, especially a man holding sway over an entire planet, may have gained enormous power, even though he never broke into his lustrous veil.”

Victor sighed as he watched Dar slowly unpacking materials from a dimensional sack he’d carried down, grasped in his thick, stony fist. At the moment, he was making stacks of plate-sized, slightly concave stones that looked almost like they could be used for paving a garden. He held the sack, and it took no effort to summon the objects out, or Victor would have asked to help unload the supplies. He would have, that is, if his mind weren’t fixated on something Dar had said. “I’m starting to get frustrated with the constant mentions of the ‘test of steel’ and the ‘lustrous veil’ when I really don’t understand them. Is it such a mystery? Can’t you tell me what to expect?”

“You know more than you think. When you reach level one hundred, what will happen?”

“I’ll have to choose a new Class?”

“You’ll have to create a new Class.” Dar looked at Victor and moved his shoulders in a gesture he’d had come to recognize as his best attempt at a shrug. “There’s a reason it seems mysterious; the process differs from person to person. Once you create your Class, you’ll need to continue gaining levels, using a portion of the Energy to improve the Class—another ‘mysterious’ process in that it, as you may guess, isn’t the same for any two individuals. If you think that’s frustrating, understand that things only worsen. Your breakthrough will likely take you by surprise, and when it happens, you’ll slip into your ‘lustrous veil’ and face new, unique roads to advancement.”

“Why ‘lustrous veil?’ I mean, the term sounds—”

“Frilly? Overly poetic? Think of it this way: in the iron ranks, you’re building up your foundation, your core of strength. During the test of steel, you’re refining all of that iron into something stronger, sharper. The lustrous veil is named so for two reasons: you’re adding the shine to your steel, and your process is hidden, obscured in the mystery of your individualism. No two people will hone their steel to a mirrored, lustrous shine in the same way.”

Victor sighed, realizing he wasn’t going to get much help. Dar continued to look at him and chuckled. “You think you’re the first iron ranker who felt frustrated by this? Listen, Victor, I won’t tell you what to do in your test of steel for a simple reason—if you try to repeat what worked for me, you’re likely to set yourself back. Things might seem to be working, and you may advance partially over the course of years or decades, only to find that the foundation you built with my guidance won’t work for you. There’s no surer way to become steel-bound.”

“So, it’s something I need to figure out myself.”

“Not entirely. I’ll guide you as you move from stage to stage, which should help you gain an advantage over this insular Warlord enemy of yours. He’s done himself no favors by keeping to his world, refusing to learn from the greater universe.”

“I still don’t get it, though.” Victor chuckled at himself, shaking his head. “I mean, I don’t think I’m stupid, but can you tell me how it’s different after level one hundred? I get that the System will help me build a new Class, but so what? I choose the Class I like, and then I gain levels; what’s different?”

Dar set down his sack and turned to face him, a broad smile exposing his teeth. “I see what’s got you confused. You don’t pick a Class and move on. You have to build your Class. Up to now, you’ve been given a Class by the System. You have no idea how that works, how it molds the Energy into your body with each level. At level one hundred, you’re going to have to do things the way our ancestors did before the System arrived. You’ll understand why you need that foundation when you enter your veil. As for the System, it won’t give you much help. It’ll start you on the first stage of creating your Class, and after that, you’ll only hear from it when you succeed in forming and refining it.”

Victor nodded, feeling his frustration slipping away. “I think I’m starting to see the picture more clearly.” He wondered if the Warlord had even finished building his Class. If the System only got him started and he had no idea what was expected, being the only person on Zaafor to reach that stage . . . Victor shook his head; it wasn’t worth speculating. He’d find out when he faced the man.

“Good. Now, let’s talk about cultivation. There’s a reason the Warlord had a cultivation chamber. A person’s advancement has three interlocking restrictions. One, you must build up Energy in your physical form. The System measures that

in 'levels.' Two, you must strengthen your Core, building it, compacting it, and expanding it. The System measures that in Core ranks. Finally, you must also improve your body with racial advancements. If you don't, two things will happen. Do you know what they are?"

"I know I can't gain levels past a certain point if I don't advance my race."

"Exactly! How can you advance in levels, enhancing your physical aspect with Energy, if your body cannot contain that Energy without being destroyed? The second?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with advancing my Core?"

"That's right! Just as you can't gain levels beyond the limits of your body, your Core cannot outstrip your physical form, else it, too, could destroy you with the Energy it contains."

"So, the Warlord?"

"Yes, the Warlord—he likely spends much of his time cultivating because he's grown too powerful for his world. The Energy he takes from slaying the beasts or people on Zaafor likely doesn't impact him much. You'll learn that if you push your Core, reaching the limit of your racial tier, then you can use the excess cultivated Energy to advance your level. Again, you can only do that until you reach the peak of your body's capabilities. With an 'epic' race or bloodline, that peak is well over level two hundred."

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"So, if he has an epic racial tier, he could be level two hundred or more?"

"Yes, and likely with a Core in the epic tier as well. Do you see how, even steel-bound, he could be formidable? Even so, it's not as dire as it may seem. Levels gained while steel-bound are far less impactful than levels gained in the iron ranks."

"Are all people who've entered their 'lustrous veil' that high level?"

"Some. Some might break through early and quickly. I know a woman who was only level one hundred and eight when she broke through."

"So, the Warlord could be stronger for staying steel-bound for so long?"

Dar barked a quick laugh, shaking his head. "No, lad. He'll be stronger than any iron ranker and some other steel-bound folks, but anyone in their veil will have glimpsed true power. They'll have abilities that he simply cannot fathom or counter."

Victor nodded, reaching up to scratch the back of his head. Was Tes in her lustrous veil or whatever name the dragons had for that stage of advancement? He had to think she was; she'd been utterly

fearless when facing the Warlord. Was her “elder magic” a clue to the test of steel? Was it what masters in their lustrous veil used? He hoped her early lesson in the pre-System magic would aid him when the time came, and he resolved to practice with it and try to learn new applications for it like he’d done with the spell to summon his spirit totems.

“Was the Warlord’s cultivation chamber a spherical chamber?” Dar asked, interrupting his thoughts. Victor looked up to see his mentor was once again piling what looked like building materials on the cave floor.

“Yeah, it was. He had a platform suspended in the center so a person could sit in the middle of the chamber.”

“Mmhmm. I imagine he had many treasures in there, considering he’s lord over the entire planet. I’ve done something similar in a world or three. I don’t think you quite understand how wondrous your ability to build up your Core via the heart ritual is. Your tale of running through the wastes of Zaafor, eating the hearts of great spiders and minor wyrms, each time flooding your Core with Energy . . . Honestly, Victor, I wonder if we waste our time with this chamber. It might be wiser to simply send you into dungeons to rip the hearts from every monster you encounter.”

Victor looked at him, not sure what to say. If he were honest, he’d be just as happy to do what Dar suggested; the act of cultivation was sometimes cathartic, but frequently, for him, it dredged up painful memories as he forced himself to relive and work out what made him so angry and fearful.

Dar saved him from a reply by saying, “No. Cultivation isn’t only about building Energy, not for a Spirit Caster. You must inure yourself to the Energies with which you toil. In any case, we won’t try to match the Warlord’s chamber with your first one—a flat floor, curved walls, and a domed ceiling will suffice.” He grunted as he shifted a large stack of lumber. “I sent Drema to collect these building supplies, and she did you some favors. She had the timbers cut to the exact lengths I specified and purchased brackets to join them. You’ll have an easy time of it.”

Victor surveyed the stacks of stone, the bags of mortar, the large metal buckets, the sacks of nails, and the piles of wood. “What am I building?”

Dar smiled, produced a large roll of parchment, and unfurled it, holding it out to Victor. It was densely inscribed with the detailed plans for a domed, stone-lined room. Victor could see the blueprints for a wooden framework and instructions for building it down to the individual nails. The next stage showed where to place each octagonal, plate-sized stone, with precise instructions for mortaring them into place. “Huh. I thought there’d be more magic involved.”

“Sometimes it’s good to do things with your hands, Victor.” Dar nodded and moved toward the tunnel leading back to his house. “While you construct the chamber, I’ll procure the other cultivation items you’ll need. Normally, I’d send you on quests to gain each one, but we’re a bit pressed for time. Speaking of which,” he pulled a golden watch from the pocket of his bright orange, silken pants and studied it, “I also need to stop by the council building. They’re making a decision about releasing you from your debt.”

“You think they’ll let me off?”

“I have my enemies on the council, but I’m hopeful that a bit of wealth and a favor owed will move things our way. The truth of the matter is that they cannot stop me from sending you away, though it could make your return problematic if we disregard their decision.”

Victor wanted to tell him to forget it, that he’d do the three tasks, but he knew Dar didn’t want the Sojourn council to interrupt his training or delay his departure. Nevertheless, he hated that his debt to the master Spirit Caster was mounting by the day. Thinking of debts, he frowned, looking at the building supplies. “Are these magical materials?”

“The tiles, aye. They’re a dense material, resistant to the passage of Energy and further enchanted to reflect it. Don’t fret; they’re cheap in the greater scheme of things. It’s the cultivation sources that are going to cost me.”

“Nothing I can do?”

“Nay. Again, don’t worry; the service you will provide to my neglected descendants on Ruhn will be worth the meager investments I make in you. Let’s see here.” He paused by the tunnel opening and gave Victor a long look. “You’ve got fear and rage, so I need inspiration, glory, and magma, yes? Nothing else you’re keeping secret?”

Victor looked up from his study of the blueprint and narrowed his eyes at Dar. “You expect me to believe you can’t see my different affinities?”

Dar smiled and shrugged. “I believe you have a secret or two you’ve yet to entrust to me.” When Victor’s eyes widened, he held up a stony hand and said, “No matter. I trust you’ve told me what’s important. We’re all entitled to a closely held secret or three. Build this chamber, and we’ll speak again tonight.”

As his mentor turned to leave, Victor said, “Dar, wait. Um, I promised Lesh I’d try to get a regular practice schedule planned out. He’s a good sparring partner, and I also was wondering if there was anything you could tell me about breath Cores—”

“One thing at a time, Victor. Finish this construction, then spar with your friend. Tomorrow, we’ll add your treasures to this chamber, and then we’ll talk about your schedule. And yes, I have a few things I can tell you about breath Cores; it will be part of your training. Now, I’m off.” With that, he turned and almost seemed to flicker out of sight as he employed some skill or spell to whisk himself away.

Victor straightened the blueprint in his hands and looked over the steps Dar had outlined for him. Had he written this out? It wasn’t exactly something only a master Spirit Caster would know; basically, Victor was going to do some wood framing and then build up an interior stone façade. The whole thing made him think of corny movies where a martial arts master would make the student do

sweeping or carry stones, driving the student crazy with frustration. Then, the master would laugh and explain how the chore movements were the martial arts techniques.

Victor chuckled as he began hammering nails into the pre-cut wooden frame pieces. The blueprints said to start with the base, so that's what he did, using metal brackets to connect each length of wood as he placed them around the edge of the cavern. Dar must have measured the space because the framework filled it as much as possible while maintaining a roughly circular shape. In reality, it would have sixteen sides, with each face aiming directly at the center of the space.

His hands were nimble and strong, and Victor no longer grew tired from manual labor, at least nothing he'd been able to throw at himself. Perhaps if he went to a world rich in Energy and had to dig or mine dense, powerful ore, he'd find that exhausting. He didn't know. As it was, he had the frame built in less than an hour. Fifteen minutes later, he'd nailed up all the backer boards for the stone façade. He set to work mixing the mortar, and when it felt thick enough to spread, he used the trowel Dar had given him to begin mounting the bottom row of eight-sided, concave stone tiles.

While he worked, Victor's mind wandered. He thought about the dinner parties he had lined up and began to warm up to the idea of meeting and speaking with some of the people he'd fought in the dungeon. He felt it was the right thing to do, inviting those folks. Even the ones who'd talked trash in the dungeon might be totally different in a social setting. He'd known wrestlers like that. Shouldn't he work to mend fences and build peaceful relations before leaving his friends here? Lam had said she would invite them, so he didn't feel he had to do anything more. If some showed up, great, and if none did, so be it.

Thinking of parties reminded him of Fanwath and the people he'd left there. Wouldn't it be nice to visit? Wouldn't it be fun to invite them to see Dar's lake house and experience Sojourn? Deyni would be in heaven! He wished he could afford a permanent portal like the ones connecting the cities of Fanwath.

Something told him such a gateway between worlds would require an order of magnitude more power and know-how. Even setting that aside, though, he knew some people could open temporary gateways between worlds. He wanted to learn that kind of power. Would the ability to walk through the Spirit Plane be similar? How hard would it be to bring people? Dar acted as though it wasn't trivial.

The instructions on the blueprint were to trickle Energy into each stone after setting it, and when Victor did so, they grew solid and unmoving, the mortar beneath completely cured. The ability to instantly set the tiles made for easy and quick work, and, despite the chamber being a good fifteen feet in diameter, he rapidly built up the stone façade. Seeing the chamber take shape around him was gratifying work. Victor was relaxed, and his mind gradually stopped worrying at all the things going on in his life, and he lost himself to the work, utterly zoning out.

When he finished, he was almost disappointed that he was done. He'd enjoyed the honest labor, seeing the room taking shape and feeling a little accomplishment as each stone tile fit snugly into place. He thought those feelings said a lot about what was going on with his life. He was trying to control too much. He was wracking his brain trying to understand love, trying to keep track of too many, sometimes conflicting, goals. He needed to take Lesh's advice and focus on what he could control, grasp the joys within reach, and make the best of the hand he'd been dealt.

Building the enclosure perfectly—and it was perfect—had been an excellent example of that. He felt better having done it, having let his mind rest, and having focused wholly on the task. It was an introduction to what he needed to do for the next few months. He needed to give himself over to his training. When he wasn't training, he needed to make the most of his time with Valla. He needed to let go of the many worries that gnawed at the fabric of his sanity. "Yeah," he said, stooping to pick up the tools and leftover building supplies, stuffing them into the dimensional sack Dar had left behind, "that feels good."

Book 8: Chapter 22: Promises

When he emerged from the underground, it was only an hour or so after noon, and Victor found Lesh more than eager to get some sparring done. They made their way to the area Lesh had dubbed Dar's sparring ground, only for Victor to question the designation; to him, it felt more like a fancy courtyard meant for entertaining. Stone columns lined the space, and off to one side was a covered area that looked like an outdoor kitchen. Still, Victor couldn't argue that the sandy center of the space made for a perfect place to do some fighting, especially considering how everything about Dar's home was giant-sized.

They worked out like usual, falling into old routines. Victor used Inspiration of the Quinametzin, giving them both a little more insight into their training, and neither of the two used any Energy abilities, at least not at first. Victor wore his armor, wanting to see how Belagog, Lesh's cudgel, fared against the set pieces and their lava king materials. A few glancing blows got past his guard now and then, and the leather held up fine, though it wasn't adept at stopping bludgeoning damage. The helmet and heavy gauntlet were another matter; the dense material easily rebuffed the blows.

About an hour into their practice, after a particularly violent exchange, Victor backed off and said, "I want to try my new weapon."

"A new weapon?" Lesh eyed Lifedrinker resting on Victor's shoulder.

"Yeah. I enchanted this gauntlet with the, um, magma attunement gem that I won from the conquest chest."

"Ah! What will it do? Punch with fire damage?" Lesh readied Belagog, holding the great metallic cudgel in a two-handed grip before himself.

"Actually," Victor said, channeling some Energy into the gauntlet, "it's supposed to be a whip." As the Energy fed the hungry runes along the back of the gauntlet where the metal wrapped around his wrist, hot, dripping, liquid fire began to drizzle from his palm into the sand, cooling with sizzling pops into beads of porous stone. Victor pushed more Energy into the gauntlet, increasing the steady flow from his Core. The trickle of liquid fire turned into a stream that partially solidified into a flaming, smoking coil of magical magma that hung down from his gauntleted hand into the sand, where it sizzled and smoked.

"You wish to strike me with that?" Lesh backed up, eyes narrow, shaking his head. "I've the blood of dragons in my veins, but fire can still harm me!"

“Yeah, I, uh, guess I need some practice with it before I can promise not to do any real damage. Can you hold Belagog out? Let me see how hard it is to control.”

“Aye. Some fire won’t hurt this lad,” Lesh chuckled, his voice deep and rumbling, as he extended the long, metal cudgel before him. Victor nodded and jerked his left hand back over his shoulder and then forward, whipping out his “magma lash” a little awkwardly. His much-improved dexterity and agility made him more adept than he had any right to be on his first attempt at such a feat, but the whip of smoking, glowing lava still missed the cudgel. It snaked out and snapped in the air beneath it, cracking like a gunshot, spraying sizzling magma onto the sandy ground.

“Oho!” Lesh crowed, enjoying the show. “That would sting!”

Victor grinned, pleased by the savage crack and spray of magma. He pulled his wrist back, swinging the lash of magma around behind him with a whoosh. He tried again, adjusting his wrist movement slightly, and this time, the lash snapped around the cudgel, coiling with a splash of magma and billowing black smoke as it fought to transfer its fiery heat to Lesh’s weapon. The cudgel was made of nigh-indestructible stuff, though, and Lesh laughed as he pulled against the lash, trying to unbalance Victor. Victor grinned, jerking his fist against Lesh’s pull, and the two came to a stalemate.

“Not bad!” Victor panted as he and Lesh continued to strain. “The lash is durable; we’re putting a lot of strain on it!”

“Aye! It’s made of your Energy. I bet you can learn to guide and control it more than any physical whip; use your will!” Lesh grunted as he spoke, still straining to pull Victor off balance. What he said made sense, and Victor reached out with his will, urging the lash of magma to uncoil so he could pull it back. To his amazement, it worked.

“That is badass!” he howled as the lash snapped in the air beside him, moving as much with the force of his will as the motion of his wrist. He turned and jogged to the far end of the sandy ground and then, still targeting Lesh’s cudgel, some thirty yards distant, whipped the magma lash forward, guiding the fiery tendril with his will. He howled with delight when it stretched out and struck home, snapping its distant, smoldering end around the weapon. “You’re a genius, Lesh!”

After that, Victor spent another hour with Lesh as a willing participant, learning the ins and outs of his new weapon. He quickly realized that his first somewhat ranged attack was near the extent of the whip’s reach—something close to thirty or thirty-five yards. He learned that he could nudge the

whip with his will, making minute targeting adjustments, and direct it to either coil around a target or lash it with devastating results based on how he flicked his wrist.

Belagog was a good test subject, but Victor wanted to see how something less durable would hold up, so he destroyed several pieces of furniture he'd stored in one of his dimensional rings. The whip blasted them to fiery splinters in just a few strokes. By the time they called it a day, he felt good about the new weapon but knew it would require a lot of training to use effectively in conjunction with Lifedrinker in an actual combat situation.

As they walked along the path leading back to the house, Lesh said, "I will use my racial advancement elixir now, so I will likely be out for a while."

Victor nodded. "This is a good time. Valla's still out, and I'm gonna be training with Dar. When you wake up, I'll hopefully have something to share with you about breath Cores. I know you're eager to improve yours."

"I am, though I always thought it was dependent upon improving my bloodline. I hope there's something more—"

Victor looked at him with raised eyebrows and interrupted, "I mean, you know how to cultivate Energy into it, right?"

"Into my breath Core? When I cultivate Energy, it enters my pathways, which lead to my Energy Core—"

"Holy shit! Seriously, Lesh? But, like, you come from a world full of dragonkin!" The truth of the matter was that Victor had only recently learned to cultivate with his breath Core, and that had been out of necessity, trapped in the caldera of a volcano by Hector. Still, once he'd made the breakthrough, he thought it must have been something obvious to people born with one.

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Lesh stopped in his tracks and looked at Victor with a scowl, though whether he was angry at Victor or irritated in general wasn't clear. "Not all of us have a breath Core. We sometimes gain one when advancing our race, but it's not a guarantee, and my people are . . . combative. Having scales," he held out one of his arms, clenching his fist so the faintly glossy, black scales along his forearm flexed, "is a mark of power and dominance—a breath Core even more so. I was rising quickly in the esteem of my people, but those above me, those with the ability to send forth plumes of destructive breath," he narrowed his eyes at Victor, reaching out to tap a long, thick claw into his chest, "like you, don't share their knowledge. It's something that must be discovered."

Victor stared at him, sudden comprehension dawning on him, all of his conversations with Lesh taking on a new light. "I'm such a self-centered dumbass."

"Self-centered?" Lesh let his claw slide off Victor's scaled vest, his hand falling to his side.

“Yeah, Lesh. I listened to you ask to follow me. I listened to you say you turned against the damned System when you saw me breathe my ancestor’s fire, but I never fucking sat down with you and asked what that meant. I thought you were . . . I don’t know, weird! God! I’m so sorry, man. Listen, when you get done with your racial advancement, we’re going to sit down, and I’ll teach you how to cultivate your breath Core. I need to find a source for mine, and while I’m at it, I’ll find one for yours. I’ll go shopping tomorrow after Dar gives me my cultivation lesson. Deal?”

“A source?”

“I need something that gives off magma-attuned Energy. I can use fire, but it’s not as effective—turns out magma has the rage of a volcano mixed into it. Your breath affinity is acid, yeah?”

“Yes!” Lesh leaned forward, speaking forcefully, and Victor could see the excitement in his eyes.

“All right, hermano! When you wake up, we’re going to get to work. Promise.” He held out a fist, and Lesh smashed his rough knuckles into it, nodding with a wide grin, exposing the many pointy teeth along his short, snout-like mouth.

“Yes, brother!”

With that, the two continued walking toward the house, but Victor felt a certain warmth of camaraderie that hadn’t been there before. He had been preoccupied with all of his own problems and had been taking Lesh for granted. It was good that he’d acknowledged it, and he meant to make things up to the man before he left Sojourn. They parted ways in the hallway, Lesh turning to enter the bedroom Dar’s staff had assigned him.

When Victor returned to his room, Valla was still out, but the cloud of Energy-filled steam that had gathered around her was much thinner, and he didn’t see any new vapors rising from her body. He leaned close, studying her face, and he was relieved to see the scar above and below her bandage was much fainter, just a thin, dark silver line in her pale flesh, almost more like a tattoo than a scar.

He was tempted to peel the bandage aside and look at her eye but knew it would irritate her if she were awake, and doing it while she slept felt wrong. Her skin felt cool, and she breathed peacefully, almost like she was simply sleeping. He leaned down and kissed her forehead before going into the bathroom to clean up. Part of him hoped the gesture would wake her, but another part was pleased to see her resting so deeply.

The bathrooms in Dar’s house were marvels of magical ingenuity, especially the showers. The one in Victor’s room was a sunken, tiled enclosure with a row of windows high in the wall, beneath which half a dozen lush ferns grew in a planter. When he stepped into the basin, some enchantment

he couldn't see caused miniature storm clouds to form near the ceiling, and then, accompanied by the rumble of distant-sounding thunder, they began to shed gentle, warm rain.

It was difficult not to overindulge; Victor lost himself as he stood in the refreshing rain, occasionally breaking from his reverie to soap off a body part, scrub his hair, or carefully scrape a razor-sharp blade over his soapy stubble. There didn't seem to be any sort of time or Energy limitation on the shower, at least not one he'd yet run into. By the time he got out and the storm cloud dissipated, he was pretty sure he'd spent nearly two hours in there.

He donned his wyrm-scale vest and new armor in its clothing form, first holding it up to his nose to ensure everything was still smelling fresh. "It's damn nice never having to do laundry," he chuckled, stepping out of the bathroom.

"Finally!" Valla said, sleepily stretching on the bed.

"Hey! You were out cold when I went in there."

She smiled, and Victor's gaze was drawn to her eye, devoid of its previous bandage. He stepped close and grinned when he saw her tracking him with both eyes. When he leaned close, the only sign of her earlier injury was a very faint line of silver in her teal iris. "Looks all better!"

"I haven't looked in a mirror but can see fine." She pulled him close, squeezing him in a tight hug. "I was more worried than I let on. It was the worst injury I've ever had. Before Lesh poured a healing potion over the wound . . ." She trailed off, and Victor hugged her again.

"Hey, it's all right. How many ranks did you get?"

"Just one. My bloodline is advanced-six now."

"Well, that's pretty great that your eye basically regrew with just one racial rank."

"How did—Did you look?" She pushed him back, narrowing her eyebrows.

"No, I was just assuming, Valla. I mean, you wouldn't let me see it, so I figured it was bad." He chuckled and backed away from her. "You never said anything about my new clothes. Check this out." He trickled some Energy into the runes on his armor, and suddenly, he was clad in his dark crimson and black wyrm-scale vest, his glowering lava king helm, deep red, metallic gauntlet, and the rest of his thick, red leather armor.

"Ancestors!" Valla said, leaning back and clapping. "Fierce! Is that helmet supposed to look like a dragon?"

"Nah, I think it's what a lava king looks like." He shrugged. "Maybe they're related—you know, like wyrms." Victor made a slow turn, giving her a view of every angle, then sent Energy into the disguise runes, swapping the armor out for his clothing again. "Pretty cool, huh?"

“Lava king? Isn’t that the hide you won for the campaign?” She reached out to feel his shirt. “But what about your armor? How are you changing it so quickly?”

He chuckled, then spent a few minutes explaining the set pieces and how he’d added his treasures from the Free Marches. When he told her about the matching enchantment he’d gotten on his wyrm-scale vest, she interrupted with a gasp, “Victor! That’s so helpful! I want it, too!”

“No problem! I’ll introduce you to Tria.” Victor sat beside her and held her hand. “Hey, you remember how Dar wanted to talk to me before you drank that elixir?”

“Yes. Was it bad?”

“Depends on how you look at it.” Victor inhaled deeply. “I guess there’s not an easy way to say this.”

“Just tell me, Victor.” She squeezed his hand. “Are you going away?”

He looked at her for a long minute, shifting sideways to stare into her eyes. “You’re pretty damn smart, you know that?” When she didn’t reply, he sighed and told her, haltingly at first, then in a rush of words, about Dar’s distant granddaughter and the plight of her kingdom. She tried to interject mid-way through, saying she’d come with him, but she slowly began to nod when he got to the part about fighting duels and not actual wars.

“You want me to stay here.”

“I don’t want you to. I think it’ll be smarter, though. You can continue to dungeon delve and train with Lesh. There are other things in the city, too—non-lethal tournaments, even some weird sports, according to Mr. Qwor.”

“Sports?”

“Yeah, games for prizes. They have rules about Energy usage, I guess, and they vary in terms of physical conflict, but I think they might be worth looking into. The point I’m getting at is that there’s a lot for you to do here. There’s a shitload of ways you can advance. If you came with me, the best thing you could hope for would be sparring with me or other people in the granddaughter’s household. The world will be at war, and the only open part of it will be the champion duels. Everything else is going to be fucking cloak and dagger bullshit—kidnappings, assassinations, sabotage, you name it.”

Valla frowned, thinking things over for a few moments before replying, “You’ll have dozens of duels, maybe more? Against people who are all likely at a higher level than you. You’ll make huge gains, maybe not early on, but when you face the stronger champions. You’re afraid I’ll fall further behind if I come along with nothing much to do but watch your duels? Does that about sum it up?”

“I’m going to earn hearts, Valla—hearts and tribute for my victories. I’ll make gains in many ways, not just Energy from my kills. Don’t you think it would be better if you and Lesh were here, earning treasure, gaining levels, and improving your bloodlines?”

“Of course, logically.” She chuckled and stood up, summoning some clothes from her storage ring. She began to change out of her pajamas as she continued speaking. “I suppose things will be easier for me if I’m not there to watch you fight champions who are beyond level one hundred. I understood that correctly, yes? Dar says many of the champions are steel seekers?”

“Yeah.” Victor looked at the floor as he answered, his voice low and resigned, expecting Valla to start another argument.

“Well, I’d rather not witness that. Fine, I’ll stay here with Lesh, but you must promise to write to me daily in the Farscribe book. You have to promise you’ll visit me if you earn lots of tribute and have some time between duels.” She’d pulled on a knee-length, pale gray skirt and a breezy white blouse, tying its tails in a knot at her waist. “For now, though, let’s go see this lake you were going on about to Lesh in the coach. I went straight to bed when we arrived, and I’d like to get a little sun before it sets.”

Victor looked at her, perhaps a little hungrily. “I do, Valla. I promise. Have I told you I love you lately?”

“Not enough.” She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him quickly before darting toward the door, her wings rustling with faint metallic tinkles. Victor gave chase, and soon, she was giggling in near hysterics as the two exploded through the open door and onto the deck. Victor was right on her heels when she spread her wings and, with a crack, snapped them down, launching herself over the rail and into the air. She soared out over the lake, and Victor laughed, too amazed by her grace to be bothered by her cheating escape.

Book 8: Chapter 23: The Council's Response

When Victor woke the next day, he saw that the sun had yet to rise, which was good because he was supposed to meet Dar in his new cultivation chamber at dawn. He concentrated, reactivating Sovereign Will, which had a tendency to drop while he slept, and pushed his bonuses into dexterity and agility. With his already nimble body boosted, he practiced his stealthy movements, sliding out of the bed and creeping toward the door.

He only paused to pick up Lifedrinker and the ivory case containing his captured geists before carefully pulling the door open, inch by inch, until he could slip through. He was certain he hadn’t made any more noise than a feather falling onto grass, but Valla still rolled over and mumbled, “See you for lunch.”

He chuckled. “See you.” Then he slipped out and, standing in the dim, quiet hallway, got dressed. “That was pointless,” he muttered, imagining one of the staff coming upon him half-naked outside his room. With a grin and a shake of his head, he hurried to the kitchens, pausing to use the bathroom, where he cleaned his teeth and splashed water on his face. That done, he descended into the tunnels beneath the house. They were wide, well-lit, and sized for a giant, so it wasn’t an unpleasant walk to his cultivation cave.

Victor arrived before Dar, which had been his main goal for not lying in bed, waiting for the sun to brighten the sky outside his window. Smiling at his small victory, he sat in the center of the chamber and set the box before him. He hadn't opened it, let alone touched the bones since Lo'ro had dropped him off at the house, and he was a little nervous. He'd thought long and hard about the bone where the fear-attuned geist dwelled, wondering if he should mention how it spoke to him. Would Dar be angry? Would he destroy the spirit and force Victor to find another, less . . . conscious one?

He didn't know, and part of him wanted to speak to the spirit again to see what it thought and discover the "secrets" it had promised before Dar arrived. Another part recognized the danger of it and couldn't see a real downside to asking his mentor. He was trusting the master Spirit Caster with a lot, more than anyone outside of Valla or Tes—it felt like the right move would be to ask him for advice on the matter. So, he sat there, staring at the box, trying to clear his mind, until he heard the faint scuffs of Dar's bare feet on the stone.

"Ah, apprentice," he said as though he was surprised to see him sitting there. Victor wasn't buying it—he was pretty sure Dar could feel every presence, down to the smallest rodent, on his property. "Eager to renew your studies into cultivation?" He stepped out of the oval opening in Victor's stonework and surveyed the chamber before sitting across from him. The two giant men made the chamber feel small even as they sat on the floor, legs crossed. When their eyes met, and Dar's smoldering orbs peered into Victor's mind and soul, he said, "I can feel a question burning your tongue."

"It's more like a confession."

Dar's stony brow lifted. "Oh?"

Victor bit the bullet and decided to get straight to the point, "Yeah. When I went through the veil with Master Lo'ro, I deceived him."

Dar's brow fell, his eyes narrowed, and Victor felt the tiniest fragment of the man's aura pressing against him. Even that brief touch felt like a mountain grinding against his spirit, vast and possessing a gravity that defied common adjectives. "Yet you intend to speak plainly and expose the deception to me. I am placated." No hint of the weight remained, and Victor breathed out the breath he'd been holding.

"That's right. When we were collecting the geists, trapping them in the bones," Victor gestured to the ivory case between them, "I managed to capture a powerful fear-attuned spirit. Lo'ro was impressed, but the truth is, the spirit came willingly. There was no battle of wills. The spirit spoke to me, told me not to reveal that fact, and that she would share 'secrets' with me if I took her out of that place with me."

Dar looked at the case. "And has 'she' spoken to you since?"

"No. I haven't touched the bone."

“Well, you’re both an idiot and wise, it seems.” When Victor opened his mouth, unsure if he should object to the label or just apologize, Dar held up a thick, stony finger and continued, “An idiot for risking your mind and spirit by pulling this geist into the containment vessel, wise for not trifling with the thing before first speaking to me.” He turned the box so the clasp faced him and opened it. His eyes brightened momentarily as he stared at the two bones, and then he snatched the rib bone out, holding it before him.

Suddenly, Victor felt a flare of potent, brilliant Energy, and though he wasn’t the focus, he felt the edge of Dar’s formidable will. He stood beside a mighty river as it carved a canyon from the stony ground. His mind filled with the image, unable to resist visualizing the metaphor, watching as waters deeper than an ocean and broader than most continents dug through a Jupiter-sized planet of solid rock. The water broke it up, transforming the world as it went, sending life-giving tendrils through the stone, enabling trees and grass and . . .

The feeling abruptly ended, and Victor opened his eyes, his mind once again his own. He saw Dar before him, holding the bone in his palm as half a dozen new runes etched themselves into it, glowing with brilliant white Energy. “This enchantment will harmlessly prevent the spirit from interacting with you. I’m quite impressed by the being lurking within this vessel, Victor. You’re not ready to deal with such as she, however. You’ll need to advance your will; I’d say you’re about halfway there. When you can easily wipe these runes free with your own Energy, then it will be safe for you to commune with the spirit who dwells within.” He set the bone back in the case.

“Thank you, Dar. Did she plan to harm me?”

“She’s a being utterly consumed and twisted by fear. Her intentions are less than lucid. She’s ancient, even to me, but her potency in death is a fraction of what it might have been in life. Still, she wouldn’t reveal her so-called secrets, even in the face of my wrath. I might have wrung them from her, but she entered a contract with you. I could feel the karmic ties. Fragile though they are, I won’t be the one who severs them; the repercussions may be far-reaching.”

“A contract?”

“Did you not agree to bring her forth in exchange for her secrets?”

“Yeah—”

“Victor, you’re no longer a boy with no weight in the universe. As your power grows, so do the impacts of your actions. Everything you say, especially where emotions are involved, bears weight—everything you do, even more so.” He held out his hand and wriggled it in the air. “Someone like you, someone with an intense, potent spirit, sends ripples through the ether with every meaningful act. Making deals with desperate, powerful spirits is not something the universe takes lightly. There are beings even I cannot grasp who take notice of such things.”

“Gods?”

Dar shifted his boulder-sized shoulders in an attempt at a shrug. “Perhaps. There are people on myriad worlds who would see me and name me a god. Am I? I think not. I’ve visited a thousand worlds, and my travel has taught me that I’ve only scratched the surface. There are many millions of planets in the System-controlled part of the universe. I’ve talked to scholars who speculate that the System is relatively new, that there are more worlds outside its control than within. There are beings out there with the mystery and power to be considered godlike to even the likes of me. Knowing that, knowing how little I know. Who am I to say what a god is and whether they exist?”

Everything Dar said made Victor think of Tes, and he asked, “Have you ever been to one? I mean, a world that resisted the System?”

“Aye. The Fae don’t traffic with the System, and I’ve visited a world controlled by them. It’s a lengthy tale, but I’ll say this: I stood before the Winter Queen and felt insignificant. I finished my business and haven’t looked back in centuries.” Dar sighed and pulled a small ring off his pinky. He held it in the palm of his hand, and Victor leaned close to look at it. “Enough philosophizing. I have gifts for you.”

The ring looked like it was made of polished, gray stone, though he saw a vein of silvery metal running through it. It was pretty and lustrous, and when Victor squinted, he could see that it gave off a tiny amount of light against Dar’s black, stony flesh. “Nice,” he said, waiting for further explanation.

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“It is nice.” Dar chuckled. “It’s a dimensional container, though far finer than any of those you wear. This container has limited space, but it can contain objects of power, such as these bones and the other cultivation items I’ve acquired for you.” Dar moved his hand over the ring and suddenly held a perfectly round orb. It looked like the glass part of a snow globe, but inside, Victor could see the swirls and sparkles of bright, golden Energy that could only be glory. He knew he was right when his Core flared in response.

“Glory.” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Aye.” Dar set the orb on the dark blue, silky padding inside the case, next to the two bones. He waved his hand over the ring again, producing another orb, this one full of bright, misty, white-gold Energy that Victor immediately knew was inspiration-attuned. Dar set it in the case, then, from the ring, produced a third—this one roiling with a heart of molten magma, white-hot in spots and cooling toward somber orange-red in others.

After he'd set it in the case, Dar touched the two bones and said, "These captured spirits are more potent than these hearts, but—"

"Hearts?"

"Ah." Dar clicked his tongue and shook his head briefly before saying. "When a cultivator enters their lustrous veil, they become capable of creating these Energy hearts using a process similar to the creation of Energy beads. This heart," he tapped the glory-attuned globe, "is a hundred-thousand times more potent than a glory-attuned Energy bead you might create."

"That's worth a hundred thousand beads?"

"Hah. No, lad, as flat currency, Energy hearts are useless—the System will not accept them at its city stones. I'm not sure why, but people speculate that it doesn't want to destroy its economy for the vast majority of Energy users. Still, they can be used in trades; creating one is a lengthy, tedious process, and they can be valuable for someone who might need a particular Energy type." He waved his hand dismissively. "Let's not get distracted by trivia. These three hearts will serve as potent cultivation sources for you until you reach your test of steel. After that, you'll need to find sources with more depth."

"The bones will last longer?"

Dar snorted. "Yes. That's like asking if your spirit is more potent than a single Energy bead."

"Are they hard to get?" Victor could see the crease in Dar's brow as his questions began to irritate him, so he hurried to explain, "I'm just asking because I feel a, well, a duty to my friend, Lesh. He followed me here, hoping that I would help him advance, and I'm leaving him behind to go to your granddaughter's world. I wanted to give him something he could use to cultivate his breath Core."

Dar frowned, but it seemed more contemplative than angry. "An acid attunement?"

"Yeah—"

"I'll acquire one for him. However, that will be the last gift I will freely give to your comrades. I've already offered my home—"

"No, no. I understand, Dar. If you think it's within my means, I'll gladly get Lesh a source for cultivation. He doesn't have to have an Energy heart."

Dar rubbed his chin and nodded. "Actually, there is a way for you to accomplish just that. Yes, that would be better than creating more debt between you or your companions and me. I was saving this news until after I'd taught you your new cultivation technique, but I suppose it's something we can discuss now. Yes, perhaps that's best—we'll speak, I'll teach you the technique, and then I can leave you to practice."

"News?" Victor didn't like Dar's almost ominous tone.

His mentor shifted, pressing one fist into the stone floor and leaning into it, bringing himself closer to Victor as he replied, “I told you I have some enemies on the council, yes?”

“Yeah.” The question told Victor precisely what this was about; the council wasn’t going to let him off when it came to the three “tasks” he was supposed to perform.

“Well, that faction has made matters a touch difficult for us. Rather than accepting my generous offer to pay the Energy debt in full, restoring the city’s coffers after the repair of the training dungeon, they’ve countered with an offer of their own.” He paused, ensuring he had Victor’s attention, then continued, “They’ve agreed that if I pay for the repairs, they’ll release you from two tasks. They claim the remaining task was already decided upon and that losing you would greatly increase the risk of death for the others involved.”

“Others?”

“Aye. Two others. Do you recall me mentioning a prison dungeon beneath the Sojourn City Council?”

“I do.” Victor nodded, his mind racing with the implications of the question.

“Well, it’s called the Iron Prison because it’s meant to contain iron rankers—nothing higher. It was specifically purchased from the System with that restriction, and there’s no altering that. The council cannot send anyone over level one hundred into that place.”

“So?”

“So, the council has sent quite a few powerful iron rankers into it over the years. Unfortunately, evidence has surfaced indicating that one such individual was unjustly imprisoned, and they want him extracted. The System provides an interface for the dungeon, allowing the council to see who still lives in the dungeon, and they assure me that this man, Rasso Hine, has not been slain.”

Victor groaned and put his elbows on his knees, resting his chin in his palms. “Why am I the only one who can do this? That’s what you’re about to tell me, right?”

Dar chuckled, the sound deep and coarse. “I asked the same. There are restrictions on dungeon entry—one person per hour. In the last few weeks, as they’ve attempted to retrieve Hine, each emissary has been killed within minutes. Apparently, they’ve lost half a dozen promising iron rankers.”

“And this guy, Rasso Hine, is worth all those lives?”

Dar nodded, his eyes dimming from their usual hot glow. “The council believes the information he holds is that valuable, aye. I tend to agree with them after hearing the details of the case.” Before Victor could ask, he held up the hand he wasn’t leaning on, forestalling his question. “I cannot share those details.”

Victor wanted to growl in frustration, but he settled for narrowing his eyes in a half scowl. “If I have to go in alone, what’s the deal with the two others you mentioned?”

“One is a Death Caster. You know her—Arona Moonshadow, the one from the challenge dungeon who outsmarted you.” Victor wanted to object, but he’d reflected plenty on that dungeon challenge and had to agree—he hadn’t exactly acted cleverly. Dar continued, “They want her to accompany you because she’s one of the top Death Casters still in the iron ranks, and the dungeon is death-attuned. The other is Arcus Volpuré, another friend of yours from the challenge dungeon.”

“Why is that name so familiar? I mean, I feel like I’ve heard it since the dungeon.”

“He’s an incredibly powerful Elementalist, and his master is Lord Roil, one of the Consuls. There’s little love lost between Roil and me, if you’ll recall the inquest. He claims to want Arcus to accompany you and Arona because his fire magic will be a potent aid, but I suspect he intends to betray and kill you.”

“Lord Roil was the guy in the black robes hiding his face with smoke, right?”

“Aye, though the smoke is a part of him, not a disguise; he’s partially taken the aspect of an elemental.”

Victor thought about that, about how powerful Dar was and about how he walked on eggshells around Roil. Was this the sort of enemy he wanted? “So, they want me to go in first and clear the entrance so the other two can come in safely.” Victor smiled grimly as Dar nodded. “Then we’re supposed to find this dude, Rasso, and get him out? How’s that work?”

“You’ll be given an attuned recall item that will function on yourself and one other. Arona and Arcus will also have such an item. Because they’re attuned, no one else can use them to escape.” Dar shifted to his other fist, pressing it into the stone floor as he leaned the other way.

“And Arcus? Am I going to get in trouble if I kill that asshole?”

“As long as you don’t start the conflict, I can shield you from Roil’s temper. I believe you can count on the Moonshadow girl to be a neutral party. I know her master, Vesavo Bonewhisper, quite well. He’s a cruel man but honest. We’ve been aligned politically in the past, and I know he has no love for Roil.”

Victor groaned again, dreading the answer to his next question. “When?”

Dar nodded, grinning widely, “The day after your dinner party. They wanted quicker action, but I explained that you were hosting an event at my house and that several of their pupils were invited, including Arona and Arcus.”

“Ah, shit. That’s where I heard that name. Lam was talking about him or . . . was it his sister?” Victor shook his head. “Whatever. So, I have a few days before I get sent into a meat grinder?”

“That’s right. Rasso has been in the dungeon for more than a decade—a few more days shouldn’t hurt. I thought to argue about this task, to claim it was unjust and that it was a clear conspiracy to rid me of a promising protégé, but then I thought about you and how you tend to rise to challenges. I’ve decided to treat this as an opportunity in disguise. I managed to squeeze some additional promises out of the council. If you succeed in this task, there will be additional compensation.”

Victor grinned, matching his mentor’s expression. “That’s where you think I can get Lesh’s cultivation item.”

“Precisely. I won’t be very surprised if you also gain some valuable treasures from the dungeon. Some of the criminals still lurking within are sure to have amassed rewards from the denizens, and they’ll also be worth significant Energy infusions.”

“I can kill the prisoners?”

“I would hope so; they’ll surely try to kill you! No soft men or women could survive in that vile place. It will be a good challenge.” Dar chuckled and straightened up. “Now, let’s talk about cultivation. First,” he stood and scooped up Victor’s cultivation items, “place the items around you in a loose circle. Because you’ve built your chamber to contain and gather Energy, you can put them near the wall. As they emit Energy, the tiles will contain and condense it. Moreover, as you cycle the Energy—in a way I will teach you—the shape of this chamber will help you focus it on yourself.”

“Shouldn’t I have built a door to cover the tunnel opening?”

“In an ideal world, yes, a sealed cultivation chamber is best. You’ll only be here a few months, though, and this is not your primary means of advancement, so I cut a few corners. The chamber will still contain most of the Energy emitted from your treasures.”

“Oh, will I leave them here?”

“While you’re here on Sojourn, yes! That way, the Energy will gather while you’re gone, making your next cultivation session more fruitful.” As Dar spoke, Victor nodded along, but all the while, he couldn’t help but imagine how his “vault” container would make a perfect cultivation chamber. Victor tried to pay attention to Dar’s lesson, picturing the flows of Energy and how he was supposed to weave them together as he drew them into his pathways. He told Victor it would

be challenging to weave more than two differently-attuned Energies as he cultivated, but practice would make it easier. He was confident that Victor could eventually pull all five, including the magma he'd send into his breath Core.

The problem was that Victor felt distracted. Just as he'd been learning to let go of the things he couldn't control, Dar had thrown another at him. He was literally going to step into a trap that had killed a "handful" of promising iron-rankers ahead of him. Was Dar that confident in him, or did he simply not value Victor as more than an amusement? It was the same question he'd had about the duels on his Ruhn—did Dar really think he could win against people well above level one hundred?

"You're not listening, Victor," Dar growled. "I have men and women scheming and killing for an hour of my time, and you sit there daydreaming while I explain the fundamentals of cultivation?" His eyes had taken on the dangerous gleam Victor had only seen a couple of times, and it brought his mind back into focus.

"Sorry, Lord Dar. I keep thinking about the trap waiting for me as I step into that prison."

Dar nodded and sat down in front of him again. "This is why I think you must continue to cultivate, despite your ability to strengthen your Core through the consumption of hearts. When you cultivate, Victor, you must face all facets of your spirit Core. You must confront your fear, your rage, your glory, and even your inspiration to understand how they rule your spirit. You must master them. The fear, though, that's the biggest challenge for you. You mask it well, usually using your rage, but it runs amok in your mind." He reached out and—almost gently—punched Victor's knee. "Come, pay attention. Using this new drill, you'll learn to master your fear."

Book 8: Chapter 24: Core Consolidation

Victor sat before Dar, waiting for his next words. His master's face was relaxed, the fire in his eyes simmering low, but he knew, like coals, they were ready to ignite with the faintest breath of oxygen. So, he waited patiently, not willing to provide that fuel. The Spirit Master had just spent nearly two hours describing the method of gathering Energy from his various sources—how to weave the different aspects together and pull them into his Core. Victor had been about to make his first try at it, when Dar had said, "I must study your Core." And then he'd, apparently, begun to do so, staring at Victor, unblinking for nearly another hour.

Finally, just as Victor was starting to fear Dar had fallen asleep with his eyes open, the man's stony countenance shifted, his eyes moving to lock onto Victor's. The master took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "The cultivation method I just described isn't going to work. Not yet. The entire point of cultivating for you, rather than growing your Core, is to learn to harmonize your affinities and embrace every aspect of your spirit whilst tempering the more destructive aspects through the lens of the more positive. Your Core, however, is in disarray. I see what you've done. I believe I even understand why you did it. It's simply not ideal. No," he chuckled, "not even an approximation of ideal."

"What I've done?"

"In the development of your Core. It makes a kind of sense; I can see how you've tried to create counterbalances between your various affinities—

inspiration against rage, glory against fear, a sort of light versus dark side in your spirit, pushing and pulling against each other. The problem is that your affinities aren't equal, and even if they were—a near impossibility—they contend with each other rather than building upon each other.”

“Well, it's not like I had a teacher. Not really.” Victor's mind flitted to Gorz and then Old Mother—both had provided guidance, but neither had ever talked to him about the actual structure of his Core. Not even Khul Bach had broached the topic.

“I know. I can see the logic in your efforts. Energy tends to compress into a sphere; it's the easiest way to build up the density and then break it through into the next stage. As you gained more affinities, you naturally assumed you should have more spheres of Energy. It's not a terrible thing, but there's a much better, more elegant design that I want to teach you. It's better because it will shore up the less volatile aspects of your spirit, using your stronger affinities to compress them.

“You see, Victor, considering this formation, I'm somewhat astounded by the strength of your spirit and Core. You've essentially split your Core into four smaller ones. Rather than compounding them, using the weight of each affinity to compress the ones beneath it, your cultivation has revolved around building each one individually, pushing them to a breaking point before advancing the level of your Core. I'm not sure you'd ever break through into epic tier with this structure.

“The design I'll teach you will combine the weight—the gravity—of each affinity, creating a single Core that will be far denser and stronger than these four individual ones. Moreover, it will take your most valuable aspect and put it closer to your spirit while keeping the others, the ones that tend to overwhelm your spirit, at a bit of a distance.”

“My most valuable aspect?” Victor guessed Dar would confirm his suspicion that his rage was the most valuable part of his Core, but he was surprised by the master's response.

“Your inspiration, lad. It's quite a rare affinity and one that any Spirit Caster would be wise to cultivate if they could. In fact, I suspect that affinity is responsible for much of your uncanny success and strength. You may feel you're 'lucky' for learning a rare, treasured ability like Sovereign Will or that your hard work is what led you to the Paragon of the Axe, and to some degree, you'd be right, but I believe your easily inspired nature has been a large influence in your growth. Thank the old gods that you've had some positive influences in your recent development.”

When Dar said the last bit, Victor saw a parade of faces run through his mind's eye: Yrella and Vullu from the Wagon Wheel, Lam in the mines, Old Mother, Thayla, Tellen, Tes, and even his enemies, like the Warlord and his subordinates. He did take inspiration from many sources—there was no denying it. “So, even though it’s not my strongest affinity?”

Dar chuckled, clicking his tongue and shaking his head in admiration. “Aye, you lean toward the others more, but your affinity to inspiration is by no means weak. All of your affinities are absurdly strong.”

Victor nodded. He didn’t want to argue. His rage had, without a doubt, kept him alive in many desperate situations, but he liked his inspiration more. If Dar thought he should bring that closer to his spirit, whatever that meant, then he wouldn’t argue. “What do I do?”

“This will not be easy, especially with your Core sitting on the cusp of epic. If I recall correctly, you told me it is ranked advanced-nine, yes?”

Victor nodded but looked at the Energy and Core section of his status again to be certain:

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Improved 3

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 9

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9

Breath Core Energy:

2200/2200

Energy Affinity:

Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1

Energy:

25407/25407

“I believe this new formation will push you over into epic. Such tension will make the reshaping process incredibly difficult. I’m pleased you’ve worked so hard to cultivate your will because you’ll need it.” He paused, then snapped his fingers. “Didn’t you mention a natural treasure from the challenge dungeon? Something for breakthroughs?”

“Oh.” Victor nodded, mentally sifting through his dimensional containers. “I did, yes. Something like a berry, but bigger.” He found it and summoned the fruit onto his palm.

Dar peered closely at the plump, blue, apple-sized fruit, reading the label. “Perfect! An Urd Berry—useful for a difficult breakthrough!”

“Should I eat it?” Victor’s mouth was already filling with saliva at just a hint of the fruit’s fragrance.

“Patience! First, I must describe the process. You’ll need to focus on your Core space, and, using the strength of your will, you’ll need to arrange the four orbs of your affinities into a stack, with inspiration at the bottom, then glory, then rage, and finally, at the top, fear.”

“I thought I wanted inspiration at the top?”

“No! Patience, welp!” Dar growled, and his eyes flared momentarily. “This will be a tremendous battle for your will, so listen carefully lest you hobble yourself with a lopsided, mangled Core!” He glared for a moment, ensuring Victor would remain quiet and pay attention, then said, “Once you’ve created the stack, as I said, the real battle will begin. You will use part of your will to hold the stack in place while stretching the orb of your glory-attuned Energy into a ring, encircling your inspiration-attuned Energy.

“If you do it correctly, you’ll feel it snap into place, and you’ll no longer have to exert your will to hold the glory around your inspiration. After that’s done, you’ll repeat the process with rage, stretching it to encircle your glory. The ring will be larger but narrower as it has to stretch further. Finally, you’ll complete the process with your fear-attuned Energy, pulling it into a ring that encompasses the others.”

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Before Victor could ask the half dozen questions burning to escape his mouth, Dar continued, “Each ring will be an order of magnitude harder to shape. The resistance will increase, but so, too, will the compression as it snaps into place. This is what will push your Core toward the next tier—the different affinities working with each other instead of against each other as they’re currently arrayed. I think you’ll be able to complete the first ring without the fruit, so save it. When you begin to shape the rage ring, that will be the time to consume it.”

Victor nodded, visualizing what Dar described. He could picture it, the inspiration at the center, still a compact, glowing sphere, with each of the other affinities wrapped around it in layers. “Um, how will this bring inspiration ‘closer to my spirit?’ I mean, aren’t they all still in my Core?”

Dar nodded, leaning back to look down his nose at Victor. “A good question. This is an advanced topic, but one you should contemplate as you approach your test of steel and beyond. Your spirit is tied to your physical form through a pathway, not unlike your Energy pathways. This pathway breaches the veil between planes at the very center of your Core. With inspiration there, every other affinity must pass through it before it can touch your spirit. Moreover, the outermost affinity, fear, will also need to pass through rage and glory.”

Victor's eyes widened with understanding. "So, right now, all of my affinities can touch my spirit equally?"

"They could if you had equal affinities. As it is, your rage and fear get through more often. This new Core structure will change you, Victor. You may not notice it right away, but you will start to experience your rage and fear to a lesser degree. What makes it through to your spirit will be colored by your glory and inspiration.

"This was the entire point of the cultivation drill I've taught you—how to filter the fear and rage-attuned Energy through your other affinities, primarily your inspiration. It will grant you a greater measure of control over those powerful emotions. They'll still be a part of you, still powerful, especially when turned outward into the structure of a spell, but they'll influence you less."

"Will it mean my Volcanic Rage won't make me lose control?" Victor had high hopes of holding onto that spell's tremendous power while keeping his Iron Berserk's rationality.

"No. That spell has an effect that you embrace when you cast it. Its destructive design is incredibly potent, but it opens your pathways wide to accept the rage in both your Cores. It will take improving the spell and strengthening your will to accomplish greater control. What reshaping your Core will do, Victor, is allow you to begin thinking in your day-to-day life without the constant, unfiltered influence of your fear and rage."

"What if all I had was rage or fear? Is that what happened to the geist I captured?"

Dar nodded, glancing to his left where he'd placed the rib bone. "I'm sure that was part of her problem, aye. She likely cultivated fear to the exclusion of all else. You can imagine how that would shape a spirit, especially if she were allowed to run amok, unchallenged by someone stronger in her world." Before Victor could ask another question, the giant smoothly stood and, looking down at Victor, said, "I've spoken enough today—more than I have all at once in years. You know what to do."

Victor's heart began to hammer in embarrassing panic, and he pushed it down, his pride refusing to allow it to show on his face. Of course, he'd wanted Dar to stick around to watch his progress, perhaps even helping somehow, but the way he'd been dismissed rankled something inside him, and he just nodded. "Thanks, Lord Dar."

He didn't doubt that Dar could read him like an open book, but the Master Spirit Caster didn't let on. "I'll know when you're finished. We'll talk more after that." As he strode from the room, Victor almost called after him to ask that he let Valla know he'd miss lunch but changed his mind; she'd figure it out, and he didn't want to sound so needy to the gruff, powerful man.

Frowning, gritting his teeth in angst, he turned his gaze inward and tried to control his racing thoughts. He took several deep, calming breaths, and then, staring at the four orbs of his Core, he

gathered his will, contemplating the method of his attack. He decided to try to move his inspiration-attuned Energy first, pushing it closer to the other three orbs. Countless times, Victor had pulled Energy out of the orbs in his Core. Similarly, he'd gathered and pushed Energy into them more times than he could count, but he'd never tried to move one of those densely packed globes of thick, pulsing Energy.

When he began to exert the pressure of his will against the sphere of inspiration-attuned Energy, he felt it start to deform, bulging with the pressure, but then it stopped, and nothing more happened. Victor doubled down, pushing harder. He scowled in concentration and effort and bore down. Slowly at first, then with more and more momentum, he pushed it where he wanted it, near the center of his Core space, and definitely out of the original, almost circular pattern his four orbs had once maintained.

Nodding with satisfaction, Victor repeated the process, moving his glory-attuned orb atop the inspiration. It shifted more easily, perhaps because he'd started with a vicious jab of his will rather than a slow ramp-up. Wanting to maintain his momentum, Victor buckled down and drove his will against his rage orb, growling with the effort as beads of sweat emerged all over his scalp, running in rivulets down his forehead. Like a boulder breaking free of the stony soil, the red, glowering orb began to move, and Victor pushed with everything he had, driving it up and over to the top of the stack.

His initial placement of the inspiration orb was paying off; he'd arranged his three orbs so the empty spot near the top was close to his orb of fear-attuned Energy—he'd guessed it would be the hardest to move. His fear—Victor snorted at the thought—proved well-founded. The dark, purple-black orb, pulsing with slow, dread-filled beats, resisted his will for several long, strenuous minutes. Victor felt his ire rising but pushed it back, clearing his mind; rage might make him feel better, but it wouldn't help his concentration, and it would almost certainly undermine his will.

He took a massive breath, filling his lungs to bursting, then bore down, concentrating on what he intended, bending that orb, that part of himself, to his resolute desire for it to move. If the rage orb had been a boulder, Victor's fear moved like a glacier—a mountain—slowly, painfully, with tremendous gravity, sliding into position. "Chingado," he hissed, brushing the rivulets of sweat off his face, shaking his head, and sending a fine mist of perspiration around the chamber. "That was the easy part?"

Victor stretched and breathed, trying to recharge his reserves as he realized he'd only just begun the task Dar had set before him. When he settled down and turned his gaze inward again, he was dismayed to see that his inspiration and glory-attuned orbs had begun to slide out of formation, pulled up around the rage by the fear-attuned orb. Victor cursed and forced them back into place, holding them still with his will. It was clear that, outside of the semi-circular, lopsided "balance" he'd managed to push his Core into, the fear was trying to take the central position. It was trying to pull the other orbs into a sort of orbit.

Once again, Victor took a deep breath, and, pushing all thoughts from his mind, he willed his glory-attuned Energy to begin stretching out. He pulled the largest tendril of Energy out of it that he could control, stretching it around the inspiration-attuned orb. The tendril kept trying to fly free, to drift

through his Core space, back toward the orb of glory-attuned Energy. Victor held it firm, wrapping it down and around the inspiration orb and then up and back into itself.

Once he'd created that loop, things became a little easier—even though the Energy flowed back into the glory orb, his will held it firm around the inspiration orb, so it flowed like a river with a fat bulge at the top. From there, Victor used his will to manipulate strand after strand, flattening the orb as he built up one loop after another. When he could no longer see any evidence of the glory orb, and he just had a dozen thick strands of glory looping the inspiration orb, he pressed them together, squeezing, willing them all to combine.

When the strands of glory-attuned Energy combined into one thick rope, it snapped into place—a bright, golden, glittering ring around his white-gold, misty orb of inspiration. “Fuck yes!” he howled, pumping his fist. Victor felt like he'd just defeated a state champion and proven his legitimate claim to the title. He allowed himself a few minutes to relax and study his Core, basking in the pride of accomplishment.

What Dar hadn't told him was that it wasn't a two-dimensional ring. In that space, things had depth, and Victor felt more like he was looking at a multi-layered sun, somehow able to perceive it in a cross-section. He saw how the glory-attuned Energy hugged the inspiration-attuned Energy, how they interacted with each other, the wisps interlocking, clasping, pulling on each other. What he saw was no stack; it was a bond, and Victor couldn't imagine the force of will it would take to undo what he'd done. The orbs of fear and rage, while heavy and dense, looked far less vibrant, less vital. Had he really had such an inferior Core all this time?

With renewed excitement, Victor picked up the fruit. He chuckled at his reluctance to call it a berry just because it was the size of an apple. In his massive hand, it looked enough like a berry. Maybe the world where it grew was populated by giants. “Or titans,” he chuckled, plucking the stem and plopping the whole thing into his mouth. It was the most delicious thing he could remember tasting. It tickled his tastebuds—tangy and sweet, but more than that, it burst with uncountable flavors, one rolling into the next as the juice washed over the flesh of his mouth, down his throat, and into his stomach.

Victor's eyes were closed, but each new flavor, from vanilla to honey to cloves to citrus to a thousand others, seemed to send bursts of colorful light into his mind. He felt inspired but a thousand-fold more than he ever had with his inspiration spells. Everything felt possible. No, Victor decided, not possible—trivial.

He laughed as he considered his earlier struggles, and he turned to his rage-attuned orb of Energy and pulled a thin strand from it, looping his new inspiration and glory Core. It was easy, of course, to manipulate a single thread like that, and he kept pulling, looping it again and again around the Core. The thread wanted to go back into his rage orb, but it was nothing to keep it away. It was so easy that he started moving it faster, looping around the edge of the glory-attuned Energy.

It wasn't hard to keep the thread, now in a hundred loops, bunched up. All it took was a slight pressure from his will while he continued to pull. A hundred loops became two hundred became five hundred, and then, to his delight, he no longer found any rage-attuned Energy to pull. Victor had stretched his entire supply of rage into a long, looping thread around his Core. With a forceful exertion of his will, he pressed the loops together, and with a jolt like a thunderbolt to his heart, the rage snapped into place.

He now had a dark red, vibrant band of hot, angry Energy that slowly bled into the band of glory-attuned Energy, turning from hot red to orange to yellow to white-gold as it seeped toward the center of his Core. Victor wanted to celebrate, wanted to study the beauty of his new Core—the sturdy, dense, powerful nature of it—but he was still riding high on the fruit he'd eaten and didn't want to lose his momentum.

Just as he'd done with the rage, he began to stretch his fear-attuned Energy around his new Core. He thought it would be more challenging, that there would be some hidden difficulty, but despite the density of that fear-attuned orb, his other three affinities, working together, had far more gravity. It was almost effortless at this point to pull his fear out in a ribbon, wrapping it again and again, faster and faster, around his Core. When he'd stretched it to the limit, utterly diminishing the orb, he squeezed and, with a burst of blinding, soul-wrenching Energy, it snapped into place. Victor's new, fully realized Core began to pulse like a neutron star, and System messages danced across his vision.

*****Congratulations! You have advanced your Core: Epic 1.*****

*****Congratulations! You have constructed a unified, multi-layered Core. Your total Energy reflects the potential of any of your affinities.*****

“Hah!” Victor slapped his hands together in celebration, the crack of his thick palms echoing in the chamber. If he understood what he was reading, he was reasonably sure he could now use his entire pool of Energy to fuel a particular affinity. For instance, if he wanted to, he could burn all his Energy for Berserk. It would make managing his Energy during combat a hundred times easier.

A deep, rough voice rumbled behind him, “I felt that five miles away. I am pleased, apprentice. If they thought you a monster before, wait until they feel the pressure of an epic-tier Core behind your aura.”

Victor grinned fiercely, his white teeth shining in the dim chamber as he turned to regard Dar. “They?”

“Your foolish enemies. Come. You've been at this for hours and deserve to celebrate; we'll join your friends for dinner.”

Book 8: Chapter 25: Party

Victor stood in his shower, washing away the sweat of a hard day's practice. He was a little late for Lam's party but figured he had some time before people—Lam and Valla mostly—began to get irritated with him. He and Lesh had been sparring for hours, and he was a mess. The dragonkin had put him through a rough one, eager to demonstrate his scales' new resilience and the strength and agility he'd gained from his bloodline upgrade.

Victor chuckled at the thought, turning his face toward the mini rainclouds, washing the soap out of his hair. While he had his eyes squeezed shut, he turned his gaze inward and marveled proudly at his new Core. Once he'd started using the cultivation technique that Dar taught him, the bands of glory, rage, and fear-attuned Energy had begun to rotate around his compact, central sphere of inspiration. The gleaming, sparkling band of glory-attuned Energy moved quickly, while the overarching ring of smoky, purple-black fear moved more ponderously. Rage was somewhere in between.

It amazed Victor to no end, watching the interplay between his different affinities. He could see the slow trickle of fear, rage, and glory toward the center, but he saw how they changed as they passed through each layer. Dar hadn't been lying; his Energy fed his spirit, and now none of his rage or fear got through unaltered by his other affinities. He wasn't sure if it was a result of his Core's redesign or if he was just experiencing some sort of placebo effect, but Victor had felt great the last couple of days. His mood had been good, his outlook positive, and it seemed like he was getting more out of everything he did.

Smiling at the idea, Victor got out of the shower, intent on being amicable at the party. He was a little apprehensive; there was the chance that some hard feelings might come up. After all, he'd been fighting, no-holds-barred, against many of Lam's guests not too long ago. Still, the challenge dungeon had been a competition, and he hoped some grudges could be forgiven after some pleasant conversation, drinks, and food.

He dressed in the clothing version of his armor, choosing a midnight blue shade for his shirt. The other pieces, his pants, boots, belt, bracelet, and headband, all shifted to a deep black that complemented the choice. "Nice," he grunted, looking at himself in the mirror. The headband took a little getting used to, but it was supple leather, tooled with silvery thread, and, according to Valla, gave him an almost regal appearance.

As he left the bathroom, he glanced at Lifedrinker leaning beside the bed and thought about wearing her. He decided it was a little much, considering it was "his" home. Still, he didn't trust all the people Lam was inviting, so he summoned his coyotes and left them in the room to keep watch. They yipped and cried a little, but when he expressed his intentions, they curled up like they were sheltering for the night on his bed. Grinning, Victor walked out and nearly bumped into Sora.

"Oof," he said, falling back against his door, "almost ran you over."

She looked up at him, smiling. "Victor! I was just wandering a little, trying to avoid Cam."

"Yeah? Cam's here?" Victor got a little frustrated looking down his nose at her, so he cast *Alter Self*, reducing his height to something more like seven feet.

"So weird that you can do that! What an interesting ability!" She giggled and sipped her drink; from the flush of her cheeks, he didn't think it was her first. She looked lovely, Victor couldn't deny—a slim-fitting dress that didn't cover much of her lithe, tan figure. Her grayish hair was curled and shone vibrantly, almost like silver, and she had a mischievous twinkle in her big, bright eyes.

"So, you're hiding from Cam?"

She nodded, brushing a droplet of condensation from her drink off her chin. “He’s going to deny everything I told you about his betrayal. Be warned.”

“Well, come on. I’ll shield you from his wrath,” Victor said, feeling too smooth for his own taste, and turned down the hallway. “I should get to the party before Valla kicks my ass.”

“I get to meet her? The mysterious woman that holds the leash of a mighty titan?”

Victor sighed and chuckled. He had no doubt that there were plenty of rumors around Sojourn about him and, of course, anyone connected to him. “You’ll meet her, all right.” He could hear music, surprisingly modern Earth-like music, with instruments playing that reminded him of synthesizers, drums, and even guitars. It was mellow, nothing like rock and roll, but definitely not the jaunty medieval stuff he’d gotten used to on Fanwath. “Is that local music?”

“Strista brought a minstrel box, a good one, loaded with music from dozens of nearby worlds.”

“Strista . . .” Victor ran the name through his mind. “The avian woman with the whip? Her master is a consul, right?”

“Yes, Master Yon.” As she answered, Victor stepped out of the hallway into the main parlor of Dar’s house and was a little surprised by the size of the crowd. There had to be more than thirty people in the room, and he could see, through the floor-to-ceiling windows, an equal or greater number out on the deck. “Damn, Lam,” he breathed, scanning the space, seeing some familiar faces but many he didn’t recognize.

Sora leaned close, speaking low, “Quite a showing. I don’t think any invites went unanswered. Can you blame them all? Everyone in the city is still talking about the thrashings you handed out in the Vault of Valor. Then there’s the venue—Ranish Dar’s lake home! He’s never had a gathering here. Many masters are feeling irritated that their apprentices were invited here before they were.”

Victor nodded absently, still trying to spot Valla while avoiding locking eyes with any of the dozens of people already staring his way. He saw a glimpse of silvery, teal wings out on the deck and started moving that way, only to have an enormous figure, someone he first thought was Dar because of his colorful, loose clothing, step into his path. “Oho! There she is, and there’s the man of the hour!” Victor looked up into Brontes’s brutish face and couldn’t help smiling at the giant’s crooked-toothed grin. He also couldn’t help noticing how Sora inched closer to him, practically pressing her side against his as Brontes stuck out a meaty hand.

“Brontes!” Victor clasped the meaty palm. “I’m glad to see you didn’t bring your club.”

“Oh, Ballsmasher?” He laughed. “I have him resting in a pool of hot clay back home, still recovering from your axe’s wicked edge!” His grip felt like a sandpaper-wrapped ham hock, and as he squeezed, Brontes frowned, his brow wrinkling in confusion. “Shit! Have I gone mad, or have you shrunk?”

“Careful, Brontes,” Sora sighed.

Victor chose to ignore the question and pulled his hand back. “Nice to see you, big guy. Wanna do some sparring sometime soon? I have a friend I want you to meet.”

“Do you jest?” Brontes boomed. “Of course!” He gestured expansively and enthusiastically, and Victor felt very glad Dar’s home had been built with giants in mind.

“Cool, well, let’s talk some more in a bit. I need to go ask the hostess if she needs any help.”

“Cool?” Brontes frowned, then grinned. “I like it. You were right, Sora, he’s not half bad!” Victor just smiled and pushed by the big man, only to be accosted by another group of people, all avian, one of whom was Strista Kono, the hawk-featured lady with the whip he’d knocked out by charging and smashing her through a dozen trees. The two avians flanking her both looked decidedly feminine and clung to her arms as though she were a flotation device keeping them above water.

“Victor!” she trilled, her voice surprisingly melodic. He could hear Brontes talking to Sora behind him—it was hard not to hear the giant—so Victor took another step closer to Strista and her entourage.

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“Hello, Strista.”

“You remembered my name?” Her golden eyes widened, and though her beak couldn’t smile, he recognized the pleased-sounding clicks she made in her throat; he’d learned them from Tria, his yellow-feathered, avian Artificer friend. “Victor, can I speak to you alone for just a moment?” She leaned close. “Before Arcus finds us?” She glanced at her friends—dates?—and said, “Mingle! Shoo! I’ll be back in a moment.” Then, before Victor could even reply to her request, she grabbed his wrist in surprisingly strong fingers and tugged him toward the hallway leading to the kitchen.

“Strista!” He pulled against her grip, and it was only when his pull didn’t slow her that he had to take into consideration that this woman might be stronger than he was at that moment. He wasn’t channeling Sovereign Will into his strength, he wasn’t Berserk, and worst of all, he’d hobbled himself with Alter Self, reducing his attribute maximums by close to thirty percent. As far as he knew, Strista was

tier-eight, and he had no idea how much she'd built up her strength attribute. She pulled him around the corner and then let go, turning to face him.

"I'm so sorry about that. I know it was rude. I know you could have gone mad and thrown me around like a child, so thank you for holding back. I wanted to grab you before you became too busy with all the fawning people in that room and before Arcus realized I was here. You see, Victor, I believe he means you harm! In fact, I know he does! He tried to involve me."

Victor sighed. Dar had already told him that Arcus Volpuré would probably try to kill him before they were clear of the Iron Prison. He was Lord Roil's protégé, and Lord Roil and Dar had plenty of history. He smiled at her and shrugged. "I know."

"You do?" Her throat clicked awkwardly as she clutched her hands together. "That's embarrassing. I seem to have betrayed a friend for naught."

"Eh, relax. I appreciate the head's up, but yeah, I figure he'll pull something while we're in the prison. You've heard about that, I suppose?"

Strista nodded, her throat clicking rapidly. "Yes! Arcus has been crowing nonstop about the mission to rescue Rasso Hine. He anticipates great rewards and, of course, a chance to avenge his pride against you. I'm glad you're aware. He told me that Arona will also be a part of the mission, yes? Be wary of her. I don't know her well, but Arcus does, and he speaks about her as though she's an ally."

Victor nodded absently, certain he heard Valla's voice, slightly raised, saying his name. He turned back toward the hallway and nodded that way. "Hey, thanks again, Strista. You're all right. I gotta get back in there; I think I heard my name."

She nodded but deftly snatched his wrist again, saying, "Please don't mention my warning to anyone. I don't want Arcus to turn his schemes against me. He's already furious that I backed out of his plan to 'avenge' himself. How ridiculous! We all went into that dungeon knowing the risks, and he's the one who struck first! I've seen the full battle review in the Daily!"

"The, uh, Daily?"

"The Sojourn Daily? It's the biggest newspaper in the city . . ." She trailed off, giving him a chance to interject, so Victor did.

"Ah, right. Of course." He nodded and jerked his head back toward the parlor. "I'm heading back. Have a good time, all right?"

"Thank you. I see a restroom down the hall. I think I'll use that before I rejoin the party."

Victor grunted in acknowledgment, already walking away. He supposed he should be more grateful to her, but what more could he do than say thank you? He wouldn't tell Arcus or anyone else that

she'd tried to warn him, so it wasn't like she'd get in any trouble. When he stepped into the parlor, he saw several people angling his way, but he refused to make eye contact and hurried toward the door to the deck. He could see Valla standing out there speaking to a man in a bright red robe with a high collar that obscured his head. If he were the kind of guy to say things like "speak of the devil," he might have uttered those words.

Feeling just a hint of agitation, despite the buzz of conversation, music, and general good humor around him, Victor shoved his way out, muttering, "Excuse me," as he nudged people aside. When he stood a bit behind and to the right of the man in red, he grinned at Valla as she shifted her eyes to meet his gaze. He felt his anxiety plummet as he listened to her, ". . . several different instructors over the years, but haven't yet met anyone who practiced that particular style."

The man nodded, or at least Victor thought he did; he could only see the top of his head over his high collar. His voice was smooth and cultured as he replied, "Ah, well, as I said, my father's man-at-arms is a master, and I'm sure he'd be interested to see how your style might differ."

Valla smiled and nodded to Victor. "Arcus, this is Victor. I believe you've met."

Arcus whirled, his silken robe's hem flaring out expansively at the movement, and turned to face Victor in surprise. He wasn't wreathed in flame as he had been at the start of the challenge dungeon, but his eyes glowed like smoldering coals beneath his dark brows as he smiled and bowed shallowly—really, more of a respectful nod. Victor shifted closer to Valla while the man said, "I'm pleased to meet you outside of a contest, Victor. I hope there aren't any hard feelings?"

Victor grinned, perhaps a little savagely. "Why would there be? You might have struck first, but I believe I hit back harder. We're all good in my book."

Arcus had thin lips, and they became even more so as he pressed them together in a smile that his eyes didn't reflect. No, his eyes spoke more of murder than pleasantries. "You certainly are a sturdy fellow, no doubt about that. I underestimated you to my folly. Safe to say, I won't make that mistake again." He glanced to Victor's left and right, and Victor saw what had gotten his attention; they'd drawn a small crowd. Arcus turned to Valla. "I can see why the council has chosen your man for such a dangerous job."

Victor felt a growl starting to take shape deep in his chest. The little asshole was trying to get Valla upset. He'd told her about the Iron Prison, of course, but, as he was wont to do, he'd downplayed the danger. She, of course, wasn't one to be easily manipulated, however. "Oh, Arcus!" She laughed. "It may seem dangerous to you, but that's only because you've only just met Victor. He'll be fine." She moved close to Victor and grabbed his arm, leaning against him. "Won't you, my sweet?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, kissing her forehead, "of course."

"You're not worried?" Arcus pressed. "The council has lost five iron-rankers trying to make a foothold in that place!" The muttered conversations on the deck told Victor they had done more than draw a small crowd; everyone was listening. He was about to spout some bravado to try to change the topic and prevent

Arcus from actually getting to Valla, but then another voice spoke up, raspy and low—Arona.

“Haven’t you read the reports of the fights after you were eliminated, Arcus? I think Victor will be fine.” The Death Caster stepped up to Victor’s left as she spoke, and he glanced at her; she looked similar to the other times he’d seen her—black lips, dark eyes, and sharp teeth. He quickly shifted his gaze back to Arcus when he saw that she wore a very slinky black dress that exposed a lot of pale flesh rather than her usual layered black robes. Valla’s hands tightened on his biceps.

Arcus chuckled, waving a hand dismissively. “Right, yes. I suppose if they couldn’t get one of the top-ranked bulwarks in the city to clear the entrance, someone like Victor will have to suffice.”

“I’m a top-ranked bulwark. Number two in the city. Thank your fiery gods that Victor will be going in there.” The new speaker had a deep, rumbling voice. Victor peered at him, only to see it was a man he didn’t recognize, easily eight feet tall but leaner than Brontes, with a rigidly straight posture. He was dressed in a fine suit layered in different shades of purple, and his face was classically handsome with a square jaw, straight nose, and lips that curled in a pleasant smile. “That man is the sturdiest, hardest-hitting bastard I’ve ever crossed blades with.”

Finally, it clicked for Victor, and he realized it was the man who’d been encased in plate armor. He glanced at the woman by his side to confirm—she didn’t have her crossbow, but there was no doubt she was the one he’d eliminated—his wife. Victor smiled at her and asked, “How’s your bow?”

“She’s fine, sir. Thank you for your honorable mercy.” She let go of the man’s arm and bowed, and the tall man stepped closer, reaching out a hand.

“Victor, you have my thanks as well.”

Victor took the hand and squeezed, nodding and smiling, pleased that most of the people he’d fought seemed to be good sports about their losses. He wracked his brain, trying to remember the giant warrior’s name, but it wouldn’t come to him. Finally, he sighed and shrugged helplessly. “I’d introduce you to Valla, but I’m an idiot when it comes to names.”

Valla let go of his arm and reached out a hand to the woman, who smiled. “I’m Lyla Rose, and this big fellow is Dovalion Boarheart.”

It seemed that Arcus didn’t like being left out. He shouldered closer, bumping Arona, and asked, “Boarheart, why didn’t you accept the council’s offer?”

“Because I’ve lost enough this decade. I’ll be spending my time grinding away at the Dread Spire for the next few years.”

“We will be,” Lyla corrected, clasping Dovalion’s hand with hers.

Arona, done being patient, shifted to lock eyes with Victor. “Don’t let Arcus discourage you, Victor. If you can hold the entrance until the portal opens again, I’ll help you subdue that dungeon. I’d go first, but the council thinks that prisoners are lying in wait, killing the council representatives, not the undead inhabitants of the dungeon.” She frowned, and Victor felt some cold Energy wafting off her as she struggled to contain some emotion—anger? Irritation? She sighed. “I wanted to go in first. My bone thralls are made for such a situation, but Master Vesavo refused to allow it.”

Arcus started talking then about how he’d handle it if he were “allowed” to go in first. Victor didn’t buy it; he knew damn well that Arcus and his master hoped that Victor would die when he stepped into the dungeon. Then, they could drop the whole charade. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he doubted there was any real reason to get Rasso Hine out of the dungeon. As that thought occurred to him, he waited for Arona to finish saying something about monsters respawning in a dungeon and asked, “What’s the deal with this Rasso Hine guy, anyway? They’re risking all these lives to get one man out?”

“Justice!” Arcus cried. “We cannot allow the council to punish an innocent man!”

“It’s more than that,” Arona added. “My master thinks Hine knows something about the half-finished invasion circle that Consul Rexa found and destroyed last month.” The conversations around them had picked back up, but a new hush descended at Arona’s raspy declaration.

“Imagine that!” Arcus scoffed. “Who would think to invade Sojourn? We’ve nearly a thousand veil walkers in the city at any given time.”

“The circle was real,” Strista said. Victor hadn’t seen her approach, but she stepped forward on the other side of Valla. “My master saw it with his own eyes. I saw him sketching it from memory later that day.”

“Consul Yon?” Again, Arcus scoffed. “You know what the other consuls call him, yes?”

Arona nudged him with her elbow. “Don’t be rude.”

“Arcus is brave,” Strista said, irritated clicking sounds coming from deep in her throat, “when he has Lord Roil’s robes to hide behind.”

Victor saw Arcus’s face tinting toward crimson and could even feel some heat emanating from the man, so he stepped forward and cleared his throat. “Let’s keep it cool, huh? This is a party. Strista, I liked the music I heard earlier; it had a different kind of beat—a little faster. Can you play it again? On your device, I mean? Valla, where’s Lam? I wanted something to eat, and the table was picked over when I passed by. Also, damn, but I’m thirsty! Anyone else want a drink?”

His interjections seemed to have done the trick. Glowering but visibly restraining himself, Arcus turned to speak more quietly with a young woman who looked like she might have been his sister. Victor frowned at that thought—hadn’t Edeya said something about his sister? Everyone else started speaking at once about drinks, snacks, the view, the fabulous setting, or Strista’s music. Valla pulled his arm, and he turned to see her pointing out Lam, who was waving her hands, speaking to

some of Dar's house staff. Victor chuckled and walked over; it would be a long night, but he was already having fun. He hoped he'd run into the turtle-guy, Drobna.

Book 8: Chapter 26: Gird Yourself

Victor ate some kind of sweet, smoky meat on a skewer as he listened to Lam, Darren, and Edeya talk to Arcus and his little sister. He and Valla sat on a cushioned bench, their backs against the deck railing, as Arcus spoke, waving a hand for emphasis. Victor had done a lot of mingling, even spent some time comparing notes on Berserk with Drobna, and now things were winding down a little. It had been a surprisingly relaxing night; Arcus hadn't stirred up any further arguments, and, in fact, Victor had hardly seen him, as the Pyromancer spent time with others, rarely in the same conversation.

"I, um, was going to bring that up," Darren said, answering Arcus's pointed question about his Class. "I'm still only level eight."

The fire mage snorted. "If you're going to enter the First Clash Coliseum, you'll want a Class."

"They have a week, brother dear. Well, nearly so. In any case, don't be dismissive! It's not like I have groupmates lining up at our door." The familial resemblance between the two was striking; their eyes and noses mirrored each other, and they spoke with a certain refined air that Victor found grating from Arcus but almost endearing from Trin. He supposed he was biased.

Lam cleared her throat. "Speaking of the 'coliseum,' can you tell us why it's not in the guidebook?"

"Of course," Arcus chuckled. "The dungeon is on my family's estate and not open to the public."

Edeya looked at Trin. "You said your father 'acquired a pass' for the dungeon—"

She was cut off by a burst of laughter from Arcus as he shoved Trin's shoulder. "Trying to be coy? Trying to downplay your—"

"Our family's wealth? Yes, I was! It's embarrassing. I'm sorry, Edeya. My father controls access to the dungeon, so the 'pass' was a fabrication of sorts. The true part of my tale is that he never lets me go into the place; it only opens a few times a month, and he sells the slots for favors and influence with the council."

Victor lost track of Edeya's response because Arona approached and leaned close to whisper, "Victor, might we speak in private for a moment?"

"Um," Victor glanced at Valla, but she shrugged and stood up, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze on the way.

"I'm going to check on the kitchen staff. I'll find you again soon."

Arona stepped back, lowering her head in a respectful nod. Victor couldn't help smiling at how Valla squared her shoulders and looked down her nose at the Death Caster as she brushed past.

He stood. "Come on, let's take a walk." They meandered through the little conversation groups, following the deck along the back of the house, past the library, and then onto a cobbled path that

led into Dar's gardens. The same path would eventually open up to the area where he and Lesh liked to spar. Once the music and conversation were a muted background hum, Arona quickened her step to walk beside him.

"I know I spoke confidently about the little quest the council is sending us on, but I hope you understand how dangerous your part in this will be."

Victor sniffed deeply of the night blooms, enjoying a faint citrus tang that tickled his nose. He shrugged. "I need to do this to be free of them. You know about my punishment for damaging the dungeon."

"I know. I hope you realize that anyone with a brain recognizes that there's a faction on the council trying to get to Dar through you."

"Well, he used me pretty well to strike blows of his own, didn't he? I have a feeling he made a fortune betting on me, and let's not forget that many people, such as Arcus, are significantly weaker today than before going into that dungeon." Victor shrugged, peering up at the bright stars. "I guess I'm just trying to say I don't blame people like Roil for trying to abuse the situation."

"You seem . . . different." Arona chuckled, even her laugh raspy and low. "I'd imagined you to be fuming over this whole situation."

"I've had some clarity over the last couple of days. My rage is still there, trust me, but with Dar's guidance, I'm learning to use it more like a tool than a road I must walk upon."

"An interesting analogy. It doesn't bother you that the council has lost five representatives trying to gain a foothold in the dungeon?"

"There's a part of me, Arona, that truly enjoys challenges. I love to fight, and more so when people are around to see me win. I mean, honestly, if people thought I'd be discouraged because some others failed before me, they don't know me very well. Valla knows that. It was funny listening to Arcus trying to rile her up; she knows me better than I know myself. I told her what we were doing, but I didn't mention the people dying before me. Still, do you think she didn't suspect something like that?" He barked a short, genuine laugh. "She's probably relieved to hear what's really going on."

Arona's small smile didn't waver, and in the starlight, her teeth shone in the dark void of her black-painted lips. "You think she was imagining something worse?"

"Yeah, considering the trouble I've gotten up to in the past, I wouldn't be surprised."

Arona's voice grew even quieter as she said, "She's beautiful. I've never seen anyone like her."

Victor stopped and turned to look at her, listening to the night sounds—chirps, clicks, and even the warbling song of a nocturnal bird. He took a deep breath and nodded—how could he deny it? “Yeah, she is. Was there something else you wanted to say? Were you just hoping to warn me about the danger we’d be facing tomorrow?”

“I wanted to be sure you were aware of the politics at play. Some masters keep their students in the dark. Lord Roil and Master Dar have fought wars against each other—not only politically, here on Sojourn, but with armies on other worlds. Arcus is one of Roil’s students, and he lost much favor by being eliminated from the Vault of Valor so quickly. He will be looking to save face and regain his master’s favor. He may try something underhanded.”

Victor grinned and reached out, resting a hand on Arona’s bare shoulder. He supposed it was a little forward, but he wanted to convey his confidence and didn’t think words were enough. Her flesh was icy to his hot flesh, and she shuddered slightly at the touch. “You’re the third person to give me that warning. If he surprises me, then I’m a fool who deserves it. Do me a favor, though, will you?”

“I will.” She nodded, a little too eagerly, if Victor were being honest.

“Be the first to follow me through. I’ll have that entrance safe for you.”

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Again, she nodded. “I will!”

“Perfect, then.” Victor removed his hand and smiled, turning back to the house. “Let’s get another drink, then I’m going to try to talk Valla into a swim. Care to join us?”

#

Victor sat beside Dar in the Spirit Master’s favorite coach, the black-lacquered one that made Victor think of a steampunk bat mobile. It was hurtling through the air toward the Council Spire, where he was meant to descend to the Iron Prison and put his life on the line—again—to establish a foothold in the place. Dar was quiet, contemplative, perhaps, and Victor was reminded of Arona’s words the night before. He cleared his throat and risked irritating the giant, stone-faced man. “I heard you’ve been at war with Roil for a long time.”

“Didn’t I tell you as much?” the giant rumbled.

“Well, I mean, you said you two had differences, but at the party, someone said you’d actually had armies battling each other on other worlds.”

“Aye, that’s a fact. We’ve fought over some of the same territory. It’s not uncommon, Victor. As new worlds are added to Sojourn’s registry, one with resources or cultures worthy of notice occasionally strikes the fancy of more than one of us old masters.” Apparently, he was done with the subject because he asked, “Tell me of your cultivation. Any insights into your next breakthrough? I would suspect you’d tell me if your drill had reached the epic tier.”

“Nope, still advanced, even using what you taught me. I can tell it’s more effective than my old method, and it’s a hell of a lot easier on my mind. I just don’t know why it’s still considered advanced.”

“Because, like your old one, it is an advanced method. It simply has more potential for growth. Never fear, the improvement will come, and when you see what you’ve been doing wrong, you’ll likely think yourself a dolt for not realizing it sooner.”

“Heh. I’ll take your word for it.”

“You mentioned the party. How was it? I’m told you had quite a showing—more than eighty guests, according to Mister Ruhn. I’m pleased that no fights broke out.”

“It was surprisingly fun. Something like ten of the people I fought in the dungeon showed up, and they were all pretty cool, even Cam and Arcus. Arcus tried to start a little shit at the beginning, but he got over it after a few drinks. I still don’t like the guy, but he behaved all right. I also set up a few new sparring partners—Drobna, Brontes, Dovalion, and Sora—assuming I survive the dungeon today.”

“You’ll survive, but you may be in longer than a day. I believe there’s some time dilation involved.” Victor opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but Dar must have read his mind. “It won’t be a major effect, but if I’m not mistaken, each day in that dungeon is closer to a week of standard System time.”

“Is that on purpose?”

“Time dilation affects many dungeons, especially naturally formed ones, but it seems the System always adds the effect to level-locked dungeons to one degree or another. Didn’t you notice how your time in the Vault of Valor seemed shorter than the time that passed outside?”

Victor’s eyes opened wide. “Yeah. Shit! That makes sense! I thought I was only in there for about a day!”

Dar chuckled, nodding. “I’ll be sure to inform your friends so they don’t worry.” He shifted, looking directly into Victor’s eyes. “Let’s talk about worst-case scenarios.”

“You mean for the dungeon or my friends if I die?”

“The dungeon, boy!” Dar chuckled, shaking his head. “There’s a good chance that someone has set up an Energy void on the other side of the transport portal, meaning, if you step through, you may not be able to use your Energy abilities; anything you expend from your Core will be depleted, pulled away by the formation.”

“Mmm.” Victor nodded, scratching his chin. “Sounds bad.” He pointedly remembered his time in the Caldera, suffering from Hector’s trap.

“The problem with such a formation is that it will only draw Energy you expend. Your Sovereign Will ability will function fine, and other abilities not dependent on an Energy expenditure will also work—Titanic Leap, for instance.”

“And my axe.” Victor, out of habit, reached up to stroke Lifedrinker’s haft.

Let us slay your foolish foes! she cried into his mind, her voice thick with the lust for battle.

“Precisely. I saw a list of the iron rankers who were slain attempting to accomplish this task, and three of the five were mages. They died quickly—each in under two minutes. Another was an assassin variant. No doubt he believed he could sneak past or use his incredible speed to bypass the trap, but he died in just under five minutes. However, one fellow lasted nearly twenty minutes—a bulwark-type with a legendary shield. I’d seen him in a few gladiatorial events, and he was impressive.”

“So, he was the most sturdy without spending Energy?”

“Just so.” Dar nodded. “You are both sturdy and deadly, with or without Energy.”

“Not so much if I can’t Berserk.”

“Is that so?” Dar produced an obsidian blade engraved with smoldering orange runes and, faster than even Victor’s Quinametzin eyes could follow, slashed it through the meat of Victor’s forearm.

“Fuck!” Victor hissed, slapping his hand over the deep cut as blood began to swell out. Dar deftly slapped his hand away, his stony fingers impossible to resist, and stared at the cut. Victor followed his gaze and watched as his flesh stitched back together in just a few seconds.

“A fine cut, easily healed, but it illustrates the point. You’re a hard man to kill. Use that axe of yours, use that strength and vitality, and bully your way out of their trap. Once you’re clear of whatever formation they’ve set up, you can use your other abilities and lay waste to them.”

Victor rubbed the blood into his arm, trying to smear it into nothing. “What will the formation look like?”

Dar nodded. “A good question. Look for a pattern of runes on the floor or pillars or totems or flags. If the magic prevents you from passing through, turn your axe against the formation. It will be sturdy and may resist your blade, but Lifedrinker and you are strong. If you can get her edge to pierce the formation, she can siphon the Energy. Have you imparted your spirit unto her?”

“Yes.”

“What aspect?”

“Inspiration.” Victor snatched Lifedrinker from her harness and held her on his knees so Dar could see the white-gold gleam that limned her shiny metal head.

“Not a bad choice, but for this, give her rage. She must be her most ferocious, with a blade that can melt stone.”

Victor nodded, and then he quietly said, “Chica, I’m going to pull back this spirit, but then I’ll give you another piece, the part of me that’s always pissed off. Can you handle it?”

I yearn for it!

Victor chuckled, almost nervously, and then canceled his Imbue Spirit spell. Lifedrinker lost her white-gold aura, but as soon as it was gone, he cast the spell again, fueling it with rage-attuned Energy. A deep crimson light that smoldered almost like fire began to limn the axe, and he felt her eagerness for battle redouble—she vibrated and practically pulled away from him, desperate to strike something. Victor carefully lifted the axe over his shoulder and let his harness snatch her tight. “She’s ready.”

“And your Sovereign Will?”

“Already on strength and vitality.”

Dar nodded. “Even if you don’t break free, if Montes Foh can last twenty minutes, you can last an hour.”

Victor grunted his acknowledgment, leaned back, and tried to relax; the coach would arrive in just a few minutes. He’d probably be nervous or worried if he thought about things too much, but he didn’t like to do that. Before a match or, in this case, a fight, he simply wanted to think about how he’d perform. It calmed him to visualize his movements, to picture foes taken down or cleaved in half. He liked to think about his axe work—his stances, cuts, blocks, combinations, and counters. If he couldn’t use his spells in this fight, it just meant he’d get to concentrate more on his fighting style. Frankly, that sounded fun to him.

It wasn’t long before the coach settled with a gentle bump, and Dar threw the doors open, leaping out with a ground-shaking thud. Victor followed suit; he was just as large as his mentor, and the two of them easily cleared the crowds on the bustling sidewalk outside the city council’s tower. They made their way inside, past the enormous System Stone, and then onto an elevator made of crystal that, rather than ascending as Victor thought it would, dropped down beneath the ground floor and beyond, descending rapidly for several seconds.

When the elevator lurched to a stop, Victor followed Dar out into a polished, gray-and-white marble corridor wide enough for a city bus to drive through. It led toward an equally large pair of wide-open double doors. As they approached, Victor’s boots clicking on the stone, he saw a huddle of

robed individuals in the room beyond. When Dar led the way into the chamber, the figures looked toward them, and Victor recognized several of the consuls he'd met at his "inquest."

As he glanced around the spacious, domed chamber, taking in the murals—torture scenes, body-strewn battlefields, and a depiction of what could only be described as hell—he saw Arona and Arcus standing to the side of the otherwise empty chamber, chatting. Dar nodded toward them. "Wait over there. We'll open the portal soon."

Victor walked over, and, to his surprise, Arcus inclined his head in a nod of greeting. "A pleasure to see you made it, Victor."

Victor offered him a half smile. "Arcus." He shifted his gaze to Arona, noting she was back in her dark robes with the deep cowl. "Arona." He gestured to the macabre murals. "Lovely space."

Arona breathed a soft chuckle, then rasped, "This is the antechamber to a prison dungeon. You wanted flowers and angelic beings? Would you like a statue of your lady love, Valla, here?"

Victor felt some heat in his chest, felt the rage trying to slide out of his Core into his pathways, but he willed it down. Arona's lips turned up in a smile, and he could see she was being playful, perhaps even trying to pay Valla a compliment with the "angelic beings" line. He shrugged. "If it were the last thing I'd see before getting dumped into a death-attuned dungeon? Hell, yes!"

Arona's smile widened, exposing her sharp canines. It looked like she'd say something more, but then Arcus ran his gaze up and down Victor's figure. "I see you're back to your gigantic size. No armor?"

"I'll put it on before I go in." Victor was, in fact, wearing the clothing versions of his armor; he'd been tempted to wear his old dragon-steel belt instead of the new Sojourn-set belt, but the old one was starting to lose its value; opponents at his level, especially casters like Arcus, could unleash enormous torrents of Energy in their attacks and the belt only absorbed a small fraction. His new one could boost his agility and dexterity in a pinch, and was pretty much immune to damage.

"Nervous?" Arcus asked, his head craning back inside his high, sharp collar to see Victor's face better.

Victor stepped back to make it easier on the much shorter pair. "I don't generally feel nervous before a fight, bud. I'm a little anxious, I guess, but that's just because I'd rather fight than stand around talking about it." Arona stifled a raspy laugh at his words, turning away and feigning a cough, and Arcus stiffened. Victor grinned and turned toward the gaggle of older men and women standing at the chamber's center. "Think they'll let me get things started soon?"

As if his words had been prophetic, Victor felt a surge of chilly, death-attuned magic, and then, with the howl of a thousand tormented souls, a swirling portal formed at the center of the chamber, casting the space in malevolent, cold, blue light. Lord Roil's unmistakable cowed figure stepped out of the group of consuls and masters and called out, "Victor, the time is nigh. Gird yourself."

Book 8: Chapter 27: Foothold

At Lord Roil's words, Victor nodded and channeled a little Energy into his armor, instantly armoring himself in crimson and black scales, thick, red leather hide, and dense, deep-red, gleaming metal. Victor found the helmet strangely comfortable, and something about the enchantment allowed him an unobstructed view from within the "lava king's" fanged maw. Arona lifted an appreciative eyebrow, and Arcus nodded, a slow smile spreading on his face. The expression surprised Victor, but not as much as the Pyromancer's words.

"Impressive. I begin to wonder if I should have made some wagers on your success." Genuine levity tinged the man's voice.

Victor smirked. His voice reverberated, slightly amplified by the nature of the helm, as he asked, "I hope you didn't bet against me. You've lost enough thanks to me, don't you think?"

Arcus shrugged and again surprised him: "Nothing I hadn't signed up for. Best hurry over; I see Lord Roil's vapors quickening—an expression of impatience I'm all too familiar with."

"Right. See you soon." Victor nodded to Arona.

She smiled, exposing her sharp canines, and shrugged. "Not soon enough. An hour for you, seven for us out here. I'll be ready."

With nothing to add, Victor turned and stomped toward the group of older, far more powerful men and women standing near the brightly glowing portal. His boots thudded on the marble, and he flexed his gauntleted left hand, eager to put his new lava lash to work. The thought brought a question to his mind, and as he approached, he asked, "If they've set up an Energy void, will it not drain my Core? If not, why can't I use abilities that stay within my body? Or this?" He channeled some Energy into the gauntlet, and the molten lash handle filled his hand, the coil sizzling and popping, dripping hissing magma onto the marble as it extended to hang from his hand.

Dar opened his mouth to reply, but another consul, one Victor hadn't met, stepped forward. She was a tall, slender woman wearing silken blue robes. As she spoke, she pulled her cowl back, revealing a beautiful, elven face with odd, white-furred fox ears jutting up through her pale blonde hair. Her voice rang out, melodic and chime-like. "Only an Energy trap properly attuned to your affinities can pull the Energy from your Core. However, a general void trap will drain any Energy that so much as touches one of the pathways outside your Core. You must resist the temptation to activate any abilities or spells, lest you diminish yourself for naught."

"Thank you, Lady Rexa," Dar rumbled. Then he turned his gaze on Victor and, more loudly, said, "Understand? Capture the foothold as we discussed, Victor." Victor nodded and turned to the portal, but then he realized several consuls had stepped forward with packages. Again, Dar spoke, "We'll equip you with a few minor treasures to help ensure your victory. I'll start." He held out a small, brightly glowing golden pill-like capsule in his hand. "If, for some reason, your Core becomes drained, swallow this. It will partially replenish you."

Victor smiled, recognizing a waft of glory coming off the little treasure. He took it in his palm and then tucked it into one of the many, near-invisible pockets on his new armored pants. To his surprise, Yon, the avian consul, and master of Strista, stepped forward with a brace of five vials, each filled to the cork stopper with thick red liquid. "Regenerative healing draughts. Some of my

best work. I give you these with the understanding that this undertaking will benefit all of Sojourn and is far beyond the scope of the three tasks you owe this council.”

Victor was sure he heard Lord Roil hiss at those words, but when he glanced at the man, all he saw was impassive smoke inside his heavy cowl. Victor slung the brace of vials crosswise over his shoulder so the five potions were on his chest and easily accessible. Yon spoke again, “The crystal containers are exceedingly sturdy.”

“Awesome,” Victor grunted, taking a moment to pull Lifedrinker from her harness while he was at it. He started to step toward the portal but realized one more consul was holding a package out to him. It was the grandmotherly woman from the inquest, the one with solid black eyes. He’d almost overlooked her, for, unlike most of the other consuls, she wasn’t nearing giant-sized proportions. Rather, she was probably around five feet tall with a stooped back. She shakily stretched up her arm, and Victor accepted the heavy, billiard-ball-sized orb she proffered. It was cold and metallic and inscribed with hundreds of tiny, neat runes. He could feel the Energy pulsing at its dense core.

“A bomb!” she cackled. “Were I you, I’d throw it at the first fool I saw once I emerged from the portal!”

Victor grinned, hefting the ball in his gauntleted hand. “Hell yeah! Thanks . . .”

“Kreshta Griss.” She mock-curtseyed, and it looked like she might fall as she grinned lopsidedly and cackled.

Victor arched an eyebrow, then looked around at the old masters and, with the helmet adding extra resonance to his voice, boomed, “Anything else?”

Dar clapped him on the shoulder. “Only one more thing, Victor.” He held out a small mani-colored marble. “This recall token will bring you and one other out of that place. Attune it to yourself so another cannot use it in your stead.” Victor did as he asked, sending a trickle of Energy into the tiny glass ball. Then he tucked it away in his “good” dimensional ring, along with his cultivation treasures. “Excellent. Don’t rely on that recall token in an emergency. Due to the nature of this prison dungeon, you’ll need to channel Energy into it for several minutes before it will activate.”

Victor nodded, then clapped his mentor on the shoulder. “See you soon.” Hefting Lifedrinker in his hands, he stepped toward the portal. When he stood before the blue, swirling rip in reality, he turned and ran his gaze over the room one more time. Arona and Arcus stood to the side, both looking pensive. Dar didn’t flinch from his gaze, and the steady blaze of his eyes gave Victor confidence. Roil’s smoky cowl was useless when it came to reading his intentions or thoughts, so Victor shifted his gaze over the rest of the consuls. Some smiled and nodded. Some looked disturbed—guilt, perhaps? More than half refused to meet his gaze.

Victor couldn’t stomach the idea that so many of them wouldn’t even look him in the eyes or acknowledge him before he stepped through. He hefted Lifedrinker overhead, staring hard at each of the Consuls. They might be more powerful than he, they might be able to squash him if they wanted to, but he was damned if he’d go into this death trap without them even looking at him. He

released his aura, letting it fall around him like a lead blanket. Of course, none of the old masters flinched, but he got a couple more to look his way.

Victor grinned and lifted his head to the sky. Shouting as loudly as he could, with the magical amplification of his helm, he screamed, “Ancestors! I go to bring you glory!” The final word was deafening, echoing strangely in the domed chamber. Seeing that his cry had gotten everyone’s attention, Victor smiled savagely, turned, and leaped into the portal. Cold washed over him, but the passage was brief, and when he emerged, he was struck by the sudden change of his environs.

He’d jumped into the portal, so he came out mid-leap, and, as he descended toward a bone-strewn, stone platform, he took in the scenery. He wasn’t in a cave or a network of tunnels as he’d always pictured “dungeons” in his mind. A night sky hung overhead, devoid of stars but illuminated by a gibbous, gray moon. A landscape of broken ruins lay around him, low walls and small crumbling buildings in the foreground and taller, more whole structures further away.

The portal was bright and blue, and before it snapped closed, Victor saw that the platform he was falling toward was surrounded by a dozen stone totems carved with brightly flaring runes. He’d just noticed the skulking, shadowy outlines of watching individuals, more than a handful, when the portal snapped shut with an ear-popping collapse of air, and the world was thrown into momentary darkness.

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It was only momentary because a bright white globe of Energy flared to life, and a man in ragged gray robes stepped forward, just on the far side of the stone platform. The light was above his hood, casting his face in deep shadow, but his voice rang out stridently, “What’s this, then? Another lackey of the council come to feed the grinder?”

Victor didn’t respond, ignoring the pendejo as he turned in a slow circle, allowing his eyes to adjust. He could feel the emptiness around him and knew that Dar’s theory had been correct; there was no Energy in the space contained by the totems. He could feel their tug, and it brought to mind Hector’s trap in the volcano’s caldera, only weaker and less tailored to Victor’s affinities. He could see the other figures moving closer to the circle, watching him. Most wore tattered clothing, but a few had armor on—mismatched chainmail, leather, and a few pieces of plate. One giant man with the head of a bull held a shield and a spiked mace.

Nodding as he counted the seven different foes, Victor finally turned back to the speaker. “What’s the deal? You guys just camping here hoping for easy kills?” Victor stepped toward the man and the platform’s edge, wondering when they’d attack, but the fellow just shifted to his left, keeping Victor in view as he approached the totem. Lifedrinker was vibrating hungrily in his right hand, but he kept her low, her smoldering edge hanging below his knee. He still held the “bomb” in his left gauntlet, unsure of its best target. Should he toss it at the man? Should he try to blow up the totem?

“Look at the gear on this one,” the man said, chuckling. “Ronkerz will appreciate the armor, no doubt.”

Victor smirked, then lifted Lifedrinker toward the edge of the circle. She pressed against something invisible—a barrier created by the totems, no doubt. If he tried to throw the bomb, he didn’t think it would go well for him. “Who’s that? Your master?” Just then, a sizzling zwap echoed behind him, and a bolt of hot lightning slammed into his back. It hurt—well, stung was probably a better word for it—and Victor took a step forward, bumping into the barrier. He grunted in annoyance, then turned around to see one of the others, a tall, thin man lowering a smoking iron rod. He wore a crooked, mad grin as he began to cackle.

“We have no master here, fool. In this realm, every man is free!”

Victor chuckled at the irony of that statement. “Free? You’re in a prison, dipshit.” A twang sounded, and Victor shifted, lifting his left arm so the incoming projectile bounced off his heavy bracer. “Speaking of dipshits, are any of you guys Rasso Hine?” As he’d figured they would, his words brought forth a torrent of attacks. The mage with the smoking rod fired another lightning bolt, which Victor ate, knowing he couldn’t dodge it. He ducked his shoulder into another arrow, and then a huge fireball streaked through the air, cast by a woman standing on a pile of broken gray stones. Victor smiled as the orb of screaming flames came, ignoring it to deflect a hurled boulder with his bracer.

As the fireball exploded at his feet, great orange flames burst out, black smoke billowed upward, and Victor’s mad smile spread in the almost pleasant heat. The attack obscured him, and he took that moment to turn and try Lifedrinker against the nearby totem. He grunted as he swung her, putting his muscle and bulk behind it, and she struck home, carving a thin groove in the rock in a shower of sparks. Victor grinned. It wouldn’t be easy, but he could do it; he could break their formation.

When the flames and black smoke cleared, and the attackers saw he was still standing, largely unscathed, he could feel them gathering Energy for another, perhaps more intense, round of attacks. “Don’t you think you should maybe try talking? You guys so sure killing me is the right move?”

This time, one of the people behind him spoke, responding in a deep, hoarse voice that had Victor imagining him living a life in a smoky factory, shouting constantly at his coworkers. “Unless you’ve come to take us out of this fucking hell, then you can die like the rest!”

Victor sighed, lifted Lifedrinker, and, with a grunt, hacked her into the totem again. He aimed for the same spot, and she bit into her previous groove, chiseling it out just a little deeper than before. He figured, if they left him alone, he’d cut through enough of the totem to break it in half within thirty or forty chops. He felt the attacks coming before he saw them, and then he was bombarded by fire, electricity, arrows, stones, knives, crossbow bolts, and even something that felt like a splash of acid.

He tried to dodge around, rolling, jumping, and waving his gauntlet at any projectiles he saw in time. He kept his chin tucked, allowing his helmet to receive the attacks that might have hit his face through the open maw of the lava king’s snarling countenance. When the wave of attacks let up, he

wasn't hurt all that badly. A few bolts and arrows protruded from his arms, and one very large, nearly spear-sized arrow had pierced the tough hide of his greaves and stood proudly from his left thigh. His armor smoked and ticked as it rapidly repaired itself, but overall, he felt okay.

Holding the bomb in one hand and Lifedrinker in the other, he couldn't very easily pull the bolts and arrows out of his flesh. As more arrows and other projectiles flew toward him, Victor looked in frustration at the totem he'd been attacking. During his dodging, he'd ended up near the center of the platform, and the totem was a good ten yards from him. Shrugging, he tossed the bomb at it. A crossbow bolt, fired by a skilled or very lucky marksman, hit him in the armpit as he launched the bomb, burying itself a good eight inches into his flesh.

"Fuck!" Victor roared, and then the bomb went off. If his wits hadn't been blown from his mind, he might have reflected that he should have considered the word "bomb" more literally. The billiard-ball-sized orb didn't explode like a grenade but more like a pile of dynamite. A white flash blinded Victor, a roar like a collapsing mountain deafened him, and a shockwave like a tsunami slapped him back to crash into the stone totem opposite the one he'd thrown the bomb at.

He smashed into the column of solid rock, carried by the wave of fire and pressure from the bomb. The forces ground him against the stone until the formation burst, and he was blown through. Blinded, deafened, stunned, and flopping brokenly, Victor tumbled head over heels into one of his attackers, knocking him aside like a bowling pin. If he hadn't been knocked senseless, he would have cried out at his broken, twisted limbs. He would have gasped in pain, struggling for air as his ribs collapsed.

All he knew, though, was silence, darkness, and a vague sense of movement as he bounced and slid over the stone. Later, he'd reflect on whether he was unconscious or simply deprived of senses by the blast. Had the damage to his body been so severe that it overwhelmed his nerves? Whatever the cause of his initial numbness, it soon faded. His nerves began to wake up, and agony washed over him like a hot blanket. He still couldn't see or hear, but he could feel the strange, grating pain of his bones slowly, inexorably shifting, straightening, and knitting back together. His Behemoth's Regeneration wouldn't let him lie broken for long.

Victor couldn't see it, but the effects of the bomb and his body shattering the formation were farther reaching than he knew. When the orb exploded, it sent a tremendous wave of fiery Energy out that gathered against the invisible barrier of the formation. It took nearly a full second for the first totem to fracture and for Victor to smash through the other. In that second, enormous forces gathered against the barrier, and when it failed, they washed outward in a tidal wave of fire.

His ears began to heal, and the silence gave way to ringing. Then the ringing faded, and he heard the moans, woeful screams, and angry shouts of the others. Despite his own agony, Victor felt a smile tugging at his lips. He was lying in a crumpled ball, a pile of stone blocks covering much of his body—a broken stone wall he'd crashed through. He still couldn't see, but he heard more and more as each second ticked by.

"The fool killed himself," the deep, hoarse voice said.

“Himself? Look at Forkan! He nearly killed us all,” panted a woman, her voice strained with pain.

“Check him!” the man who’d first spoken, the one with the orb of light, shouted. He sounded distant; had he been knocked further in the other direction from the blast? Victor almost laughed but managed to keep his thoughts inside his head—Pendejo! That crazy old bruja gave you a bomb, and you set it off inside the trap! The thought was quickly followed by another: had she tried to kill him? Didn’t she say to throw it right away?

He felt a new pang of agony as a huge stone was shifted off his leg. They were uncovering him, and his body had yet to heal. He could feel his bones knitting with agonizing slowness, and Victor decided he’d had enough. He turned his gaze inward to his pulsing, Energy-filled Core and tugged out a rope of thick Energy, channeling it into the pattern for Iron Berserk. His body exploded with increased mass, his bones straightening with audible pops and cracks as they grew. Victor choked out a sound that was half-roar, half-scream as his muscles expanded, and he lurched to his feet, shrugging off the tons of stone.

“He lives!” the hoarse voice cried.

Victor felt the fiery warmth of rage in his eyes, and his vision rapidly returned to him as they healed. Darkness was replaced by smoke and the crimson haze of his fury. He began to hear more clearly—the crackling of flames, the clink of tumbling stones, muttered curses, sobs, and angry shouts. He laughed as he flexed his mended muscles, his torn flesh rapidly smoothing over. He’d come up from the broken pile of stone hunched, leaning over, still in pain, but when he straightened, stiffly at first, then more smoothly, he realized he still clutched Lifedrinker—it would take a lot more than a bomb and some shattered bones to knock her from his grasp.

The giant, bull-headed man with the shield didn’t waste time. He immediately charged Victor, but he wasn’t a giant any longer. To Victor, he might as well have been a child. He grabbed the minotaur’s—he figured that was as good a name as any—shield, jerked it aside, and hacked Lifedrinker down, cutting halfway through his muscle-bound, fur-covered neck. Victor’s laughter intensified as hot blood sprayed his face.

He threw the dying man aside and scanned the blasted landscape through crimson-tinted eyes. He saw one charred corpse and another half-burned woman rolling and moaning in agony. He saw two men lying stunned and another loading a massive bow with an equally enormous arrow. He saw the cocky speaker, the one who’d called him a boot licker, and Victor zeroed in on him.

He held out his left hand and sent Energy into it. An angry, orange-and-red coil of magma unwound from his gauntlet, and Victor snapped it back and forward with a terrible crack, wrapping it around the archer’s neck. At the same time, he cast Energy Charge, targeting the first man—the speaker. As he streaked forward in a cloud of howling, shrieking, purple-black shadows, his whip pulled on the poor archer’s neck ferociously, burning deep through his flesh to his spine

and then ripping his head clean off. Meanwhile, he slammed into the criminals' spokesperson, with Lifedrinker leading the charge.

The man wasn't weak; Victor would give him that much. He wasn't weak, but he wasn't a match for an enraged titan. Victor's Energy exploded out of his Core, tore through his pathways, and surged around him, protecting him from the impact. The man, too, managed to raise a shield of shimmering purple Energy that matched him . . . for a moment. Victor's Energy kept coming, but the shield cracked and shattered, and the prisoner flew back to crumple wetly against a broken stone wall.

Victor whirled, a mad grin on his face, his teeth white but washed in blood, his eyes ablaze with fiery rage. "Well? Who's next?"

Book 8: Chapter 28: Lay of the Land

Victor sat on a large stone block and, groaning and cursing, worked to dig the crossbow bolt out of his armpit. A dozen bloody, broken bolts and arrows already lay at his feet. He'd finally run out of enemies to kill—they'd kept coming in twos and threes out of the ruins, seeking to capitalize on his "weakness" after he'd killed the original crew of ambushers. Those latecomers had soon learned the folly of their ways. Victor chuckled at the thought, glancing around the clearing at the many corpses and pieces of corpses. A few had escaped sans a limb or two.

One thing bothered him; the System had yet to send him any Energy, and he'd been done fighting for nearly five minutes. Did that mean other attackers still lurked nearby? As the bolt finally slid free, following the widened channel he'd made with his knife, Victor grunted in relief, dropping the bloody shaft. He stood and shouted, "If anyone else is waiting for a fight, let's get this shit done. If not, then get the hell out of here!" His Iron Berserk had worn off, but his voice still boomed from his giant-sized chest.

He heard some scrabbling, some sliding stones, and rapid footfalls, but nobody showed themselves, and the noises grew more and more distant. Had he just frightened off some would-be attackers? He looked around at the corpses. Some were large—giant-sized as he'd come to consider his usual form—others were more human in proportion. None had been close to his titan form. None had been much of a challenge for him, either, not once he'd gotten out of the formation trap.

He supposed it wasn't quite a fair comparison; these people had been stripped of everything before being sent into the prison. None had much in the way of armor or magical items, and few had any weapons that were worth mentioning. He wondered about that—hadn't they slain a few fully-geared iron rankers ahead of his arrival? He remembered the loudmouth saying something about giving his armor to someone named Ronkerz. Was there a hierarchy in the prison dungeon? Was there a caste system for divvying out loot gained from the monsters that spawned within? If so, these folks hadn't been high on the pecking order.

Victor was approaching the "minotaur" to look at his gear when he noticed rainbow-hued Energy beginning to coalesce around the body. He grinned, looking around to see a similar glow around the other bodies in the clearing. "Here we go," he said, eagerly twisting his hands on Lifedrinker's haft. A few moments later, an enormous surge of Energy hit him. The influx instantly healed his puncture wound, mending deep tissues that were slower to regenerate than simple flesh. More than that, it filled him to bursting, knocking him senseless as his mind drifted into the ether.

Almost immediately, he felt a familiar presence. It was Golgothoz, the Master of the Axe, who'd put his mark on Victor's chest. He came near, and Victor felt his approval, though the master said nothing. When Victor tried to speak, he found no voice in his throat. Soon, the weighty presence faded, and Victor's vision returned to normal. Once again, he stood in the blasted ruins of the death-attuned dungeon, the glowering gray moon high overhead. A System message marred his vision, and he read it quickly.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 66 Herald of the Mountain's Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.*****

"Good," he grunted, slowly turning, ensuring no one was sneaking up, ready to take advantage of his distraction. The ruins were quiet, though, so he turned back to the minotaur corpse. His spiked mace seemed to be rough black iron, and his shield wasn't anything much better. Victor stooped and turned the corpse over, hoping that he'd find something worth looting on the inmate's corpse; after all, he'd come into this dungeon hoping the denizens had managed to pry some treasures from the deeper, more powerful monsters. The man's clothes were ragged, stinking leather.

Victor stood. "Shit," he growled. Not only were the inmates devoid of decent gear, but he'd expected to gain more than one level. He'd killed close to twenty attackers, and though they hadn't felt particularly strong, they were "iron rankers." Surely, some of them were higher level than he was. If not, how had they managed to kill five strong individuals before him? Was it just due to the trap?

One thought tickled the back of his mind, and, examining it, he saw that he'd been ready to compare his gains from this battle against those awarded by the System in the challenge dungeon. The situations were too different, he decided. The System's awarded Energy in the Vault of Valor had been a portion of that taken from high-ranking, living cultivators—enough to account for ten levels. Looking around at the broken bodies of his foes, he began to understand just how little the System typically granted for slaying someone.

Victor spat, rubbing his hands together irritably. He'd touched something damp on the minotaur's fur, and when he looked at the smear, he saw that his hands were covered in ash and blood. He dug a water bottle from one of his containers, poured some over his palm, then rubbed them together before drying them on a self-cleaning towel—he had half a dozen in one of his rings.

He scanned the quiet ruins, wishing he'd marked the time when he'd arrived. He looked at his watch for the second time since the fighting ended and saw he'd wasted another twelve minutes. "Twelve minutes and what? Five minutes of fighting . . . Nah, longer than that with all those guys slinking in after the first group. So maybe twenty-something minutes so far? Gotta hold for forty more?"

"Who you talking to, mister?" a youthful voice asked behind him. Victor whirled to see a lean, impish young man sitting atop a nearby, broken wall, his bare feet kicking up and down as he stared. He had empty hands and wore nothing but brown sack-cloth pants and a rough-spun green shirt. Victor relaxed his stance and lowered Lifedrinker. The kid had a pleasant face, smudged with grime as it

was. Under a mop of sandy-brown hair, he had wide green eyes, a sharp, narrow nose, and a pleasant smile.

“Myself,” he grunted.

“Oh! I do that, too. Not many friendly folks to talk to around here, but the Enclave’s better.”

“Enclave?” Victor frowned at the kid. “Aren’t you a little young to be in a prison like this?”

The young man smiled and shrugged. Even atop the wall, he had to look up to meet Victor’s gaze.

“Well, it’s not a prison to me. I was born here.”

“Seriously?” Victor shifted Lifedrinker onto his shoulder, holding onto her haft with one hand. He supposed he should have gotten more details about the place from Dar or the council. How many iron rankers had they sent in there over the years? How big was it? If a man and woman managed to survive inside the “prison” for a while and one thing led to another, he supposed it wasn’t so far-fetched to think some kids might be born. In a dungeon, though? Who would want to raise a family in a death-attuned dungeon? “Are there many kids here?”

“I’m not a kid, sir! I’m not strong enough to fight the spawns, but I know how to get around ‘em. I’m allowed out of the Enclave, unlike the children. To answer your question, there are lots of ‘em.” He held up his hands and started turning his fingers down one by one as his face twisted in concentration. “Seventeen in the Enclave, and I don’t know how many in Rumble Town.”

“Rumble Town?”

He nodded eagerly. “Yeah, where Ronkerz rules.”

“There’s a town here? How big is this place?”

“Big!” the kid laughed. “It keeps growing, too. A gap opened in the southern range last year, and my own father found a new valley!”

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Victor scratched his head and turned in a slow circle, surveying the carnage he’d wrought. “You know these guys?”

“Me? No sir! Those are Ronkerz’s people. They attack anyone from the Enclave who comes this far north; that’s why I was hiding.” He rubbed his chin, adding a new spot of soot. “Well, they’d probably capture me ‘cause I’m young and only tier-two. My da’ says they’d put me to work in the mine ‘til I was tough enough to fight the spawns.”

“Tier two, huh?” The conversation had taken on a surreal feel to Victor. He was struggling to believe he was chatting with a random kid in the middle of a dungeon after fighting off nearly twenty criminal inmates. “You know a guy named Rasso Hine?”

“Um,” the boy—Victor couldn’t help thinking of him as such—continued to fidget, kicking his feet up and down, while he contemplated, “I think it sounds familiar, but there’s a lot of folks at the Enclave. My da’ knows all their names.”

“How many people are in this place, kid?”

“I dunno. Hundreds? Maybe more! I’ve never been to Rumble Town or Vasso Cavern. My dad’s gonna be mad I came up this way, but he’ll be happy to hear you thrashed a bunch of Rumlbers.”

“You should be more careful,” Victor sighed. “You saw me kill all these people, and you still thought it would be smart to talk to me?”

“They’re bad folks. I heard you try to talk to ‘em.” He lifted his too-large shirt, pulled a crude water skin from his belt, and held it over his mouth, wringing it tight in his fists to get a few drops to fall onto his tongue. “Wish I knew where safe water was around here.”

Victor tossed him the bottle he’d used to wash his hands. “Here. I’ve got plenty.” It was true. He had cases of water bottles and a dozen kegs of weak wine. He had juices, liquor, beer, and mead. He’d go for years before running out of fluids, not to mention his body didn’t really need to drink much at all—a perk of advancing his bloodline into the epic tier and having a body steeped in Energy.

“You’ve got one of them, uh, di-dimension bag things?” the boy asked as he wriggled the cork from the glass.

“Dimensional container, yeah. Some people call them spatial containers. I think it depends on where you’re from.” Victor glanced back to the charred stone dais upon which he’d arrived. “Listen, I’ve got some friends coming in the next hour or two. When they get here, you wanna earn a few beads or food or whatever? You can guide us to the Enclave.”

“That would be great, but you’ll have to pass by the Gate Warden before they let you into the Enclave. He’ll probably just ask you some questions; Duke Brosia will be happy to have a real fighter join us!”

“Duke Brosia?” Victor chuckled and shook his head. “Never mind. What’s your name, anyway, kid?”

“Tyn.” He hopped off the wall and approached Victor. He couldn’t have been more than five and a half feet tall, and Victor doubted he weighed a hundred pounds. Still, he moved with vibrancy and stuck his hand out proudly for Victor to shake. Victor nodded and squeezed the slender appendage. “My first companion should be here pretty soon. You think Ronkerz is going to send more people to attack me?”

“Probably, but the ones who ran will have to get back to him first. It’s a good stretch of ground between here and Rumble Town, with lots of spawns in the way. It’ll probably take half a day for any of his Big Ones to come out here.”

Victor sighed, scratching his hair at yet another new term. “And they are?”

“Big Ones? They’re his . . . well, they’re his head smashers, his bone breakers, his trouble makers. They’re the ones who keep other folks from coming into his territory. My da’ says one of ‘em killed a whole party of folks from the Enclave ‘cause they were farming a spawn in a valley that Ronkerz claimed. That happened when I was six, which was eight years ago. We ain’t had any big fights with ‘em since, seeing as Duke Brosia put strict rules on where the Enclavers can wander—south.”

Victor snorted, shuffling over to the flat stone where he’d been sitting earlier. He kicked aside the arrows and bolts he’d pulled out of himself and sat down. “But you’re here, and this is north of the Enclave, yeah?”

“Well, I’m not supposed to be here, but I can hide and sneak better than most. I got my tier-two Class a while back and, along with it, a pretty good skill. Even so, my da’ will get mad if he knows I came this far, so can you tell him you met me closer to the Enclave?”

Victor grunted, pulling some dried, smoked meat out of his ring. “I barely know you, kid. Don’t ask me to lie for you.”

Tyn moved closer, squatting to sit on a smaller stone near Victor’s seat. “Well, can you at least not mention it?”

Victor shrugged. “I won’t bring it up.” Sitting there, amid the carnage of his earlier battle, he reflected on how it wasn’t such a healthy place for a youngster to hang out, so he gathered a thread of Energy and shaped it into Honor the Spirits. The spell flickered out of his outstretched hand, a tendril of wispy, flickering white flames that jumped from corpse to corpse, flaring brightly as it touched each one. The bodies burned away, reduced to ethereal smoke that vanished, transitioning away from the Material Plane and into the realm of spirits.

Victor must have been frowning as he sat, watching the corpses disappear because the boy asked, “Are you angry?”

“Hmm?” Victor shifted to look at the kid. He ripped the hunk of dried meat in half and offered it to him. “Nah, just thinking about how I didn’t put on much of a

show for my ancestors. These guys weren't worthy enemies. The only thing they had going for them was the trap they'd set up."

Tyn took the meat and immediately stuffed it into his mouth, biting off a large hunk. The work of chewing the dense, dry meat kept him quiet for a while, and Victor brooded some more. He didn't like the idea that kids were being born and raised inside of a prison dungeon. The whole thing was a stark contrast to the elegance and beauty of Sojourn. The city seemed so evolved and advanced, yet this prison was disgusting on many levels. Victor could understand banishing iron rankers who caused trouble or committed heinous crimes, but something about this situation didn't sit right with him.

Sending hundreds or thousands of criminals into the same free-for-all wasn't justice—there was no way every prisoner was equal in terms of raw strength, so that meant the stronger ones were going to have more power inside. They would suffer less than the ones who couldn't stand up for themselves. Did they all deserve a fate like that? Even if you could argue that they did, Victor would be damned if he'd hear anyone say the children born inside deserved that fate. Tyn looked like he was starved half to death, which was bad enough, but the kid clearly didn't have much going for him, even if he could get enough to eat.

"You said there are a lot of kids in the Enclave?"

"Oh, sure! Like I said, I'm a man, but I've got a younger sister, and she's got many classmates at the school."

"There's a school?"

"Yessir. Lady Breeze runs it."

"Lady Breeze?"

"The most beautiful woman in the world, sir." Tyn grinned while he stuffed another wad of dried meat into his mouth. "You should meet her, but be warned: I'm going to marry her!"

"Oh yeah?" Victor chuckled as he leaned back, watching the stone circle, waiting for the portal while listening for any signs of approaching inmates. Tyn grew quiet as he ate and drank, and Victor lost himself in half-baked plans to help the children in this weird pocket-world. He had no idea what he could do; he had the ability to rescue precisely one other person. He supposed he could argue their case with the council when he got out, but beyond that, he felt like his hands were tied.

His frustrated musings were interrupted by the flare of blue light and the weird wailing sounds of the portal, and then Arona appeared, stepping out of the swirling blue disc of Energy. She whirled, her polished-bone staff held out defensively, and when she saw Victor sitting on the stone watching her, she

relaxed and stepped closer as the portal snapped shut with an audible pop. “You did it,” she said by way of greeting.

“Yeah. Almost killed myself with that old lady’s bomb, but it broke the formation.”

“Old lady . . . Kreshta Griss? She gave you a ‘bomb’?” She looked around at the blasted area around the dais. “You set it off inside the formation with you?” Her raspy voice was incredulous as she shook her head. Victor simply nodded with a half-smile. “Who’s this then?” She looked at Tyn with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m Tyn, milady!” He hopped up and bowed sloppily, dragging both hands through the dusty gravel near his feet.

Victor stood and gestured at the kid. “I guess the inmates are building towns and having families. Tyn’s going to show us to one of the towns and, hopefully, Rasso will be there. If not, maybe someone will know where to look.”

“Children . . .” Arona looked Tyn up and down, her slender fingers tapping the polished bone of her staff. “How interesting.” She turned in a slow circle, her brows creasing as she observed the strange world with its black sky and oddly close moon. “The death-attuned Energy is strange here—too thin. I wonder if perhaps the many cultivators are causing a shift in the ambient Energy. The dungeon was created with death-attuned Energy, but that was thousands of years ago, and they’ve sent many cultivators into it since.”

“How many?” Victor asked. “The kid doesn’t know.”

“They’ve been sending a few dozen a year into this place since it was opened. I always assumed that most criminals banished here would have short, violent lives dealing with the dungeon’s denizens—it’s supposedly tier-nine. If they’re cooperating and having children, though . . .” Again, she trailed off, probably, like Victor, trying to imagine growing up inside a dungeon.

“They don’t all cooperate. I had to kill a dozen or so people who were lurking outside the trap. They mentioned a guy named Ronkerz, and Tyn says he runs a town called . . .” Victor looked at the boy. “What’s it called, again?”

“Rumble Town, sir.”

“Ronkerz Gatebreaker is a legendary figure in Sojourn,” Arona rasped, and Victor felt a small surge of cold Energy waft off her staff as she gripped it and looked around nervously. “He led an insurrection, trying to overthrow the council two thousand years ago. He breached the Spire and killed four council guardians—all steel seekers. The story goes that Ronkerz was only tier-eight!”

“Great,” Victor said, shifting Lifedrinker on his shoulder and turning to look out over the dead landscape. “And he’s had two thousand years to get stronger.”

“Closer to three hundred—remember the time dilation.” Arona pulled a handful of tiny bones from her robe and scattered them around her feet. “We should get moving. I’d rather not run into him.”

Victor nodded, distracted, thinking about Ronkerz. The story of an iron ranker killing some guards in their “test of steel” was acutely interesting to him, considering Dar’s expectations for him when he went to Ruhn to help his granddaughter. In all honesty, Victor felt a wave of relief hearing about Ronkerz’s exploits—if he could do it, then it was possible. Maybe Dar’s confidence in him wasn’t so unusual. When he saw Arona’s five bone guardians spring up from the stony soil, it brought him back to reality, and he gestured to the stone dais. “We gotta wait for Arcus.”

“Do we?” Arona rasped. “You know he can’t be trusted. Wouldn’t it be wiser to leave him to his own devices?”

Victor chuckled and poked one of the weird, blue-fire-eyed skeletons with Lifedrinker’s blunt axe head. It stumbled back in a clatter and hissed at him like an angry cat. “Arona, no offense, but I hardly know you. We’ve had a few good conversations, and I’ll hand it to you: you were honest when you spoke at the inquest. I appreciate that, but I think I’ll wait for Arcus so I can keep you both where I can see you.”

Book 8: Chapter 29: A Slight Detour

[Next Chapter](#)

Arona wasn’t exactly what Victor would consider a socially adept person, but after he’d basically told her he didn’t trust her, she became decidedly standoffish. She brooded by herself on the northern edge of the clearing with her five skeletal servants standing watch in a wide circle while Victor and Tyn continued to chat, sitting on flat stones and snacking while they waited for Arcus. Victor checked his watch regularly, and after some time had passed, he called out, “Just a few more minutes,” hoping to get Arona to perk up a little. She ignored him, staring into the ruins, leaning on her ivory staff.

“Is she angry with you?” Tyn whispered.

“She’s a Death Caster, kid. Who knows?” Victor chuckled and handed him a slice of buttered pumpkin bread. At some point, he’d decided to do what he could to put some meat on Tyn’s bones. He watched him wolf the treat down, enjoying the expression of bliss on the youngster’s face.

After he swallowed a huge mouthful, Tyn cleared his throat and jerked his thumb at his chest. “I’m not a kid.”

Victor nodded solemnly. “Right.” He couldn’t stop glancing at Arona’s pale, glowering face as she stared into the dark sky. After another couple of minutes, he sighed, standing. “Wait here.” He gave Tyn’s shoulder a friendly slap, careful not to knock him over, and walked over to the Death Caster. “Hey, was I too blunt earlier?”

She snorted and turned slightly, making it hard to see into her eyes. “About not trusting me?”

“Do I know you, Arona? I mean, really? Give me a chance to—”

“Please put the matter out of your mind, Victor. It’s fine.” She still wouldn’t look at him, and Victor could hear her bone guardians clattering as they moved. Were they agitated? Could they sense their master’s mood? Staring at the side of her face, seeing the partial scowl and hearing the stiffness in her voice, Victor recognized a kindred outcast. He’d been in her shoes a hundred times with his cousins and their friends. He knew what it was like to act unbothered when something was eating at him. He’d gotten over it with friends from school and, obviously, his friends in this new life, but those memories still stung.

He reached into his Core and pulled out a thread of inspiration, casting Globe of Insight. It had a more subtle effect than Inspiration of the Quinametzin, but he could explain it by saying, “This dim landscape is getting to me.”

Arona glanced up at the glowing ball of white-gold Energy, and he saw some of the creases around her eyes fade as her glowering countenance relaxed. “A pleasant glow.”

Victor nodded, watching her, and then, as he’d hoped, some inspiration struck him. “Hey, you’re worried I won’t ever trust you, huh? You’re thinking about those friends of yours you abandoned in the challenge dungeon.”

“I didn’t—” She cut her protest short, clenching her fist around her staff until her pale fingers turned white. After a moment, with Victor staring at her the whole time, she sighed and seemed to collapse inward. “I did. I left them to fight you so that I could win the competition. My master was proud.” She practically spat the last sentence.

“Well, I’m not thinking about that. I just, well, I’ve got a bad history with Death Casters. I guess that’s a kind of prejudice, but I can’t help being wary.”

She turned to face him, her dark eyes wide and earnest. “You should be wary. Death-attuned Energy wears on a person’s spirit. It eats away at qualities people generally view as virtuous—honesty, kindness, honor, empathy. I’m tier-nine, Victor, but I’m young—a prodigy, some say. I haven’t lived with this cursed Energy for centuries like most at my level. I tell you this with an open heart; do not trust a Death Caster, especially my master!”

Victor's mouth hung open in surprise. He'd expected her to deny being bothered or to shrug off his concerns and tell him she was different. He certainly hadn't expected that emotional outburst. He cleared his throat and tried to think of the proper response, but she was already turning, already stomping away, and he decided to give her some space. He shifted to look away, staring into the distant ruins as he contemplated. Softly, he whispered, "Shit, chica, I guess I hit a nerve."

Lifedrinker vibrated against his shoulder, and he knew exactly what she was thinking: It didn't matter to her what kind of Energy his enemies used—she was ready to fight. He was saved from further introspection when the portal howled to life in a flare of bright blue Energy. Seconds later, Arcus walked through in his bright red robes, a two-foot metallic rod in each of his hands. One was red and radiated heat. The other was dark iron and seemed to absorb the light around it.

"Well done, Victor! The council is pleased." Before Victor could respond, Arcus whirled to face Tyn and lifted his red rod. It began to glow with white-hot flames, and Victor realized he was about to blast the kid.

"Chill out!" he roared. "That's my friend!"

Arcus looked at him with a cocked eyebrow, his eyes ablaze. When Victor returned his gaze, glowering, the Pyromancer shrugged and lowered his rod. "Who's this, then?"

"I'm Tyn, sir!" The kid jumped up and surprised Victor by approaching Arcus with an outstretched hand. Victor stared, trying to decide if Tyn was too stupid to understand the danger he'd been in or if he was just so used to being in danger that it hadn't registered.

Victor cleared his throat. "Arcus, did you know people were having kids in here? Did you know there are towns in this dungeon?"

Arcus stared down his long, straight nose at Tyn, then, surprising Victor, took his hand. He shook his head slowly. "I had no idea. How strange! You were born here, young man?"

"Yes, sir." He nodded eagerly, the unruly mop of hair atop his head bobbing back and forth.

"Come," Arona said, and her skeletons emerged from the nearby ruins, click-clacking over the stony ground as they took up positions around the four living beings. "We should get moving before Ronkerz sends another group of attackers."

"Ronkerz? He's still alive?" Arcus waved his red rod in the air, and Victor felt a surge of Energy. A flash of flames and sparks erupted above Arcus's head, and then a fiery bird appeared, shrieked, and flapped its wings, flying high into the dark sky. Victor watched as the magical creature continued to rise and then

leveled off, gliding in a wide circle around them. "I'll be able to keep an eye out with my flame kestrel."

"Come on," Victor said, following Arona and her bony guardians. "I'll fill you in while we walk. Lead the way, Tyn."

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They hiked through the ruins for a while, moving ever "south." At first, Victor wasn't sure how Tyn could determine their direction, but when he asked, Tyn pointed to the moon. In all the time Victor had been there, he hadn't noticed it moving, but he could see how it hung in a particular half of the sky. If that was constant, he supposed it would be easy enough to mark direction using it as a guide.

As they walked, he filled Arcus in on the situation in the dungeon and was surprised to find the fire mage ready to agree with him about the abhorrent nature of the place. "That's not right!" he shouted after Victor told him about the school children in the Enclave.

"Do you think all the counselors and old masters know about this?" Victor asked, only to receive a derisive snort from Arona. He scowled at her. "Stupid question?"

It was Arcus who answered, "I'm sure they do. There's a reason they're called 'old masters' in Sojourn, you know. Not one of them is less than a thousand years old. I'm sure the tribulations of some wretches born of criminals in one of their dungeons don't precisely impact their day-to-day plans."

"Your tongue is awfully free when you know Lord Roil can't hear you," Arona rasped, and Victor thought he caught her trying to send him a look. What the look meant, he couldn't say.

"Ah yes, I forgot I'm with the ever-worshipful Arona Moonshadow. I'm sorry if I cast any unintended aspersion your master's way." Arcus mock-bowed, and Arona quickened her pace, moving ahead.

Victor was about to change the subject when Arcus held up a hand and shouted, "Stop!" Everyone froze, and he said, "A palpable fog roils this way from the east. I see figures within."

"Death wind!" Tyn cried. He broke into a run, heading the way they'd been going but at an angle, toward the west. Arona waved her staff, and one of her bone constructs leaped after the boy, quickly catching him and wrapping its bony arms around him. They tumbled to the ground, and Tyn cried, "Let me go! We'll die!"

"We'll not." Arona's voice was firm as she turned to the east and asked, "How far, Arcus?"

"Half a minute." Arcus sounded almost bored.

Victor looked at the sky where Arcus's fiery bird still circled, then he cast Banner of the Champion, and the world was instantly bathed in the golden, fiery light of his bloody sun.

"Old Gods!" Arcus whooped. "Let's hope this 'death wind' brings us a challenge!" Suddenly, he was wreathed in fire, a man-shaped torch with a blazing, fiery brand in one hand and a shaft of pure darkness in the other.

"Quiet, oafs!" Arona hissed. "Let me dispel it lest we become embroiled in a cataclysmic battle that will draw denizens for miles." She drew a long line in the dirt with the end of her staff and then began rapidly scrawling runes along its length. By the time she finished, stepping back from her line, Victor saw a wave of mist barreling over the broken, rocky hills and ruined buildings. It looked almost like a tsunami, but rather than water, it roiled with dark shadows, spirit-like wisps, flashes of ghostly light, and ever-changing glimpses of horror-filled, rictus-bound faces.

Arona slammed the butt of her staff into the ground on the near side of her rune-inscribed line, and suddenly a wall of blue, shimmering Energy sprang into being, soaring for dozens of feet into the air. Victor felt a surge of Energy pour out of the Death Caster, and the barrier widened, stretching north and south for hundreds of feet. The 'death wind' slammed into the barrier, and, with the wailing roar of a ghost-filled hurricane, it burst apart into blue-gray smoke that rose upward and faded into nothing.

The process wasn't instant, and the noise was such that Victor wanted to cover his ears, but he held Lifedrinker ready. He and Arcus stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the barrier as it tore the death wind to bits, reducing it to blue-tinged steam, inch by inch. When it was over, the silence was so profound that Victor had to speak to ensure he wasn't deaf. "That was pretty damn wild! Nice one, Arona!"

"Was that a creature?" Arcus's flames dimmed as he slowly came to grips with the realization that he wouldn't have to burn anything.

"A pack of unquiet spirits, bound together by the thin nature of the veil in this place. I've never seen one that large." Arona slumped against her staff, and Victor could see the circles under her eyes had grown. She looked exhausted.

"You," Tyn said, kicking his legs and scrabbling away from the skeleton as it released him. "You destroyed it! I've never seen that! Even da' has to hide from those winds." He rushed toward Arona, and, at first, Victor thought he was going to hug her, but he ran past her, leaping her runic line in the dirt. He rushed to and fro, scanning the ground. "Lady Breeze says they can drop Energy orbs!"

Arona twitched her staff, and her five guardians clattered into the area where the wave of spirits had been, flipping over rocks, running up and down the hillsides, and clambering over and through the ruins. Her raspy voice was even more ragged than usual as she said, "If so, my servants will find it."

Victor stepped over to her, and though she tried to avoid his gaze, he persisted until she looked at him. "You okay? That was bigger than you thought it would be, huh?"

“I need rest or, if the boy is right, an Energy orb.”

“Why doesn’t the System simply award Energy for slaying the thing?” Arcus asked, moving closer.

Arona sighed, shaking her head. “It’s not exactly a monster. More a force of nature common to death-attuned environs.”

“Would fire have an effect?” Arcus held up his red rod, still ticking with heat.

“Perhaps.” She squeezed her eyes closed for a second, then inclined her head to Arcus. “Well, yes, I’m sure it would. If we meet another and I cannot handle it, I’ll call for your flames.”

Victor was feeling particularly useless, wondering how he’d handle a ‘death wind.’ Would Lifedrinker have any effect? He supposed if worst came to worst, he’d go Berserk and breathe magma into it. He was about to say as much when Tyn cried, “Here! Here! Great Lady!”

They all looked to see that the boy had scrambled atop a high wall and was standing, pointing at his feet where a lustrous glow illuminated his rough, brown pants. “You found one?” Arona perked up when she saw the light and gestured with her staff. One of her skeletons, humanoid like the others but with extra-long arms ending in hooked claws, bounded over and pulled itself atop the wall, nearly knocking the boy off. “Careful, fool thing!” Arona growled. “Sorry, Tyn. Don’t fall!”

Arona’s skeletal helper lifted out a brightly glowing object and dropped down in a clatter of bones. As Tyn more carefully descended, the skeleton loped over to Arona, holding an orb of swirling rainbow Energy cradled between two long claws. Arcus stepped forward and said, “Transferrable? Usually, they’re consumed on touch!”

Arona smiled, her canines brightly reflecting the light from the orb. “This isn’t a System award. It’s . . . I suppose it’s a type of natural treasure.”

Victor didn’t want to look like an idiot, so he didn’t speak up. He was fairly sure he knew what the orb was. He’d gotten one in a chest from the dungeon when he’d escaped the Greatbone Mine. The one he’d received had glowed with golden Energy, and when he touched it, it gave him a level. To clarify without sounding too ignorant, he asked, “Will it give a full level?”

“I think so,” Arona said, making him feel a little better—they didn’t know for sure, either. “This would sell for a handsome prize to someone of our tier.” Victor could see she spoke mainly to Arcus but included him in the glance she threw their way.

Arcus was clearly struggling with his words, trying to think of a reason why he should be able to claim the orb or at least a partial stake. Victor decided to earn some points with the Death Caster and spoke his feelings plainly, “You did all the work. Keep it.”

Arcus sputtered, “She only did all the work because she told us to stand down! I could have summoned an inferno upon that death wind.” He spat the name derisively.

“Well, you didn’t.” Victor shrugged. “Don’t worry; I’m sure we’ll have plenty of opportunities to earn our own prizes.”

“So unconcerned, hmm? So easy for you to be the generous one—you, who didn’t lose any cursed Energy to the System’s greedy clutches.” Arcus’s smooth veneer had cracked, and Victor was only slightly surprised at how quickly it had occurred.

“You want this so badly?” Arona rasped, gesturing at the orb still in her skeletal pawn’s clutches.

“Of course! Don’t act like you aren’t thrilled. That, there, represents a year’s hard labor for you or me at our tier!”

“Seriously?” Victor raised an eyebrow, looking from Arcus to Arona. “A year for a level?”

“You’re not—” Arona started to say, but Arcus spoke over her.

“That’s right! When you’re tier-nine, you’ll see. Things come slowly!”

“Probably depends on what you do, yeah? Didn’t you gain any levels in the challenge dungeon, Arona?”

She nodded. “I did—one.”

Again, Victor shrugged. “Well, there you go.”

“Listen to this rube! Victor, just because you stumbled ass-first into a challenge dungeon doesn’t mean the competition runs all the time. There’s great risk involved. Take me—rather than gaining a level, I lost ten!” He practically screamed the last word, and Victor saw flames dancing in his eyes. He was well and truly losing his grip on the relaxed, friendly façade he’d been putting forth.

Victor sighed and glanced down at Tyn, watching the back and forth with wide eyes. “How far to the Enclave, Tyn?”

“Maybe an hour if we’re careful and avoid the spawns.”

“Forget that.” Victor grinned at the kid and ruffled his mop of sandy brown hair.

“Lead me through all the spawns; let’s kill some shit on the way, and maybe Arcus can find a treasure.” He snorted, turned his back on the casters, and stomped southward.

“Victor,” Arona called, her voice hoarse as she raised it. “What of the orb?”

He waved dismissively with his free hand. “Do what you want.” He only took a dozen steps before Tyn jogged past him, angling for a row of low hills with scraggly, dead-looking trees on their slopes.

“Victor, sir!” he panted, turning to walk backward while he spoke. “There’s a lich-wyrm in those hills. We all give it a wide berth when we hunt and scavenge. I bet you could find a trinket or two in its lair!”

Victor laughed and turned to look back at Arona and Arcus. They were walking behind him, though separated by a good ten feet. Arona’s skeletons were ranging out, establishing their usual marching perimeter. He couldn’t see the orb, but he could tell by Arcus’s scowl that Arona had kept it. “Did you hear that, Arcus?”

The Pyromancer quickened his steps, and though his eyes still burned with angry fire, he spoke almost pleasantly when he caught up. “What’s that? The boy said something of note?”

Victor nodded. “There’s a lich-wyrm ahead. I don’t know exactly what that is, but I know what a wyrm is and what a lich is. Sounds like it might be a decent challenge. Sounds like it might drop a treasure or two. What do you say? Shall we make a slight detour?”

Book 8: Chapter 30: Lich-Wyrm

Victor looked up the scree-covered slope to the dark cave entrance. It opened into the side of the hill, some hundred yards from where he and the others stood. He and the others were watching one of Arona’s skeletons, the one with the long, hook-clawed arms, scabble upward. They stood in a narrow valley between two rows of low hills. The environment was largely barren, with only stunted trees here and there, devoid of leaves.

While they stared, hardly moving, Victor looked at Tyn, who stood on his toes, clearly ready to run for his hiding spot. They’d found him a place around the hillside near a pile of boulders where he could watch whatever battle unfolded from relative safety. “Hey, what the hell do you all eat around here? Does anything grow?”

Arona looked at him and shushed, but Tyn whispered, “Gardens, sir! There are folks who can treat the soil with earth magic and—”

“Hush!” Arona said, clapping a slender, pale hand over Tyn’s dirty, soot-stained face. “Grasper sees something.”

“Grasper?” Victor whispered.

“My minion.” Arona gestured toward the bony creature who’d, at that moment, begun crawling into the cave opening.

Victor frowned, watching the skeleton slink into the darkness. He contemplated calling forth his coyotes and sending them up to get a look, but it seemed Arona had much clearer communication with her minions. She claimed to see through their eyes. He glanced at Arcus, whose fiery bird still circled a thousand feet in the air, and began to wonder if he shouldn’t try to add a new totem to his repertoire. He couldn’t help thinking a flying one would be nice—either as a scout like Arcus’s bird or a mount like the creature he’d seen Ranish Dar riding.

His mind wandered down paths of elder magic and his last experience on the Spirit Plane when he’d claimed Guapo. Should he tell Dar about those strange, powerful beings who’d visited him? How would they match up to Dar in power? Could his new mentor protect him from those two who’d seemed intent on

finding him again once he'd 'ripened'? It was hard to say because they'd only given him a glimpse of their power, and he'd changed a lot since then. His musings were interrupted when the ground lurched under his feet, and a great whump of stale air, dust, and debris was thrown from the cave mouth.

"What the—" he started to ask but was cut off as Arona cried out.

"It comes! Grasper is no more!"

Victor held Lifedrinker in both hands and watched the cave entrance, rapidly building the pattern for Iron Berserk in his pathways. Arcus had a similar idea—Victor could feel the waves of heat radiating from him as he wreathed himself in fire and began to float above the ground. Arona had drawn forth a large, black, silver-rune-inscribed bone and set it on the ground at her feet. "Buy me a minute or two," she rasped to no one in particular. Victor shrugged, cast Iron Berserk, then bunched his massive legs and leaped up the hill toward the cave opening.

Lifedrinker had grown significantly as she'd evolved, but she was still more of a hatchet than a battle axe when he gripped her in his titanic fist. He held her outstretched in one hand as he flew through the air and grinned savagely when a target for his wrath emerged from the cave. The lich-wyrm was much as he'd imagined—a great, slithering creature of desiccated flesh and bone, wreathed in cold, blue mist.

Victor had battled an ancient wyrm on Zaafor, so he'd been expecting something massive. This creature wasn't half the size of that great beast. How could it be with such a lair? The wyrm he'd helped to kill on Zaafor wouldn't have begun to fit in that cave opening. Still, this monster was probably a hundred feet long, with a body as wide around as a horse's belly. Its fangs were like sabers, and it moved far more quickly than Victor had expected—it had shot out of the cave and glided down the slope before his leap ended, and he crashed onto the stony ground outside the cave.

The lich-wyrm was driving toward Arona, likely angered by her minion and tracing it to the source. As a pillar of flames erupted from the ground, flipping the monster onto its side and sending it careening down the slope, Victor didn't hesitate and cast Energy Charge, fueling it with glory-attuned Energy. He streaked over the broken ground, gliding over the stones and broken trees like a comet of sparkling golden Energy. As the bony serpent fought to right itself, he crashed into its side with a violent concussion. His impact shattered bones, and misty blue Energy erupted from the point of impact as the lich-wyrm flopped over in a tumble to the base of the hill.

His spell had protected him, as usual, but it had also stopped his momentum at the point of impact. As the dust and mist cleared, he saw the serpent-shaped skeleton shift, righting itself, as its broken bones rapidly regrew, filling in the damage Victor had done. He was preparing another attack, bunching his legs to leap down the hill, when the sky darkened, and a swirling maelstrom of fire appeared over the valley. Victor paused to watch as a handful of tumbling boulders alight with flames and trailing black smoke emerged from the cloud, falling like meteors toward the monster.

Victor knew all too well how much that spell hurt. He glanced back at Arona as he waited for the flaming boulders to do their damage, unwilling to dive into the fray only to be blasted back by the concussion. Arona was standing, arms wide, sheathed in a scirocco of blue Energy as her black bone stretched and multiplied, taking the form of a gargantuan, four-legged skeleton. It reminded

Victor of museum exhibitions—displays of predatory dinosaurs. The thing, composed of black bones and claws, looked like a cross between a Tyrannosaurus rex and an elephant. It had four legs ending in scythe-like claws, a body fifteen feet high at the shoulders, and a head like an enormous crocodile.

The ground shook, and a roar like a series of bombs going off brought Victor's eyes back around to the destruction wrought by Arcus's spell. The lich-wyrm had been obscured by dust, smoke, and fire. Even so, he saw the blue glow of its Energy and caught glimpses of long, yellowed bones moving about in the destruction—it wasn't dead. That was all he needed to know; he charged down the hill into the lingering flames and choking smoke, and when he ran up against the thrashing monster, furiously working to repair its shattered bones, he went to work with Lifedrinker.

As he fought, beams of fire lanced through the black smoke, scorching the monster, and then Victor was joined by Arona's skeletal monstrosity as it trampled down the hill and smashed into the bony wyrm, flipping it over. Victor laughed and summoned his magma lash, whipping it back and forth, wrapping it around bones, and yanking them out of the monster as the fire burned the creature's desiccated scales to ash. Lifedrinker split through bone after bone, and when she met the ancient armored hide of the monster, she tore it like paper.

Not once did the wyrm manage to land a bite with its great, gnashing maw; Victor was too fast, and the thing simply had too many targets to choose from. One moment, Victor would think he had to dodge as the head snapped backward on its serpentine spine, only to have Arona's skeletal monster get in the way, shrugging off the attack with its iron-like bones. Many times, the lich-wyrm tried to summon great torrents of death-attuned Energy, only to have Arona siphon it away or Arcus break its concentration with a ball of explosive fire.

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The melee was furious, but before long, Victor noted that the bones were slower to reknit and that some ribs he hacked out remained separate, inert, and no longer part of the monstrous undead being. He finished things by fighting his way up to the wyrm's thrashing head and planting Lifedrinker in the center of its skull with a thunderous crack. She screamed her fury and dug deep into the bone, jerking and pulling until he let go and let her do her thing. With a Titanic Leap, he launched himself up the hillside to land with an earthshaking thud beside Arona. As she staggered, he laughed and watched the lich-wyrm's death throes.

Arcus continued to pepper the monster with lancing beams of fire and an occasional ball of exploding flames, but it was over already; Victor could tell. Something like a hundred of the monster's rib bones were broken or missing, and the blue glow of its Energy had faded. It hardly moved as each explosion rocked it, and most damning of all was Lifedrinker's proud haft sticking up from the skull while rivulets of deep blue Energy coursed through the bone into her brightly gleaming metal.

"Your axe feeds," Arona noted.

“Yeah,” he rumbled, still titan-sized. “Don’t worry, she doesn’t take anything from the Energy awarded by the System.”

“I know. My Brutus is similar.” She pointed to the tremendous black-boned monstrosity as it took bite after bite out of the wyrm’s spine.

“He gets stronger?”

“Yes. He gains power from the foes we defeat together.” She pointed to Arcus standing on the hillside opposite them, still firing spells into the dying monster.

“Does he think to win a bigger stake in the kill? Can’t he see it’s over?”

Victor shrugged. “I think he just likes blowing shit up.”

She rasped a soft chuckle, nodding. “In truth, I believe any one of us could have killed this monster. Isn’t it odd that the boy said everyone avoids this ‘spawn’? I know for a fact the council has sent many dozens of tier-seven and higher iron rankers into this prison. Of course, many of the prisoners are lower, and, of course, they’re all sent in with no possessions, but I would think . . .” She trailed off, but Victor knew what she was thinking. It was strange that there weren’t high-level groups of inmates regularly killing creatures like this lich.

“Speaking of prisoners and what you know of the inmates, do you think the council knows about the kids in here? Do they know generations of people have been born in this place? If they can tell that Rasso Hine is alive, can’t they see these other folks in here somehow?”

Arona frowned, and her raspy voice was almost a whisper when she said, “I don’t know, Victor. None but veil walkers have ever been on the council, and they don’t share the secrets of their power with the rest of us. Or, if they do, they don’t announce their confidants. My master certainly doesn’t tell me things like that. Perhaps Roil has told Arcus more.”

Victor nodded, watching as Arcus engulfed himself in flames and began to float their way. “You still think he’s gonna try to screw me over?” She didn’t answer him, and Victor turned away from the dying monster to regard her. Her jaw was clenched, and he could see her dark eyes drifting from one distant object to another, avoiding his gaze. He sighed, understanding what was going through her mind: why would he care what she thought if he didn’t trust her? He turned and looked up the hill to the pile of boulders where Tyn had taken cover. “Come out, Tyn.”

As the kid scrambled from behind the outcropping and began sliding down the slope toward them, Arcus landed nearby. “It dies,” he announced, as though they’d all been waiting for his pronouncement.

Victor chuckled and canceled his Iron Berserk, and, as he resumed his natural size, he started sliding down toward the dying creature, aiming for the head, where Lifedrinker still throbbed, pulling Energy into herself. Before he’d gotten to the floor of the gully, the monster gave up its struggles, and gigantic orbs of rainbow-hued Energy began to bubble up around it, taking shape into three distinct streams. Victor stood still, waiting for his infusion, and when it hit, he was ready.

The reward was significant, and he knew it moved him well toward the next level, but still, it wasn’t as much as he received from defeating the ambush at the dungeon entrance. By the time he settled

back down to the ground and the waves of euphoria began to fade, he'd been joined by Tyn, who hadn't received anything from the kill. Victor looked up the hillside to see Arona and Arcus sitting on the slope, both looking dazed. "I don't think they're used to infusions that size," he said.

"That was a lot of Energy, Sir Victor." Tyn bounced over to the inert skull of the monstrous lich-wyrm and tapped on a yard-long fang. "If you reclaim your axe, could you cut me one of these fangs?"

Victor chuckled and stepped over to the kid. He grasped ahold of the fang and gave it a jerk, cracking it out of the brittle jawbone. "Here you go." Once Tyn took the mighty tooth, a look of wonder in his eyes, Victor reached up and wriggled Lifedrinker back and forth until she slipped free of the skull. "Have a good drink?" he asked, slinging her back into her harness. She didn't answer with words, but he felt a wave of satisfaction from her.

A weird, grinding clatter caught his attention, and he looked toward the sound only to see Arona's bone monster collapsing into hundreds of smaller bones that rolled over the stony ground to collect in a clump. It shivered and vibrated until it had condensed into the singular, black, rune-covered bone from which she'd summoned the creature. "We should check out the monster's lair, sir!" Tyn cried, already struggling to climb up the steep slope. Victor nodded and stooped to pick up Arona's bone.

"Don't!" she cried, halfway down the hillside on her way, no doubt, to collect the bone herself. Victor held it up to show he meant no harm, striding toward her. It was dense and heavy like lead, and the cold that radiated from it was almost uncomfortable, but it didn't bother his Quinametzin flesh much. She snatched it quickly when he held it out to her, and then it disappeared into one of her containers.

"Isn't it conscious?"

"Of course!" she hissed, clearly flustered that he'd had her treasured item in his grasp. Victor shrugged and started climbing toward the cave. He'd asked because he still thought of dimensional containers as unsafe for conscious beings, but he wasn't surprised that Arona could afford a higher quality one that allowed for it. When he reached the opening, he found it brightly illuminated by fiery orbs and saw Arcus digging through the bones and debris strewn about.

Tyn was climbing ever deeper, scrabbling over rocks and kicking piles of small bones, and Victor decided to let him and Arcus dig around. He didn't necessarily trust any of these people, but he had a feeling the kid would cry out if they found anything. He stood in the opening and turned, folding his arms over his chest, surveying the strange, dark landscape of the pocket world. From the cave mouth, he could see quite a ways, and judging by the moon, he was facing "north."

Beyond the hills and the ruins where he'd come into the dungeon, it looked like some dark, massive mountains climbed toward the sky in the extreme distance. He was surprised to see a faint yellow glow in the side of one of those distant peaks, and, squinting against the gloom, he was reasonably

sure they were either hundreds of little fires or, perhaps, the lights of a town. “Rumble Town, maybe,” he mused.

“I think you’re right,” Arona rasped, startling him. Somehow, she’d approached and stood at the cave entrance with him.

Victor exhaled in irritation, reaching behind himself to press his hands into his lower back as he stretched. “Why do I feel like we’re wasting our time going to this ‘Enclave’? Something in my gut’s telling me that Rasso Hine is up there, on that mountain.”

“I’ll see what I can learn.” Arona reached into her dark robes and pulled out a clear, pale-blue crystal. With a surge of cold Energy, she threw it out of the cave mouth into the air, and it burst into a misty cloud. With a despondent wail, the cloud coalesced into an ethereal, ghost-like thing that rapidly surged through the air to the north, fading from sight in seconds.

“Shit,” Victor grunted. “Didn’t know you could do that.”

“There’s much you don’t know, berserker.” The words were a dig—a bit of ribbing, maybe—but her soft, raspy voice and the finality of her tone made them sound more like a confession. Victor looked at her, the moonlight making her pale face even more so than usual, but her dark eyes were focused on the black night sky, and she didn’t engage his gaze. Before he could question her further, Tyn whooped from deeper in the cave.

“A chest!” his youthful voice cried. Victor couldn’t help grinning, wishing he could share his prediction-come-true with a friend. He turned to look and saw a flare of fiery magic as Arcus summoned a disk of floating, flaming Energy.

“He’ll bring it forth,” Arona said. “I’ve delved into many a dungeon with that man-child. That disc is something he uses to carry burdens.” Victor nodded, suddenly feeling like he was missing out when it came to utility spells. He wondered if he could convince his bear to drag a chest out of a cave for him. A few minutes later, sure enough, Arcus and Tyn came marching out of the cave with a large, iron-bound chest atop Arcus’s magical, floating table of fiery Energy.

When Victor stepped close, holding out a hand, curious as to why it wasn’t burning the chest, he found the flames to be only warm, not even hot enough to burn paper. Arcus waved his red rod, and the disc lowered to the stone floor and sputtered out, leaving its burden behind. It was big—large enough to hold Tyn if he wanted to curl up inside. Victor reached for the clasp but paused, looking at the others. “Can I open it?”

“It’s safe,” Arcus said. “I disrupted the trap runes.” His words, once again, reminded Victor of his ignorance, but he shrugged and opened the heavy lid, exposing a pile of glittering treasures, one of which was a brightly glowing, rainbow-hued orb just like the one Arona had gotten from the death wind. He

heard Arcus's intake of breath and Arona's shifting feet, so Victor stepped back, afraid spells were about to start flying.

"Relax, you two," he growled. "Let's take stock of all the treasure before we worry about who gets that orb."