

## Victor BK9: Ch1

Book 9: Chapter 1: Goodbyes

Victor stooped to pick up a smooth stone and threw it out over the ocean. It soared much farther than he'd intended, becoming a small black dot in his vision before he lost track of where it went. Kethelket chuckled and paused to sit on a large driftwood log. "So. You leave tomorrow, hmm?" They'd met several times during Victor's visit, even gone hunting once, but the weight of Victor's impending departure had given this visit a different, more somber, almost sullen tone.

"Yeah. I have to get back. There's so much I have to do, so much I have to learn." Victor sighed and reached up to run his fingers through his hair—too long by inches for his tastes.

"I'm sure you do. A world where kingdoms vie for power through dueling champions? It doesn't seem ethical."

"What part? The fighting and scheming, or the no wars killing the 'common folk' part?"

Kethelket narrowed his eyes but nodded slowly. "I suppose you have a point—I forget, from time to time, that while you're young, you've seen much. I concede that, while some will suffer in the machinations of those kingdoms and their dueling champions, it's perhaps better than peace for many years followed by bloody campaigns where thousands die."

"Or millions. Some worlds are far more populous than Fanwath, Kethelket. You've heard our stories about Sojourn—millions of people all clustered together in a single city. There are worlds far more ancient than that, worlds with dozens or hundreds of cities that size. Imagine the carnage of wars at that scale!"

"Yes. Yes, Victor, I'm all too familiar with the carnage of wars. I will say that having spent so much time slumbering away, lost to the advances of the Ridonne and the expansion of our network into other worlds, I certainly feel adrift, lost in a sea of information that I should have a much surer grip upon. Perhaps I'll make a visit to Sojourn soon. If I do, I imagine you'll be gone?"

"Maybe. I have a few months before Dar sends me off. Even so, Valla will be there—Lam, Edeya, and Lesh, too. There are libraries and, well, shit, anything you might want. You should definitely pay a visit; there's no reason for you to stop . . ." Victor let the thought hang, not wanting to spell out his borderline criticism any more clearly.

"Advancing? Learning? Lusting for life?" Kethelket chuckled. "There are other things in life, Victor. I take great pleasure in leading my people and seeing them made safe. I helped to build a school last month, and when the first class of newborn Naghelli attend it in a few years, I imagine I'll feel a swelling of my heart far fiercer than any victory I might win in a dungeon or dueling ring."

Now it was Victor's turn to feel attacked, but he took it in stride, nodding solemnly. "Point well received, Kethelket. This week, I felt a small inkling of that when I saw Cora making friends with the Shadeni children and learning to stalk huldii with Deyni. Her smile, the joy in her eyes—it erased some dark smear on my spirit. I could use more moments like that."

"Wisely said, young man. Well?" He sighed and stood, his strange moth-like wings fluttering softly as their ochre patterns flared with Energy. "I suppose this is farewell for now, then. It's been good to catch up. Any other plans before you go?"

"Nope." Victor shrugged and looked up the grassy slope to the wall surrounding his "retreat," which was really just a modest estate considering the size of his holdings. "Valla wants to have dinner; we, uh, have a lot to talk about."

Kethelket narrowed his eyes. "Is all well?"

"Yeah, I think so." Victor shrugged again and kicked a stone toward the lapping waves. "We were having a lot of . . . I don't know what to call it, but maybe 'friction.' We decided to put off fighting," he laughed at the idea, "until after this trip. Hopefully, she's feeling as relaxed as I am, and it'll go smoothly."

"Ah." Kethelket clapped him on the shoulder. "I have no easy advice for you there, lad. I've had many loves, but most were quite brief. One was profound, but she was Ghelli and royalty, to boot. This was before the great war split our people and before Kthella was ripped asunder and combined with the other worlds to create Fanwath. In any case, she died while I was locked away in Belikot's service. My greatest regret."

"Shit, man. Way to put my little pissant problems in perspective!" It was Victor's turn to clap Kethelket on the shoulder, giving him a comradely shake. "I mean that. Thank you, 'cause sometimes I build things up bigger than they are, you know?"

"Of course, I know! Everyone does it." The older man laughed, shaking his head. He held out his hand, and Victor clasped it firmly. After a moment, Kethelket nodded and then stepped away. "I'll leave from here; I'm due at Seaside for dinner."

Victor nodded. Seaside was the name Rellia had given her capital. "You think you can make it?"

"Oh, aye. My wings have improved much since I pushed my racial advancement into the advanced stages." He fluttered said wings, and they became a blur of ochre light that seemed to weave in a hypnotic pattern. Then he was in the air, calling down, "Just watch me!" Victor shaded his eyes and grinned as his friend streaked away to the south. It was true; he was two or three times faster than Victor remembered. Soon, he was gone, too small to track against the sun's light.

Victor turned toward the path leading up to his home, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he walked. He was eager to get back and get to work, but he knew he was going to miss Fanwath. He would miss the weather, the comfort of his home, and the heart-warming presence of his friends; Thayla, Deyni, and Chala had practically moved in for the last week, and he'd enjoyed having them close.

He could see what Kethelket meant, though, about watching your people grow and improving their lives. Nia and the other members of the Ninth who'd come to work for his "household" were completely different people from those whom he'd left behind. Some time at peace, some time helping others, had done wonders for them. He supposed things wouldn't always be so idyllic in the Free Marches or even his own lands, but he hoped it would last a long, long time.

One thing was certain—Gorro ap'Dommic was a hell of a governor. Victor's properties were already producing a revenue surplus. When Victor met with Gorro, the governor had been afraid Victor would empty the coffers, taking the surplus—as was his due. Victor had chuckled, though, and insisted they build up a management fund and reinvest in the community. He hadn't said it so eloquently—something more like, "Don't we need it here?" Still, Gorro had capitalized on his impulse for generosity and laid out his plans for expansion. Victor looked forward to seeing the results on his next visit.

He was only halfway up the path when he saw movement at the gate, and when he looked up, Valla stood there. She was tall and lithe, with a lustrous glow to her—the afternoon sun reflecting on the almost metallic sheen of her skin and feathers. Victor lifted his arm to wave, a big, lazy gesture impossible to miss. Valla's wings spread, and so did Victor's grin as he saw them light up in the sunlight—great, silver-teal things that made the Ghelli and Naghelli wings look like something you'd find on a toy. Valla snapped them down and leaped. With the slope of the hill, that single flap was enough to allow her to glide gracefully down to him.

She landed, light as a feather, on her tiptoes, and before Victor could utter a greeting, she leaned in and kissed him gently. "Shall we walk before dinner?"

"Yeah. Why not?" Victor took her hand, and they walked that way, arms swinging between them, down to the shore, adding to Victor's and Kethelket's earlier footprints. Victor had to admit he felt a weird twinge of nervousness in his gut and, hating the sensation, blurted his thoughts, "I thought we were going to talk at dinner, so I hadn't given myself a chance to feel the stress I was building up."

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

Valla giggled, and Victor took that for a good sign; he hadn't been sure his mention of stress regarding their meeting would be received well. "I, too, had buried some stress about this day. I haven't wished for time to slow down so hard in all my life!"

"It was a pretty nice time here, wasn't it? I think if someone told me I had to settle down and stop . . . everything, I'd be tempted to go along with it."

Again, Valla's laugh trilled out, and she slowed to a stop and turned toward him. "You're a liar."

"I . . ." After a short deliberation, he shrugged and agreed. "Yeah."

“I love you, Victor. I truly do.”

“Well,” Victor felt himself flushing with heat, not embarrassment, exactly, but suddenly wholly aware of how much Valla was scrutinizing him as she professed her feelings so plainly—so rawly. “Shit, Valla. I love you, too. I love you so much it makes me stupid.”

Her smile was so sweet, her eyes so open, that Victor felt that old rush, that old thrill he’d had the first time he tried to kiss her in Persi Gables. He leaned toward her, and they kissed several times, just sweet, little kisses that sent tingles through Victor’s lips and down the nape of his neck like electricity. When she pulled back, she spoke words that hit him like a lightning bolt, “That’s why I’m going to stay here for a while. That’s why I’m going to step away from you and give us each a chance to live a little bit.”

“Huh?” Victor didn’t have to feign his idiocy.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot; we’re both young. Neither of us has ever had another meaningful romantic relationship.” When Victor opened his mouth to protest, she held up a hand. “Not really, Victor. You know it’s true.” As he clamped his mouth shut and narrowed his eyes, she gestured an arm toward the sky. “We might live thousands and thousands of years! How long do you think our romance will last if we stay together now? We’ve been together, what? A year?”

Victor shrugged, his heart hammering too hard, his mind racing too much for him to formulate a proper response.

“Tell me you didn’t think about how it might not be working when we were back in Sojourn. Tell me!” She wasn’t yelling, but her voice was pleading, and where she clutched Victor’s wrists, she tugged gently in emphasis.

“I was worried.”

“So, suppose we do better. Suppose we cross this current hurdle of you being gone for—who knows how long. What if we make it five years before we decide it won’t work?” Again, Victor didn’t reply. “What’s five years in a lifetime that stretches into millennia?”

“Nothing,” he finally grunted.

“So, let’s live some of that life. Let’s build experiences—meet people, go places, accomplish things. And let’s do it out of each other’s shadows.” That last sentence hit Victor like a hammer, and suddenly, things were clarifying in his mind. Valla was admitting that she hadn’t been happy lately—dwelling in his shadow. Could he blame her? What a shadow he’d been casting! He’d had the same worry, hadn’t he? He wanted to be angry, hurt, and reactionary, but he

forced himself to take a deep breath, and, contemplating the cool, reassuring Energy of his inspiration, he slowly began to nod.

Though Valla smiled at his positive body language, Victor's first words were an objection, "And if you meet someone you truly love, the person that makes you forget all about me?" With a deepening frown, he added, "Or if I do?"

"Victor, how many people stay together for a decade? A century? Do you know? Because while you were in the Iron Prison, I spoke to many ancient cultivators in Sojourn. People just don't last that long together, or if they do, their relationship evolves over time. Heated love becomes warm companionship. I don't want our heat and passion to be over yet, and when we do come together, I want it to last a very long time!"

Victor stood there, feeling stupid, or slow, or something along those lines, and he stared at her, every second adding to the panic that he was about to lose the best part of his life. Valla must have seen some of it in his eyes because she didn't wait for him to figure out what he wanted to say. "I started thinking about this a while ago. I think it was after I hurt my eye. After we made up, and you told me about going to Ruhn for Dar's granddaughter. I remember us talking about me staying in Sojourn, which was perfectly reasonable, but I wondered why that was the extent of my ambition."

"It's not, though—"

Valla gently squeezed his wrists. "Sweet, Victor. Let me finish, please?" Victor nodded, embarrassed to realize he had some moisture gathering in his eyes. "Of course, it would be smart to take advantage of Sojourn! What did I want, though? When we came here and Thayla told us about Chandri, these thoughts came up again. I know I deny it, but Victor, I am in your shadow. What's more, I'm planning the next months or years around what you're doing! I don't want to stay in Sojourn and grind away at levels with Lesh. I enjoy Lesh, don't get me wrong, but I have other interests! I want to explore. I want to meet new, strange people, and I'd like to do it without all the stress that comes along with doing it by your side!"

Victor thought of Coloss, and he snorted a soft chuckle. "You have a point, but it had nothing to do with me when Blue decided he had to have you."

"Suffice it to say I'll plan my destinations more carefully than when we went to Zaafor!" She grinned and twitched her wings. "Besides, I think little Lord Blue would sing a different tune if he ran into me today." Her eyes flashed briefly with dancing static energy.

Victor grinned at the thought, but his levity faded rapidly. "Why are you staying here, though?"

"You're leaving at Dar's command, but I'm not subject to Dar's whims, Victor. I'm not done visiting yet! I want to spend time with my mother and learn from her as she builds this new nation! I want to spend more time with our friends and

explore these new lands a little. When I'm ready, I'll travel. I may go through Sojourn, or I may fly to the Tharcray and see where the Ridonne's City Stone can take me."

Victor's frown hadn't faded. "So that's it for us, then? I go my way, and you go yours and—"

"Oh, hush! Don't be so dramatic! We both consider this home, don't we? We have a Farscribe book we share, and, if we fill it, we'll need to meet to exchange new ones, won't we? We'll see each other from time to time. After we've spent some time living our lives, perhaps we'll come together again, and our love can bloom into something stronger, something with durability that the centuries will have to struggle to wear down."

Victor took a deep breath and forced his reeling thoughts to slow and solidify. He pushed away petty urges to lash out. He fought down the words on the tip of his tongue about what she'd do if one of those times he showed up on Fanwath with a new wife. Instead, he slowly exhaled through his nose and stared into her eyes, digging as deeply as he could, willing the truth to come to him as he asked, "Are you just saying all of this to let me down easy? To send me off without hurting my feelings? It seems like an easy way out—a way to hope I'll forget about you so you never have to say how you'd decided you didn't really love me."

"Oh, you absolute idiot

! You *know* I love you! I couldn't deny it enough to convince a child! Do *you* value our love? Do you value it enough to make it stronger by fulfilling your potential? Do you think our love can last while you're climbing that pinnacle?"

Victor shrugged. "I don't know. I could end up like Dar; I don't think that dude's interested in love anymore."

"Dar isn't you! His passions are different. You may not have love as an Energy affinity, Victor, but you know you have a heart bigger than most normal people."

Victor gestured to himself. "I'm not much bigger than you right n—"

"Stop making light!"

Despite his earlier resolve to be understanding and mature, he blurted, "This is kind of what she said, you know."

"She?"

"Tes."

Valla's eyes widened, and then her brows drew down severely. "You mean about waiting for you to grow before you have a relationship with her?"

“Yeah. I mean, I’m just being honest. Valla, what if one of us finds a real love elsewhere, something stronger than what you and I feel right now?”

“Then . . .” She frowned, and Victor saw moisture pooling in her eyes, and his emotions responded. He felt his blood rushing and his throat tightening as she continued, “Then, I suppose it wasn’t meant to be.”

“Bullshit!” Victor growled, reaching out to grab her and pull her close, kissing her again. She kissed him back, but then she pushed him away.

“Stop.” Victor reached for her again. “Victor, really!” He growled and dropped his hands.

“This is stupid! If you love me, you love me! Why tempt fate?”

“I have faith that we’ll come together again, Victor. My mind is set.”

Victor stared at her for several long seconds. He knew her face too well to miss the determination in her eyes, the firm set of her lips, the slight upward tilt of her jaw—they all told him that he wouldn’t be changing her mind with mere words. Could he do something dramatic? Could he beg or plead? He almost scoffed at the idea as it flashed through his mind; he had a good feeling that such a display would only assure her that she’d made the right decision. “So,” he finally said, folding his arms over his chest. “What do I have to do to be ‘ready’ for your love?”

“It’s not just you! It’s me, Victor! Was I not plain enough? Was I too softly spoken when I mentioned your shadow? You are driven, and that’s one of the things I love about you, but I don’t want to sit by, doing the sensible thing, putting my dreams on hold while you pursue anything that inspires you. I won’t be kept safe like a figurine on a shelf.”

“You don’t have—”

“Victor. Please. Don’t fight me anymore. Let me go and make my own—” She clamped her lips together, and a soft growl escaped her as she fought to think of the right word. Victor thought he understood, though, and he risked jamming his foot in his mouth by helping her complete the thought.

“Glory?”

Valla surprised him by chuckling. “Maybe. Maybe that’s part of it, aye. You’re going to be something great—that or you’ll die. Either way, I won’t be happy as I am.”

“Is that what this is about? That duel I had with Cora’s father? Are you worried about the duels I have to fight on Ruhn?”

“That’s a piece of it!” Valla growled, balling one of her hands into a fist and thumping it against his chest. “Yes, that’s a piece of it. I also want to be someone who achieves great things, though, and I don’t want to do it by walking on the path that you make smooth with your efforts.”

Victor unfolded his arms and took her fist in one hand, gently worming his thumb under her fingers until she relaxed them. “Listen, I want to scream and rage. I want to pick up that boulder over there and hurl it into the ocean. I don’t want to end this time with you like that, though. If you’re so determined, then let’s enjoy this last night together. The hours I have before I enter that portal tomorrow have just become enormously valuable to me, and I don’t want to spend them throwing a fit or fighting with you. Can we do that? Can we savor each other’s company for a few hours more?”

Valla’s eyes filled with tears again, and she sniffed, nodding quickly before falling into his arms, folding herself against his chest in the way only she knew how. Victor forced himself to take deep, even breaths, pushing his Energy back into his Core as it constantly tried to win free—his rage and fear were especially restless, and he knew, someday in the distant future, he might make a powerful cultivation template out of the memory of that moment.

## Book 9: Chapter 2: Checking In

When Victor stepped out of the coach he’d hired in the city, he was a little surprised to find the lake house dark and quiet. A single lamp illuminated the front door, and only a dim, ambient nighttime glow shone through the windows. When he opened the front door, a startled servant looked up with wide eyes and hurried to take the door from his hands, motioning him in with a hasty, “Welcome home, milord.”

Victor frowned and fished his watch out of his pocket—every time he put it in a storage container, the time got messed up. He’d last used it in Sojourn, so he assumed it was accurate when it told him it was an hour past midnight. “Hi, Ranal. Everyone asleep?”

“I believe Sir Lesh is in his quarters, aye, but your other companions left two days ago intent on delving into a dungeon.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good, I suppose. Darren doing okay?”

“He’s a bit out of sorts but eager to improve his bloodline advancement, sir. Excuse the gossip, but from what I hear, he’s rather unhappy being in a . . . well, an in-between stage.”

“Yeah, I can’t blame him. What, uh, all changed?”

“Well,” the servant paused, looked left and right, and spoke in an even more hushed voice, “his head is adorned with lustrous feathers, and his eyes are quite large and, if I’m honest, fierce-looking. The biggest change, though, milord, is the beak. He’s certainly adopting a type of avian bloodline.”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess that would freak me out quite a bit—he probably doesn’t look anything like his old self.”

“Correct, milord. His long, handsome hair is gone, but I think his feathers are quite nice; they have a certain sheen to them—much finer than some of the other avian folk I’ve seen.”



Victor chuckled, looking at the servant a little more closely. He certainly seemed to have a lot to say about Darren's appearance. After a moment's consideration, he shook his head and let the matter drop. "And Lord Dar?"

"He has anticipated your arrival and intends to have breakfast with you. Shall I wake the staff? Are you hungry now?"

"Nah. Thank you, Ranal. I'll plan for breakfast at the usual hour." Victor nodded to the slender, green-skinned man, then moved past him and into the house. He hadn't slept the night before and was eager to rest, but his first priority was to check on Lifedrinker. His boots, in their non-armor form, were comfortable and the soles soft, so he didn't make much noise as he moved through the house to the kitchen cellar and then down into the tunnels. He noticed a particular dampness to the air down there and, not for the first time, wondered if he'd find underground access to the lake if he took the time to explore.

His lack of knowledge regarding the extent of the tunnels would have concerned him or even dissuaded him from leaving Lifedrinker down there, but he knew Dar wouldn't let anything happen to the axe. Even so, he felt a little nervousness in his gut, a twinge of worry that he strangely welcomed—it took his mind off Valla and the fact that he'd returned to Sojourn alone.

He didn't use a light as he stalked through those tunnels; Victor's eyes were good, far better than he could have ever hoped. He saw great distances with ease, could focus on the tiniest of details up close, and, in the dark, the faintest of glows served to provide him with clear, faintly sepia-tinted vision. When he'd first descended, the soft, pale illumination of the storage ring Dar had given him was enough to outline the tunnel walls and corners, but as he neared his destination, things grew brighter and tinted with a ghostly, blue light. Victor inhaled sharply in anticipation as he saw the outline of the opening leading to his cultivation chamber.

It was limned in pale blue light, and a faint mist hung in the air, further adding to the mysterious appearance of the space. At first, he frowned, trying to remember what he'd left behind that glowed so, but a quick glance into his storage ring confirmed that he'd picked up his cultivation objects. Had he left behind a glow lamp? Victor knew he hadn't, but he supposed Dar might have stopped by to check on the axe and left a light. Still holding his breath, he put his fingers on the rough, cold stone of the opening and peered inside.

"Holy shit, chica!" he gasped, for Lifedrinker sat alone in the space, and it was immediately apparent that she was the source of the illumination. Victor stood still, frozen in wonder, as he took her in with his eyes. Lifedrinker's haft, once dark and alive—wood that hinted at untold depths as tiny motes of light winked in the impenetrable grains—had grown to nearly eight feet in length. More than that, the ancient living-wood haft had taken on the metallic qualities of the "soul ore" Victor had left behind. It gleamed with a profound, lustrous sheen, and just as before, little blue stars twinkled in its depths, their number uncountable.

The change to her haft was only the beginning. Lifedrinker's axe head had grown in size ten-fold. A massive yard-long blade with an edge that bent the air with waves of radiated heat rested on the

floor where the soul ore had once sat. The edge of that lethal-looking blade was buried several inches into the stone. Behind her edge, Lifedrinker's axe head flared severely, broadening to several inches of heavy-looking, dense, dark metal that somehow seemed translucent and opaque at the same time—like Victor could look through the top layer into a depthless expanse of darkness—a metallic window that could swallow light, matter, or even souls.

“Chingado

!” he hissed through his teeth, approaching the massive weapon. Even giant as he was, the axe seemed like too much. He could see, if he stood her on her head and rotated the haft upward, that she'd be taller than his ten-foot frame. Even so, he reached a hand toward her haft and was rewarded by a surge of recognition, welcoming joy, and excitement when his fingers closed around the cool, surprisingly pliant, metallic-wood-hybrid material.

*I did it, Victor! I conquered that ore and incorporated it into myself. I hope I've pleased you!*

“Are you kidding me? You're fucking amazing!” Victor's smile only broadened as he wrapped his other hand around her haft and, with a grunt and a muscle-popping strain, lifted her off the floor. Her head was unwieldy for him, and he had to lean back for balance as gravity pulled it down. “Holy shit, chica!” Victor choked his grip up to the halfway point on the haft and found he could manage her better. “You're heavy, beautiful.” It was true—if he were to make a guess, she was a good deal denser and heavier than Karl's gigantic axe.

*When you're mad with the lust for battle, I'll be just right!*

“Haha, true.” Victor smiled and realized he was beaming from ear to ear when his cheeks began to feel the strain. “You make a good point. Shit, though, you're not going to fit in your harness anymore.”

*Try me in that magical container where you store your vile spirits.*

Unauthorized duplication: this narrative has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

“My cultivation objects?” Victor shrugged; Dar had assured him that the geists were safe within the device. Would a conscious weapon be different? “If you're sure. I'll...I'll just put you in for a second, and you can tell me how it feels, okay?”

*Yes!*

Hesitantly, Victor mentally selected his storage ring where his most valuable objects sat and sent Lifedrinker into it. He forced himself to count to two aloud and then summoned her out. “Are you okay?”

*It's fine there, Victor. I can feel the outside—a trickle of ambient Energy drifts into the space constantly. While I love to have you hold me, is it not nice to know I can be with you even when your hands must be free?*

“Yeah,” Victor sighed and hefted her again, holding her crossways. He wanted to swing her around but didn’t want to mutilate the tilework he’d done if he misjudged her weight and followed through a little too much. “Yeah, this is great, Lifedrinker. Shit! Imagine if we fought Lira now! I bet you’d shred her damn armor.”

*I would!*

Victor lifted the axe so the edge was closer to his face, and he could feel the heat rippling away from her glossy, glass-like metallic edge. “Damn, you look sharp. I bet I could shave with that edge.”

*The heat of depthless, mountainous pressures bleeds from my edge, my battle-heart. Don’t scald yourself!*

“I won’t! It was just a thought.” He wondered if she was right; his feats and bloodline made him rather resilient to high temperatures. Still, it was with a wary, hesitant, feather-light movement that he quickly touched a finger against her edge. It stung immediately, despite his haste, and when he held his finger up, he saw flesh burned white with a sliver-thin cut at the center. “Shit!” he chuckled, watching his regenerative flesh slowly repair the damage. “Okay, beautiful, I’m putting you away for now. We’ll get some practice soon.”

*Goodnight, blood-mate.*

Victor’s eyebrows shot up at the new moniker, but he shrugged, taking it in stride. It wasn’t the first time Lifedrinker had called him something like that. He sent her into his ring, and then, feeling a good deal lighter in his heart, he made his way up to the house. When he entered his room, he felt a veil of darkness close over his mind again when he looked at the bed and unconsciously pictured Valla lying there. Grumbling and growling, he hastily threw his clothes off and laid down on the rug, stretching out on his side with his head resting on one arm. He shoved the melancholy memories away, instead focusing on the positive things in his life.

With thoughts of Lifedrinker and imagined adventures on fantastical, distant worlds, he closed his eyes and quickly found sleep. To him, it felt like a mere moment had passed when he heard the knock at his door and the soft, too-polite voice of Wensa, one of the younger staff members, calling, “Victor, sir, are you awake? Lord Dar requests you on the deck for breakfast.”

Victor rolled over onto his back and put his hands under his head as he stared at the ceiling. He was stiff from lying on the floor, but his Quinametzin constitution wouldn’t allow that to last long. Another knock on the door sounded. “Victor? Um, sir? Are—”

“I’m awake and on my way. Thank you!” With a grunt, Victor hopped onto his feet, pulling his clothes on. He swished a “cleansing draught” he’d picked up while shopping for odds and ends in Sojourn. When his gums began to tingle, he swallowed the apple-flavored fluid. Before he left, he used the restroom and checked his smile in the mirror. For some reason, he felt much lighter in spirit

after only a few hours of sleep. He proceeded to the deck, where he found Dar sitting on a broad orange cushion at one of the low, wooden tables.

The master Spirit Caster wore one of his usual loose-fitting, bright teal, silken, pajama-like outfits. This one had a sigil stitched onto the breast that reminded Victor of a hippopotamus. “Good morning, Victor.” Dar gestured to a matching cushion on the other side of the table. Victor folded his legs and sat.

“Good morning.”

“I see you’re back as scheduled and seem well-rested.” Dar paused while a pair of servants deposited a large glass of fresh-squeezed, purple-colored fruit juice and a plate of eggs and sausages before Victor. “We’re going to be very busy for the next few months. I’m not surprised your lady decided to stay back—I’m assuming that’s the case, as she’s not here.”

“Yeah, Valla’s back on Fanwath.” Victor didn’t feel the need to delve deeper into his personal matters.

“Mmhhh.” Dar nodded and bit a fat sausage in half, chewing it noisily in his square-jawed, stony mouth for a moment. “While we dine, I’ll tell you a bit about Ruhn’s customs. Consider it your first lesson on etiquette.”

“Okay.” Victor took a sip of the juice; it was equally tart and sweet, providing a strangely addictive tang that had his taste buds flooding his mouth with saliva.

“First, it’s customary to show more affection on Ruhn than on many civilized worlds. Don’t be alarmed if a gentleman or lady leans in for a kiss on the cheek when they greet you or bid you farewell.” Victor’s eyebrows arched as he took a bite of eggs, but he didn’t say anything. “Secondly, honor is paramount on Ruhn. To question a person’s honesty is a dire insult. People will challenge each other to death duels for less.”

Victor nodded. Considering they fought their wars with duels, it made sense to him. He was curious about one thing, however. “Is everyone like that, or just the nobility?”

“An astute question—the noble folk of Ruhn do not allow the common folk to slay each other out of hand. If a challenge is issued, the two parties must come before a magistrate who will determine the fairness of the contest. If one party is grossly outclassed, a suitable champion must be found, else the dispute must be settled in another way.”

“I see. But, like, does crime still happen? Murders and whatnot?”

“Oh yes. People are people, Victor. Laws are not always adhered to.” When Victor only nodded, Dar continued, “Let’s see,” he paused to sip his juice, “On Ruhn, feasts have a bit more ritual to them than you might be used to.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. They’re seen as a time for entertainment as well as fine food, and all the guests at the high table will be expected to perform.” Dar chuckled when Victor’s eyes widened. “Relax, you’ll be permitted to contribute in many ways—poetry, singing, playing a bit on an instrument, and even storytelling. I imagine you have a few battle stories you could share, no?”

“Um, I guess so.” Victor shrugged. He hadn’t ever considered himself a public speaker, but the speeches he’d been required to give during the campaign for the Untamed Marches had broken him of any fear in that regard.

“A pity you don’t sing; such a voice—”

“Not really my thing, sir.”

“Well, we’ll see. For now, think of a few stories you might share; you’ll need a repertoire, as I’m sure you’ll be invited to many dinners.” He glanced at Victor for another long moment. “Feats of skill are also considered entertainment. If you could bring forth the Paragon of the Axe . . .” Dar trailed off as Victor ate another sausage, then cleared his throat and changed the subject. “Gift giving is important on Ruhn. You should have a gift ready when you meet anyone of note. You should, likewise, be prepared to offer a valuable gift if you offend someone—an apology with no gift is considered more insulting than no apology. I’m sure Kynna will assign an assistant to you, someone to help remind you when such a thing is required.”

“Kynna? That’s your granddaughter?”

“Oh, aye. Haven’t I said so before now? You should address her as ‘Princess’ or ‘Lady Dar,’ however. Hard to imagine that after all these centuries, they still bear my surname, don’t you think?”

“How will they view me? I mean, coming from Sojourn at your request. Do they love you there? Hate you?” Victor had long since stopped worrying about Dar’s emotions; the man only ever showed hints of anger—never sadness.

“Ah. I suppose most of my distant kin will be indifferent, though there are a few who seem to view me as a sort of deity—a, um, celestial ancestor who birthed a dynasty.” Dar chuckled, and Victor was certain he looked a little embarrassed. “Though, a fallen dynasty, to be sure.” He sighed heavily. “I certainly have neglected them. They’re not my only kin, however, and there are people with no relation to me who require much of my time. Then there are my studies and research, my odysseys and conquests—” He snorted a short laugh and cut his words off with a wave of his hand. “Suffice it to say that some will love you immediately, some will hate you, and many will simply find you an oddity.”

“Um, not to be rude, but will your kin look like you?” Victor cleared his throat and looked from side to side a little nervously before blurting, “I mean, your race?”

“Igniant?”

Victor’s eyes bulged at the word. “Are you calling me ignorant or—”

“No, fool boy. Igniant is my species. To answer your question, I was the only one of my kind on Ruhn, and I’m sure my descendants will bear a small resemblance to me but lean more toward the natives of that world. Ruhnians are a race of giants who have close ties to the Fae. Well, they did a few tens of thousands of years ago. You’ll find they look much like your own kind, though,” he chuckled, “perhaps a bit fairer.”

Victor snorted. “Fairer? As in prettier?”

“Aye, lad. You’re a handsome fellow, but your face is always declaring your intent to kill and slaughter.” Victor just snorted again and put an entire sausage into his mouth, masticating it savagely. “That’s another thing we’ll need to work on. Table manners.”

Victor swallowed his bite with a gulp, then drained his juice. “Okay, I get that I need to learn to behave myself in, um, Kynna’s—”

“Princess Kynna’s,” Dar corrected.

“Right, Princess Kynna’s court, but, Dar, I’m going to be fighting some tough hombres, yeah? Shouldn’t we, like, get me ready? I need to learn how to advance some of my spells that have been stuck for ages. I need to practice with my axe. I need to get my armor upgraded, I need—”

“Enough!” Dar chopped his hand through the air. “I won’t be hounded with your list of needs. Step one: get to your cultivation chamber and don’t come out until your cultivation technique is no longer ‘advanced.’ After that, we’ll speak about your next lesson.”

“Seriously?” Victor frowned, but he pushed his chair back from the table.

“Seriously. You’ll figure it out. If it takes more than a month, I’ll come to check on you.” Dar grinned, displaying his large white teeth, then, to Victor’s dismay, he stood, summoned his dragon-spirit mount, and flew away. Victor watched his diminishing form with his mouth hanging open.

“You kidding me? What the hell, man?” Grumbling with frustration, he stood and walked toward the cellar. If he had to improve his drill in order to get Dar to teach him what he wanted, then that was what he’d do.

Darren looked at his plate, then up at Edeya, and made clicking sounds deep in his throat. She narrowed her eyes. “I forgot, Darren—is that one a happy sound or an annoyed one?”

“Happy! It’s like a smile. I love chicken!”

“It’s a chottle hen, according to the woman at the market.” Edeya smiled, then returned to her spot beside Lam on the other side of the fire. Lam mock saluted with a drumstick from her own little roasted bird, then took a large bite. It had been Edeya’s turn to cook, which Darren thought was lucky for her; they weren’t yet in the dungeon but camped a short way outside, eager to enter as early as possible on the next day—the soonest their entry slot allowed.

Trin cleared her throat. “It doesn’t bother you that it’s a, uh, bird?”

Darren clicked—a sound distinct from his earlier one with a longer windup and a more resonant final thump followed by a sort of hum. “I’m a Thunderbird, Trin! A raptor! Haven’t you ever seen a hawk take a quail?”

“I see. No, that makes sense. I’ve certainly seen hunters using hawks to kill game birds.” While she spoke, Darren pulled the meat from the bones with his fingers and deposited huge hunks of flesh into his beak, swallowing the mouthfuls whole. He closed his eyes in pleasure, and a deep, thrumming hum sounded from his broad chest.

Licking some grease from her fingers, Lam commented, “I thought birds didn’t really taste their food.”

Darren opened his eyes and clicked happily. “First of all, I’m not exactly a bird. I’m an avian species now, or, well, on my way to being one. According to Brimi, we’re different than birds in quite a few ways. Anyway, eating is . . . different. I feel a wave of pleasure with each bite. It’s not exactly a taste so much as a . . . I don’t know how to describe—Wait! I do. It’s very similar to an early buzz from alcohol! I get this warm feeling that spreads through me and makes me a little giddy. Different foods give it a different feel, too.”

“Not veggies, though?” Edeya asked because Darren had explicitly asked her to leave her stewed carrots off his plate.

“Nah, I get nothing from ‘em. Mostly meats.”

Edeya nodded, “It’s so strange how much deeper your voice is, Dare.”

“Eh, it’s still me, though, Dey-dey.” Darren put an entire drumstick in his beak and crunched it to pieces before swallowing it down. His beak was incredibly durable, and he’d found that if he guided food with his fingers, he could efficiently masticate hunks of bone that would’ve given a rottweiler a challenge.

“I know.” Edeya smiled and took another dainty bite. Darren leaned back and watched the three women eat for a moment, giving them a chance to catch up. He’d been dismayed, at first, by his new physiology, but after a few days at the lake house, experimenting with food and practicing his speech, he’d begun to warm up to the new features. Not every change had been alarming; some had been immediately positive. His newfound height, his sturdier body, and his fantastic vision had done a lot to make up for the utterly foreign face he saw in the mirror. Putting those things aside, he was also excited by the prospect of growing powerful wings and learning more about his bloodline.

After a while, he grew tired of waiting and tossed the remainder of his bird into his beak, swallowing it whole, bones and all. It was a mouthful, and he felt it going down, but something had changed in his neck; he never felt like he’d choke anymore, and the sensation was pleasurable, like having an itch scratched, but on the inside. He stifled a burp, then pulled out his Sojourn guidebook, a crystalline tablet enchanted with all sorts of interesting information. He was particularly interested in the section about the dungeon they would be entering the next day.

When he found the correct page, he read the section he was interested in aloud for the benefit of his groupmates, “Ahem, ‘The Fungal Fortress is known for its daunting challenges for tier-two iron rankers, but even more so for its healthy list of rare growth treasures. While these treasures are rare, and only one in every dozen dungeon runs results in a single drop, their value makes up for the infrequency. If your party is able to claim a slot, it’s certainly an investment in time that has the potential for excellent payoffs. See the table below for a list of the known growth item drops.’”

He looked up. “Want me to read the table?”

“You already showed us yesterday, Dare.” Edeya walked over and took his plate. “You’re cooking breakfast, right?”

He nodded. “Easy.” He wasn’t hurt that no one wanted to hear the list again. He’d poured over the tablet for days, trying to find the dungeon with the best chance of providing another racial advancement item. Everyone knew why; Darren was desperate to get his wings and push past his awkward, in-between status of half-human, half-avian. The Fungal Fortress had the best chances, and though Trin was the only member of their party who’d reached tier two, they were all close.

Lam handed her plate to Edeya, then nodded to Trin. “I’m just glad Trin’s brother got us on the entrant list. The usual wait time is nearly two months.”

“My father might be an evil sociopath, but some of my kin are redeemable.” Trin produced a fancy wine bottle with a gold-embossed label. “Shall we?” Everyone scrambled to agree, furnishing their own glasses. Darren summoned a glass, but when Trin got around to him, she took it, filled it up, and then handed him the bottle, still nearly half-full. “I’ll take your glass, Darren. You’ll find it easier to pour the bottle into your beak.”



“Oh.” Darren took the bottle, then cocked his head to the side, his throat clicking the way it always did when he felt like smiling. “That’s considerate of you, Trin.”

“I’ve had many avian friends, Dare.” She poked him in the chest. “Cheers.” She held out her glass, and Darren knocked his bottle against it. Lam and Edeya hurried over to clink their glasses against his bottle.

“Cheers!” everyone echoed, and then Darren poured a good portion of wine into his gullet, laughing as he swallowed it down, and a warm buzz began to tingle in his chest and face.

#

Victor stood and stretched. He’d just spent his eleventh night sleeping on the floor of his cultivation chamber. Most of his time during those eleven days had been spent doing exactly what the chamber implied—cultivating. However, even though it wasn’t exactly a physically taxing activity, he periodically found himself feeling exhausted to the point where he’d lie down, close his eyes, and immediately drift away. He didn’t resist those urges to sleep; something in him was worn out from the cultivation, and he always felt better, more hopeful, and less frustrated when he awoke.

“Frustration,” Victor muttered, retrieving some bread, sausages, and honey from his storage ring. The word went a long way toward describing how he’d felt during the last ten days. He knew he was doing the cultivation technique that Dar had taught him correctly. He could pull large currents of attuned Energy into his Core, watch it absorb and become part of his Core, but, for whatever reason, he couldn’t see what he was doing that wasn’t . . . optimal, he supposed, was the right way to describe it. According to Dar, the technique was capable of “epic” tier cultivation, but it had to be done perfectly.

Part of Victor’s frustration was with the master’s hands-off teaching style. He knew Victor wasn’t doing something quite right, but he wouldn’t show him what it was. Of course, Victor was no ancient master with thousands of years of experience, so he couldn’t really argue about the man’s teaching methods. Maybe he knew what he was talking about. Maybe, when Victor finally figured it out, he’d learn as much from the discovery as he would from the proper technique. He chuckled and stood, intent on doing some stretches and calisthenics to warm himself up for the day’s work.

This tale has been pilfered from Royal Road. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

As was his routine, he first summoned a Globe of Insight, filling the chamber with clarifying, white-gold light. Then, he cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin—probably the most significant factor in his maintained sanity. As the spell filled his body and mind with optimistic, steady inspiration, the dreary despondency he’d begun to dwell upon fled before its clarifying light. He nodded confidently and started to go through his routine of stretches and body-weight exercises—everything from planks to pushups to air squats. It wasn’t something he had to do; his Quinametzin constitution and enormous vitality would keep him fit for

tremendous periods of inactivity, but it still felt good, and, with his blood flowing more vigorously, he felt more confident in success.

After a while, he sat down at the center of his chamber, his four cultivation objects arrayed around him—he'd left his magma-attuned cultivation treasure in his storage ring. He wasn't sure how, but he felt like he knew the added step of cultivating his breath Core while he worked on his spirit Core would only muddy the waters. "One drill at a time," he chuckled, as though confirming to himself that he'd made the right decision. He spread his arms, closed his eyes, and, with his fingers outstretched and loose, wriggled them, willing his inner eye to feel the way the thick currents of Energy in the chamber danced along his fingertips.

After a few minutes of breathing, watching the Energy tendrils around him course through the air on their currents, rebuffed by the enchanted stone lining of his chamber as they tried to drift away, he slowly began his drill. He pushed a weave of his Core's four different Energy types out through his pathways, sending it out through the chamber, circulating, coiling, and weaving its way around as he pulled more and more of the ambient Energy into it. The coil thickened, and the weave tried to pull apart, but he held it tight with his will, guiding it along a perfect path back into his pathways and his Core.

As the Energy flowed into the construct at the center of his Core space, Victor watched the weave pull apart as each constituent Energy type found its home: bright, cheerful inspiration sank into the orb at the heart. Brilliant, enthusiastic glory wrapped into the golden band closest to the center. Baleful, bloodthirsty rage found its home in the equally furious deep red ring. And, finally, the glowering, doom-filled, purple-black tendril of fear-attuned Energy found its home in the dark ring that encircled them all.

As the Energies found their homes, his Core brightened, and the rings moved more quickly. Victor watched them, intent on finding the key to his cultivation technique that he'd missed so many times—hundreds or thousands—since Dar had taught it to him. Once again, he failed to see what he'd missed. The Energy settled in, his Core resumed its usual pace, and Victor, fighting the usual frustration, began the process anew.

Twelve hours later, after nearly thirty more cultivation cycles, Victor didn't feel any closer to solving his problem. One thing he was near, though, was ranking up his Core. He could tell it was close because its usual, slow, deliberate pulse had quickened, and he could feel the palpable thump of pressure as it throbbed. He paused to watch it, wondering if the next cycle would push it over. It would be his first new rank in the "epic" tier of his Core's development.

The pulse was almost hypnotic, and, perhaps because of its increased intensity, Victor noticed it wasn't a single beat but that it had a transient quality. The pulse began at the heart, in the center of his inspiration-attuned Energy sphere, but it traveled out through the rings of other Energies. With the more rapid, frenetic quality it had taken on as his drills had made the Core heavy and swollen with Energy, one pulse began before the previous propagated the whole. This

constant stream of beats made it clear that what Victor had taken for a simple flash was actually a sort of shift in the position of the Core; it moved ever so slightly as the thump of Energy went through the rings, especially when it hit the heavy, dense, fear-attuned one.

Victor focused his entire attention on the process, watching as the next pulse flashed at the center of his Core, then moved up through the rings, first inspiration, then rage, then fear. With the pulse, it almost seemed that the rings of rage, fear, and glory around his inspiration sphere had taken on a sort of orbiting quality. Glory and rage were separated by something like twenty degrees and rotated near the horizontal axis of the inspiration globe, while fear stood alone, rotating nearly diagonally, twenty or so degrees from the vertical axis.

When the pulse moved through the thinner, closer bands of glory and rage, the entire Core shifted toward them slightly. When it passed through fear, however, the Core noticeably surged toward that ring. For the first time, Victor wondered if the problem with his drill had nothing to do with his gathering of Energy but rather how it flowed into his Core. Was it out of balance? Could he move those rings?

With an effort of will, Victor grasped ahold of his fear-attuned ring of Energy and pulled it toward the vertical axis of his Core. It resisted, heavy with Energy as it was, but Victor was resolute, and his will was like an implacable force of nature as he bore down. Eventually, the ring shifted to where he wanted it, circling his Core at the dead center, straight up and down from his point of view.

Now, as it pulsed, the Core shifted massively, jerking up and then down, snapping back into place as the pulse ended, but immediately bouncing again as the next pulse fired. It was dizzying to watch, and Victor felt unwell deep in his being. Fearing he'd done something stupid, something that would prove his undoing if he didn't figure it out quickly, he grasped ahold of his rage-attuned ring and pulled it toward the horizontal axis. As he did so, he immediately felt some relief; it was balancing his fear-attuned ring, if not perfectly, then much better than it had been.

Victor shifted his attention to his glory-attuned ring. If he was right, all he needed to do to balance the "gravity" of his Core was to find the perfect position between his rage and fear-attuned rings for this third one. Sure enough, as he pulled it toward the center of the diagonal axis between rage and fear, he felt the shudder of his Core reduce more and more. Now, the pulses flashed through his Core, and the strange thump was nearly gone. With careful precision, Victor tugged on the glory-attuned ring, balancing his fear by moving it just a tiny bit closer to his rage-attuned ring.

As he found the perfect balance, Victor wasn't rewarded with any System message or sudden tangible award, but he knew it was right. He could feel the balance, and, moreover, he could see the flashes of his Core's pulsing, throbbing beat flow through his Core without even the slightest wobble. He

likened it to tuning an engine—the idle was smooth and steady. Smiling, pleased at the balanced aspect of his Core, he began another cultivation cycle.

Nothing seemed all that different as he went through the motions, but when he brought the streams of thick, woven Energies into his Core, they separated and flowed into his Core much more evenly. Before, he'd often have strands of rage and glory left over before his fear-attuned Energy was fully absorbed, but this time, they all entered his Core evenly. More than that, as the streams of Energy flooded their respective rings, they began to spin rapidly, rotating around his Core and creating a sort of draft.

Victor immediately recognized what was happening and seized the opportunity, cycling through another cultivation round, pulling more Energy into his Core space that was instantly snatched up by the pull of his Core's new-found rotational gravity. As that new stream of Energy began to absorb, Victor began a third round of cultivation and had it ready, already entering his pathways as the previous was pulled in. His mouth spread in a triumphant grin as his cultivation cycle took on a life of its own. All he had to do was weave the Energies; the current his Core was created in the chamber was enough to pull them into his pathways.

Victor lost himself in the giddiness of his success. He'd emptied the ambient Energy from his chamber and pulled streams of attuned Energy directly from his cultivation treasures. He wove them as fast as they could provide the Energy, and his Core pulled them in. Soon, though, the pressure in his Core space became almost agonizing as the pulses intensified into a steady stream, one after the other. They bled into each other, and soon, the density and brightness of his Core made it hard for him to observe it with his inner eye. Just as he contemplated stopping and taking a break, it broke through.

With a tremendous spike of Energy that surged through his body, his Core seemed to crunch down on itself, and the backwash was so intense that his cultivation chain broke. Victor fell flat on his back, panting and staring at the ceiling as System messages flashed across his vision. Ignoring them for the moment, he turned to his inner eye and observed his Core. It pulsed almost lazily now, a steady, heavy wave of Energy propagating through the somehow heavier, denser rings. Even without reading the messages awaiting him, he knew it had ranked up.

“All right,” he grunted, turning his attention to the messages:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Spirit Core Cultivation Drill – Epic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! Your Spirit Core has advanced: Epic 2.\*\*\***

“Damn,” he grunted when he realized that he only had two messages; it had felt like more. He'd hoped the advancement would be enough to push him to the next level. Nevertheless, he pulled up his Energy statistics to see how much he'd gained from the Core rank-up:

**Breath Core:**

## **Elder Class - Improved 3**

**Core:**

**Spirit Class - Epic 2**

**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:**

**35045/35045**

“A thousand, huh?” Victor pushed himself back into a sitting position. He’d gained five thousand when he broke into “epic,” and now it seemed he’d earn another thousand for each rank therein. He supposed that was better than the one hundred he’d gained in previous tiers. Still, for all the work he’d done over the last eleven days, it felt a little underwhelming.

“Well, apprentice, I certainly felt that!” Dar’s voice sounded from the entrance to his chamber. “It seems you managed that more quickly than I’d feared. Excellent. Let’s celebrate with a meal, and perhaps I’ll teach you a bit about proper spirit walking. How does that sound?”

Victor hopped to his feet, turning to see his master in a migraine-inducing set of magenta pajamas decorated with hypnotic yellow swirls. “What the hell are you wearing?” Victor cleared his throat and held up a hand. “Sorry, that was rude. I mean, but seriously, Dar. That suit’s making me dizzy.”

Dar lifted the hem of his shirt and frowned. “You don’t like it? The saleswoman said it was the latest fashion on Foh.” He saw Victor’s confusion and clarified, “That’s the homeworld of some of Sojourn’s more influential citizens. I bought it to attend a gala at Lord Drok’s estate last night. Is it so bad?”

“I mean, to me, but . . .” Victor trailed off, shrugging. He moved closer to his master and clapped him on the shoulder. “What do I know?”

“Indeed. You’re young and have hardly traveled. Come, Victor, let’s eat—I’ve been drinking and carousing for twenty hours.”

Book 9: Chapter 4: Friends and Enemies

After they emerged from the catacombs beneath his home, Dar led Victor into the main parlor and said, “Why don’t you take a shower and freshen up, and then we’ll go out. Tell your dragonkin friend that he’s welcome to join us. I had plans to dine with Lo’ro, but when I felt your

breakthrough, I thought it a good opportunity for you to let off a little steam. He won't mind the extra company."

"At his home?"

"Hah, no." Dar chuckled. "He may be a friend, but I've no taste for death-attuned environs." He glanced down at his hypnotic attire. "I'll get myself cleaned up—too much powerful drink can wear a man out. I'm in need of some hearty food. Meet me back here in twenty minutes."

Victor nodded, squinting at the windows. He'd utterly lost track of the days, let alone the time while he'd been down in the cultivation chamber. The setting sun was bright in the sky, and it felt good on his face as she squinted out toward the lake. "I'll let Lesh know." As Dar nodded, Victor walked toward the front door where he could be sure a servant was always on duty. He didn't have to go that far, though, before Mr. Ruln approached from the direction of the kitchens.

"Looking for something, Sir Victor?"

"Do you know where Lesh is?"

"Ah! Sir Lesh is currently sparring with a guest on the recreation field."

"Oh?" Victor's eyebrows shot up. "That's good! Thanks, Mr. Ruln." As the steward nodded, Victor hurried out the front door and down the path toward the outdoor recreation area where he and Lesh often practiced. Long before he arrived, he heard the grunts and thuds as two very large men exchanged blows and grappled. When he rounded the corner, Victor was thrilled to see Lesh grappling with Drobna, the turtle-like berserker he'd battled in the Vault of Valor. He paused on the edge of the sand-covered field and watched, waiting for the two men to notice him.

Victor could see that Drobna wasn't berserk; his muscles were swollen with power, but he was clearly not enraged. Watching them exchange blows and struggle to throw each other, Victor wondered if Drobna's berserk ability differed from his own. He wondered if he'd advanced it to the epic tier and, if so, whether or not he'd gained Iron Berserk as an ability evolution. He watched and contemplated such things for nearly five minutes, but when the two showed no signs of pausing their struggles, he finally called out, "Lesh! Do you want to join Dar and me for dinner?" When the two fighters looked his way, he added, "Hey, Drobna! You're welcome to join, of course."

"Victor!" Lesh laughed, releasing Drobna and jogging over the sand toward him. "You've finally come out of your cave!" Drobna followed him over, brushing his large, greenish-brown hands together.

Victor laughed. "I did! At long last, I've come out of hibernation!"

Drobna stood beside Lesh, clapping the black-scaled dragonkin on the shoulder. "I'm pleased to see you, Victor. When can I claim that promised sparring match?"

“Soon. In fact, I’ll corner Master Dar at dinner tonight to get him to commit to some kind of schedule. I need regular practice.” He reached out a hand, and Drobna took it in a firm grip. “Join us?”

“It’s a wonderful offer, and I’m sure I’ll be gnashing my beak in frustration later tonight, but I must decline. My wife’s parents are hosting a small event, and if I don’t attend, I’ll be sleeping outside for a month.”

Lesh chuckled, a deep, almost growl-like sound, and elbowed the berserker. “You’d miss a chance to dine with a great master? Your wife must have a weighty hand.”

“Hah!” Drobna shrugged. “She does, I can’t deny. I fear her wrath a great deal more than I value the attention of even the great lords of Sojourn.”

“Don’t worry about it, man.” Victor gave his hand a final squeeze and let go. “I’m glad you’ve been keeping Lesh busy. I’ll reach out with our training schedule for the next few months, okay?”

“Yes! I’m eager to see if we might have a secret or two to share with each other.” He turned to Lesh. “I suppose that brings our session to an end?”

“Yes! I’ll not miss a dinner with Victor and the mighty Ranish Dar!”

“Until next time, then.” Drobna waved and started down the path. Victor grabbed Lesh’s shoulder and pulled him along behind the shelled warrior.

“We need to hurry. Dar’s leaving in about fifteen minutes.”

Lesh nodded, quickening his steps. “I must rinse this sweat and blood from my scales, and then I’ll be ready!”

Eighteen minutes later, Victor and Lesh, both freshly washed, climbed into Dar’s coach. The master Spirit Caster was already inside and, to Victor’s relief, wore a fresh set of silken pajama clothes. These were solid emerald green and much easier on his eyes. As he and Lesh took their seats, Dar smiled and gestured to a tray of drinks—large tumblers filled with rich, amber liquid. “Have a drink, men. I’m pleased you joined us, Lesh!”

“Thank you for the invitation, Lord Dar.” Lesh picked up one of the tumblers and drained it in a single gulp. Victor chuckled and took a more restrained sip, well aware of how strong Dar’s liquors were.

“I have something for you. I was waiting until Victor was finished with his seclusion in the cultivation cave, and I think now would be a good time to present it.”

Victor looked into Dar’s fiery eyes and raised an eyebrow. “Is this the—”

“It is! Lord Roil was loathe to hand it over; he was rather irritated that you slipped away before the council could question you, but I pointed out that you were not

obligated to do so.” Dar chuckled, shaking his head. “Oh, you should have seen him fume when Lady Rexa wrested control of the dungeon from him.”

“Wait, what?”

“I spoke to her in confidence about what was taking place in the dungeon. After you told me of the children’s plight and your promises to aid them, I felt obligated to seek her advice.”

“But what about Ronk—”

Dar held up a hand, shaking his head. “Remember your promise, Victor. Lesh is an ally, but he’s not part of that man’s trust. Rest assured that I wrung a promise out of Lady Rexa; she will aid the children and not interfere with other matters.” Again, he chuckled, a deep sound like large plates of stone grinding against each other. “To be honest, I believe she prefers it that way.” He turned back to Lesh. “That’s all beside the point, however. The council owed Victor another prize, and he chose to request a cultivation item for you.”

“What?” Lesh’s eyes opened wide, and he looked from Dar to Victor. “You didn’t have to do that, Lord Victor!”

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

“Come on, Lesh! Just Victor. Don’t worry about it, anyway. I promised I’d help you figure out how to cultivate your breath Core, and you can’t do that without something to cultivate from.”

Dar nodded. “Exactly so.” He held out his hand, and a heavy-looking metallic box with a rounded lid appeared in his broad palm. “When I demanded your prize, I thought the council would open its coffers and purchase your friend an Energy heart attuned to acid. I was rather surprised when Kreshta Griss provided this treasure instead. Fear not; she was reimbursed by the council.” Dar lifted the top of the dull-gray box, revealing an interior filled with dark, moist soil and a single sprout of green rising from the center. As soon as the lid was clear, the little sprout began to exude green vapors that hissed in the air as they climbed toward the ceiling.

Dar quickly replaced the cover, but not before everyone got a whiff of the caustic gas. Victor’s eyes immediately began to water, and he leaned back, holding his breath. Lesh, however, leaned forward, eyes alight. “It’s potent!”

“Aye, very.” Dar nodded, holding the box out to Lesh. “A venom petal orchid. It’s something of a misnomer; there’s no venom involved; it exudes pure acid-attuned Energy vapors.” As Lesh gingerly took the box, he added, “You may find a place in my gardens to plant it—distant from the house, please.”

“Thank you, Lord Dar!” Lesh tried to bow, sitting down, but his bulky body didn’t accommodate such a maneuver easily, and he almost tumbled out of his seat.

“Thank Victor. He gave up a treasure of his own for this.”



“We already went over this!” Victor laughed, again clapping Lesh on the shoulder. “It’s nothing.” He turned to Dar. “Thank you, though, Dar, for keeping the council honest and for going to Lady Rexa for help with the children. I made a promise to a kid—young man—in there, and I’m pleased to see he’ll be getting some help. I, uh, hope it didn’t cost you anything.”

“Cost? No, rather, I gained something in the bargain. Rexa has a soft spot for children. She may be Fae, but she’s a Summer Fae, and they love life. She was pleased that I shared the secrets of that place with her.”

Victor nodded, and they rode in silence for a few minutes. The coach was Dar’s best—swift and smooth—if Victor couldn’t see out the window, he wouldn’t have realized they’d even taken flight. Lesh put his treasure away, but only after having Dar inspect his storage container to ensure it was suitable. Victor thought about the little sprout inside the box and pictured himself and Lesh planting it. Then, an idea occurred to him. “Should we build some kind of cultivation chamber around that plant?”

“The Energy is in the form of a mist, so I would think a canopy would suffice. Something domed with open sides so the flower can still get light when the sun rises and sets. I’ll have Mr. Ruln collect the supplies—I’d like to ensure they’re aesthetically pleasing since you’ll be building it in my garden.”

“Thanks.” Victor grinned and elbowed Lesh, who was also grinning. His snout made it look more like a hungry leer, however. “Getting excited? Soon, your breath Core is going to rank up!”

“I’m more than excited. I’d like to get started immediately—”

“Tomorrow will be soon enough,” Dar chuckled. “Victor and I are hungry.” Lesh began to reply, but Dar spoke over him, pointing out the window. “We’re here.” Victor followed his pointing finger with his eyes and saw that they were coming in for a landing near the top of one of Sojourn’s enormous crystalline spires. This was the first time Victor had been up to those heights while in the downtown area. The spectacle was enough to strike him dumb.

High Sojourn, as the heights were colloquially known, was off-limits to the likes of Victor and Lesh. At least, he’d thought so. Looking out there, he could see the nearly invisible walkways with their faint, iridescent sheen, stretching from spire to spire, arching over and under each other in a weirdly beautiful tangle. They weren’t crowded—there were only a few thousand veil walkers in Sojourn—but the people Victor saw were interesting enough to make up for their small numbers.

A woman with a great, bulbous black spider’s body marched by, descending an arching crystal span toward a round-capped tower with gem-studded stars and moons adorning its dome. Passing above her, a blue-fleshed man strode—he was easily thirty feet tall and moved his long, slender legs ponderously. He wore a toga that seemed to be crafted of silvery mist. Before Victor could closely examine any of the other folk passing nearby, Dar jostled him and gestured toward the door.

“Come, Victor. We should hurry into the restaurant before I have to defend my right to bring you two here.”

Victor nodded, blinking his eyes rapidly and chuckling as he exited to stand near Lesh. The dragonkin was similarly dumbstruck, staring over the edge of the crystalline pier where their coach had set down. Victor followed his gaze and felt a spinning sense of vertigo when he saw the towers stretching down toward the distant ground where ant-like people crowded the streets. He quickly looked away, grasping his friend's shoulder. “Holy shit,” he laughed. “Didn’t realize how damn high these towers go.”

“Come.” Dar, leading the way, gestured to the nearby tower. The crystal walkway expanded near the tower into a wide ring. Victor immediately felt strangely out of place when he saw the floor-to-ceiling glass windows and brightly lit signage; it reminded him of a sci-fi movie more than anything else. They’d stepped out of Sojourn's luxurious, high-fantasy medieval setting and into a weird alien city from a futuristic film. At least that’s what his imagination told him, even though he knew that Energy and enchantments powered everything around him.

The sign that hung above the doorman's station, glowing in bright neon oranges and yellows, proclaimed the restaurant as “Sunset’s Rest.” As they approached the door, the man standing ready to open it leaped into action, bowing stiffly before pulling it wide. “Welcome, Lord Dar. Your table is ready.”

Dar flicked something to him that glimmered, and he deftly caught it. Before Victor could wonder what it was, they were inside, and the door was swinging shut behind them. Dar turned to regard Victor and Lesh and gestured to the wide-open dining room. Black tables that gleamed like cut and polished opal dotted the midnight blue floor. They were almost all occupied by interesting folk, but Victor couldn’t focus on the people; he was too taken by the fact that the walls surrounding the dining room were wide open to balconies with crystal-clear railings allowing for an unobstructed view of the high Sojourn skyline.

Just as he’d stared from the coach, Victor found himself doing so again. His eyes traced the crystalline walkways, the colorful spires, and the strange, fantastical people walking about in the distance. Lesh gave him a nudge, and Victor started walking, following Dar through the dining room to a table where Lo’ro sat, adorned as usual in black robes and sipping from a tall glass of blue, fizzing liquid. Standing close, Victor realized the table was high, suited for a man of Dar’s or Victor’s stature, but Lo’ro’s chair was tall and allowed him to sit at a comfortable height.

“Lo’ro,” Dar greeted the Death Caster with a nod. “Apologies for our tardiness.”

“No need, no need.” Lo’ro smiled and regarded Victor and Lesh. “I didn’t realize you were bringing your apprentices.”

Dar chuckled and sat down, then gestured to the two empty seats. “Sit, men.” He turned back to Lo’ro. “I’ll claim only Victor. Lesh’ro’zellan is his companion.”

“Lesh’ro’zellan, is it?” Lo’ro openly stared at Lesh as he took a seat and pulled his chair in. “Well met, dragonkin.” Lesh hurried to stand again, but Lo’ro waved him back down. “Relax, young man. How interesting! Dar, you always surprise me. I had no idea you had someone from Ashenshoal at your house.”

At that moment, Victor wished he had a camera pointed at Lesh’s face. The dragonkin’s mouth hung open, and his eyes bulged as he practically choked. He coughed to cover his surprise, then asked, “You know of Ashenshoal?”

“Naturally! The birthplace of Zoh’ka’drul? He violently conquered a few worlds in allegiance with the Bloodmoon Triumvirate before succumbing to the Dread Scourge. He almost won through, but those were Vesavo Bonewhisper’s most bloodthirsty years, and his undead legions were merciless.” He laughed and sipped his drink. “I’m sorry, Dar—I’m already a bit drunk. Forgive my rambling.”

Victor had watched Lesh during the little exchange and saw only confusion in his friend’s eyes; he figured it was a safe bet that Lesh had never heard of Zoh’ka’drul. He wanted to ask Lo’ro more about the story; he was interested in Vesavo’s history, if only because he was helping Arona to escape him, but Dar spoke first. “Nonsense. We’re celebrating. Victor had a breakthrough today.” He waved a hand, and a server hurried over. She was a petite, elfin-looking young woman wearing a shimmering black dress that clung to her figure—all the servers seemed to be women, and all were similarly dressed.

While Dar ordered drinks, Victor leaned closer to Lo’ro. “What’s the ‘Dread Scourge’?”

“That was the teaming mass of undead Vesavo led from world to world, conquering in the name of death and revenge. I was one of his lieutenants back then. Some might say I was his right-hand man, but they’d be wrong; his infatuation with Shivana kept the rest of us firmly on the periphery. Those days are long over, however. We’ve been rather lazy these last few centuries, idling about Sojourn. I wonder how many of his worlds he still holds.”

“Seventeen,” Dar said immediately.

“Is that all?” Lo’ro laughed and shook his head. “He was so hellbent on conquering the Greensap Ascendancy—I swear he held more than a hundred at the height of his power.”

Dar chuckled. “Don’t downplay your part. I believe he handed off a dozen or so to you during that expansion.”

“True, true. Though, I was never one for ruling—I’m more at home in my laboratories.” Lo’ro sighed, then finished his drink. As he set it on the table, Victor’s eyes were drawn to his long, corpselike fingers with their polished black nails. He didn’t realize he was staring until Lo’ro cleared his throat and startled him by saying, “Victor! You’ve recently come out of a harrowing experience, haven’t you? I heard both the Volpuré boy and dear, lovely Arona Moonshadow

perished, yet you emerged hale.” Victor experienced a moment of panic at those words; he’d forgotten that Lo’ro had been somewhat obsessed with Arona.

Dar saved him, though, thumping the table and proclaiming, “That’s right, he did! Now, a toast!” Victor hadn’t realized the server had returned, but she was there, reaching up to deposit tall, slender, fluted glasses before each of them. They were filled to the brim with steaming orange liquid, and Victor caught a faint whiff of something like vanilla as he leaned close to inspect the drink.

Dar picked up his glass and held it out. “I’m inspired by Lo’ro’s ramblings about empires and great wars. I, too, have conquered a place or two; in fact, my army’s destruction of Lo’ro’s forces led me to befriend this dastardly rascal. How many years in my prison did you languish, old friend?”

Lo’ro’s skeletally thin face always looked angry to Victor. Even when he smiled, it looked like he was preparing to devour someone alive. Still, even with that evil, rictus grin, his voice was light when he replied, “Seventy-nine years, Dar. Seventy-nine years in which we played at least a thousand games of Fortitude. We became fast friends over that marble table, didn’t we?”

“We did. So—to friends!” Dar held his glass up, but before anyone could join in the toast, he added, “And enemies.” Victor suddenly felt like a child having dinner with a couple of old tigers, as if they might destroy him with a careless swipe of their paws. Hearing them talk of conquering worlds and fighting world-spanning empires was a little daunting, not to mention that they’d apparently been mortal enemies in the past. Victor locked eyes with Lesh and raised an eyebrow. He could tell the dragonkin was thinking similar thoughts.

“To friends,” Victor said, touching his glass to Lo’ro’s and then to Lesh’s and Dar’s.

“And enemies, Victor.” Lo’ro leered as he leaned close. “Never forget to thank your enemies. They make you what you are.” He nodded to Dar. Victor downed his drink, and it burned like acid. In fact, both he and Lesh belched loudly, and smoke erupted from their mouths.

“Hah!” Dar laughed. “Another!”

Book 9: Chapter 5: Spirit Walk

Victor jogged along the lakeshore, loping easily over the scattered rocks, driftwood, briar tangles, and other obstacles in his path. It was late afternoon on the day after his celebratory dinner with Dar, Lo’ro, and Lesh, and Victor was feeling good, though pleasantly weary after a long day of sparring in the circle with Lesh and Drobna, who’d come early after a last-minute invitation. Now, though, Victor was heading to a spot where Dar had instructed him to await his presence.

His mentor had refused to elaborate on the purpose of their meeting or why Victor had to make his way through the seldom-traveled parts of Dar’s property to meet in a secluded grove on the far side of the lake. The demand had come up when Victor asked about a regular training schedule. Dar had been drunk—as they all had been—and had put off the conversation, saying simply that Victor would have the day to exercise his weapon skills but that he must be in the “fath” grove across the

lake at sundown. Luckily, when Victor asked Mr. Ruhn what a fath tree was, the steward could point one out on the property—a tall, white-barked deciduous variety with hand-sized, fan-shaped leaves.

So, Victor ran along the lakeshore, eyes peeled for a cluster of similar trees, enjoying the light exercise in the cool, late-afternoon air. As he ran, he couldn't stop his mind from wandering, and, despite his efforts to the contrary, it often found its way to subjects he'd rather avoid; chief among them was Valla. He'd been doing well, he reckoned, considering his nearly two weeks of seclusion in the cultivation chamber, to avoid those melancholy musings, but now, for some reason, she kept coming to mind as he ran.

He had a strange, hollow feeling every time she came to mind. He felt a little like he'd done something wrong or that he'd lost something precious, even when he reminded himself of Valla's words. He tried to keep in mind that she was just trying to see what she could accomplish outside his shadow, exploring her own interests and giving them both a chance to grow and learn and become the people they were meant to be. Still, every time he remembered that she wouldn't be back at the house or ready to accompany him to dinner or whatever adventure came next when he finished with Dar's business on Ruhn, it felt final.

The other half of the matter was that Valla hadn't argued enough—for his tastes—about what would happen if either of them met someone they fell for. Victor, obviously, was more concerned about the idea of Valla loving someone else. The thought rankled something deep in his spirit and reminded him of how he used to feel when he couldn't control his rage. He kept picturing Valla with a faceless man, someone holding her hand, kissing her—loving her. It made his gut twist, and he had to remind himself that he didn't own Valla. If they were apart for years or decades or—God-forbid—centuries, how could he expect her to spend all her time alone?

As he spied the tops of tall, white-barked trees on a nearby hillside, he tried to conclude his ponderings on his relationship by telling himself that the answer to his unrest was to throw himself into training. The discipline would be good for him, and when he went to Ruhn, he knew he'd have plenty to keep him occupied—people to meet, the wonders of a distant world to see, and, best of all, duels to fight. He found a path meandering up the hillside and slowed to a walk as he ascended toward the grove.

His feet crunched on gravel, and birds by the dozen chirped in the nearby treetops, helping bring Victor back to the present as he grounded himself with slow, steady steps and deep breaths full of amazingly clear, rich air. As the sun dipped below the horizon and stars and moonlight guided his steps, he walked between the first of the white-barked trees. It felt like a curtain had been drawn—everything grew dimmer and quieter. A gentle breeze blew, rustling the leaves high overhead, and Victor felt peace like he hadn't in a long while.

The glow of a lamp brought his eyes ahead and to his right, and he recognized Dar's hulking shadow as he moved around in its circle of illumination. As he approached, he wanted to call out, but something told him it would be wrong to be noisy in that place, so he padded up the slope to the small clearing where his master sat on a patch of soft, rich loam. When he stepped into the clearing, Dar looked up and smiled and, as softly as he could with his rough, grating voice, said, "Welcome, Victor. Sit down here with me."

The master Spirit Caster wore a loose, black, silken shirt over gray pants of a matching style. Looking at him as he sat down, Victor contemplated Dar's habit of always wearing something loose and comfortable. "Do you ever wear armor?"

"Not these days. I have some—armor that could withstand the destruction of a mountain—but I've learned abilities that make it...redundant." He gestured to the ground before him, and Victor saw that he had a few items arrayed there beside the softly glowing orb-shaped lamp. The first was a smooth, normal-looking river rock. Beside it was a carved ivory figurine that reminded Victor of a chess piece, and next to that was a small terracotta pot holding a delicate green plant with beautiful, star-shaped blue flowers. "Have you ever wondered why your Spirit Walk spell is still in the 'basic' stage?"

The question surprised Victor, as it seemed to have nothing to do with the three items arrayed on the ground. He blinked, thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"Spirit walking, at its most basic level, is the ability to project your conscious spirit onto the spirit plane. You've mastered this quite well—you've learned to find places you've seen or visited before, and you've also learned to visit other spirit walkers. What you don't know is that, with practice, you can learn to bring physical objects onto the spirit plane with you. Once you've mastered that, you can also learn to bring your physical body there. It's the first step to learning how to travel through the spirit plane from one location on the material plane to another."

"I—" Victor paused, considering his words, ensuring he was right, then finished his thought, "I've brought Lifedrinker onto the spirit plane with me before."

Dar nodded. "You've brought Lifedrinker's spirit. She manifested as an axe there. It's also possible that you've brought some small item with you before, subconsciously tapping into the spell's greater potential. However, you won't evolve the spell until you learn to do it with intent."

"Ah. All right."

Dar gestured to the stone. "We'll start with this simple rock I picked up from the shore on my way here. Pick it up." Victor took the stone in his hand, weighing it in his large palm as Dar continued, "Bringing something with you on a spirit walk requires an effort of will. You must concentrate on the object and, just as you might move Energy about with your will, you must command the object to accompany you as you cast the spell."

Victor frowned and looked up from the rock he'd been studying. "I've never tried to exert my will on something other than Energy or a spell or person using Energy."

"Open your inner eye, Victor, and contemplate the stone in your hand."

Victor did as instructed, closing his eyes and opening that inner sense that allowed him to see his Core, pathways, aura, and the Energy in the world around him. As he moved his gaze away from his Core and out of himself, he had a hard time even seeing the stone at first. As he concentrated, though, he began to see tiny swirls of dim, gray-brown Energy. He continued to focus and saw that the swirling loops of Energy were contained, and that's when he realized they were bound by the shape of the stone. "I see it! It's full of Energy!"

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

"Good! And now you see how you will influence the stone; like all things, Energy is part of it. When you cast Spirit Walk, wrap that stone in your will and pull it with you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I think so." In theory, Victor thought it seemed simple and was eager to try. He began to gather his Energy into the pattern for Spirit Walk, but Dar leaned forward, and suddenly, he felt a knife-like fragment of Dar's aura reaching out and erasing the pattern before he could complete it.

"Patience! Did I say to cast your spell?" Dar didn't sound angry, but Victor couldn't help scowling at the intrusion into his personal Energy space.

"Can any veil walker do that? It feels like bullshit. I mean, I'm helpless before you!"

Dar chuckled and leaned back, shaking his head as his broad smile demonstrated his good temper. "It's a frustrating realization, isn't it? I know what it's like to think of the obstacles you've overcome, the trials you've faced, the hard work you've put in, and to know that there are those who can swat you like a bug."

"Yeah, it's not so much, you, Dar, but what if Lord Roil wanted me dead?"

"Yes. If he hadn't been worried about the code of conduct for our kind here on Sojourn, he might have struck you down shortly after that challenge dungeon showing." He sighed and shrugged. "Listen, Victor; the secret to resisting the likes of me is to build your aura to a point where it can resist my intrusion. You've learned to veil your Core, and that's the first step. Your aura is heavy for someone at your tier, but you can make it heavier. Build your Core, continue to advance your bloodline, increase your attributes, and continue to win contests. Nothing can build an aura like deeds accomplished. They become part of your weight in the universe. No wallflower who learns every spell and swallows a thousand rare treasures will ever have the weight of one who's entered hell and come out the other side."

Victor liked the way that sounded. He clenched his fists as he asked, "Can someone who hasn't passed their test of steel resist a veil walker?"

"Oh yes. There are steel-bound cultivators who would pose a serious threat to me. I'm not so sure it would be possible in the iron ranks, but there are prodigies

of all sorts that I've yet to meet. In my many years, Victor, I've met few with the potential you show. Let's focus on keeping you alive so you can reach further heights, though, shall we? Leave off your thoughts of challenging veil walkers for now." Dar finished the last sentence with a chuckle and reached over the glow-lamp to jostle Victor's shoulder.

"All right. I mean, honestly, that makes me feel better. It's nice to know what I need to work on."

"Oh, there is much you need to work on—"

"Yeah, about that, Dar. Can we please set up some kind of schedule until I leave for Ruhn? I'd like to be able to arrange for regular sparring partners and also spend time doing breath Core cultivation with Lesh and—"

"Enough!" Dar laughed, shaking his head. "You're the first in centuries to demand so much! Fine, heed me well: The mornings shall be yours, but you must be prepared to receive my tutelage at half past noon each day. Further, there will be times when I'll set a task before you that will require several days or weeks of effort—your 'partners' will need to make do without you during those times. Understood?"

"Yes! Thank you, Lord Dar." Victor figured using the honorific might earn him a little leeway for being a demanding student.

"Good. Now, let's see how well you listened. Cast Spirit Walk and bring that stone with you."

"Right." Victor reflexively clutched the stone, suddenly hyper-aware of his senses—the smooth, cool surface in his hand, the tickle of the soft breeze on his freshly shorn hair, the distant trill of a nightbird, and the mesmerizing rustle of the leaves high overhead. He took a deep breath, centering himself, then closed his eyes and saw the stone again, focusing on its shape containing the tiny swirls of earth-attuned Energy. He built the pattern for Spirit Walk and, as he sent Energy into it, willed the stone to come with him.

When he opened his eyes, he and Dar sat in a dark, twilight forest. It was the spirit plane version of the grove where he'd left his body. Here, though, the trees were much taller, with vast trunks. They were limned with ethereal light, and the dense boles stretched away as far as he could see; it was a massive forest. Dar looked exactly as he did on the material plane, but he was no longer seated, and Victor could see that his feet hovered above the loamy soil. "Can you fly here?"

"Easily. Look to your hands, apprentice."

Victor looked at his open palms resting on his knees, and when he saw they were both empty, he groaned. "Shit! I thought I had it, for sure!"



“It’s not as trivial as it seems. The stone wants to be in the ground on the material plane. You must overcome its primitive desire with your will. Next time, when you’ve wrapped your intent around it, try to hear its voice, its whispered desire. You have to have a closer connection to it than surface-level.”

“All right.” Victor reached into his pathways and severed his connection to the Spirit Walk spell, plunging himself back into the material plane. Once again, the stone sat heavy in his palm. “You want to be here, huh?” Victor chuckled and hefted the stone, peering at it as though he could see into it somehow. “Come on, hermano. Don’t be an asshole, all right? I’ll bring you back.” Victor closed his eyes and built the pattern for Spirit Walk. Then, before he filled it with Energy, he turned his inner eye on the stone again.

He stared at those tiny whorls of gray-brown Energy. They were dim and, in his estimation, weak; an Earth Elementalist would struggle to cultivate anything of note from this stone. Still, it was evident the stone had a will; it wanted to stay where it was. Victor tried to do what Dar said, staring hard at it, but he couldn’t see any indication of its primitive desire. Then he remembered Dar had said to listen for its “whispered desire.”

Victor inhaled deeply and willed himself to stop hearing the noises of the world around him. He shut out the bird’s trilling song, the leaves’ rustle, the breeze’s whisper, and Dar’s slow, steady inhalations. When he’d imposed his will upon himself to the point where he sat in utter silence, he stared at the stone again, and this time, he caught it—the faintest, strangest sound he’d ever heard. It was like a distant, muffled conversation of which he couldn’t make out a single word. The muttered, droning sound was without intelligence, without design, but it held a definite intent. The stone wanted to be part of the earth—part of the world.

Victor wrapped his will around it, and this time, as he pulled it with him into the spirit plane, he ground out a single word, directed toward the stone, and pitched so it overwhelmed its strange intent-filled drone, “Come!” When he opened his eyes, he looked at his hand and was rewarded to see the gray stone there, solid and real, not limned with the weird phantom light of spirit things. Victor’s lips split in a wide grin, exposing his bright teeth.

“Congratulations, apprentice. You did well, though I feel compelled to inform you that I managed to pull a stone with me onto the spirit plane with my first attempt. Still, success on your second try is an admirable feat. I’ve taught apprentices who required weeks of constant effort to achieve the same.”

“Uh,” Victor chuckled, “thanks, I guess.”

“Back to the material plane, now.” Dar winked out of existence, and Victor quickly canceled his Spirit Walk spell. When he opened his eyes, Dar was hefting the ivory figurine.

“This was once a living thing. A piece of ivory from tavahawk’s horn. Because of its former existence as a piece of something powerful and alive, you’ll find its will somewhat more...tumultuous. For reference, Victor, it took me several hours and close to a hundred attempts to pull a similar object into the spirit plane with me. I was a child, however. Hopefully, you’ll prove yourself more capable.” He stood and held the figurine toward Victor.

Victor took it, and when Dar stepped away toward the lake, he raised an eyebrow. “Oh, are you leaving?”

“I won’t go far. I’ll feel it if you succeed because I’m quite certain it will rank up your Spirit Walk spell.” He pointed toward the lake. “I’ll just step over to the house for an early dinner. Pay attention, Victor; if you were wondering how a veil walker like me might move great distances quickly, this is one method. I’ll bring myself onto the spirit plane, walk quickly to my home, and then emerge back on the material plane.”

“Will I be able to do that?”

“Eventually. First, you must master these three objects. Then, Victor, the fun begins, and you will work to master yourself. You might not realize it, but your body—your very cells—has desires. Once you’ve learned to exert your will over yourself, many doors will open to you.” He gestured to the ivory figurine in Victor’s hand. “Focus on what’s before you, however. After you succeed with the piece of horn, move on to the plant—a complex, living thing. When you’ve emerged victorious, I will return, and we will speak of the next step.”

“Okay, but—” Victor snapped his mouth shut as Dar shimmered and disappeared with a potent swirl of brilliant golden Energy. Victor wanted to be annoyed, but he was too busy feeling excited. How incredible would it be to use the spirit plane to move around? He could walk from the lake house to Sojourn in seconds. Back on Fanwath, he’d covered a thousand miles on the spirit plane in minutes. Could he learn to travel between worlds? “Yes!” He laughed as he recalled Dar talking about “walking” to Ruhn. With a grin, excited to prove he could do it, Victor closed his eyes and turned his attention to the strange golden Energy swirls inside the figurine he held.

Book 9: Chapter 6: Successes and Warnings

Victor managed to bring the carved piece of ivory with him onto the spirit plane after two difficult, aggravating hours. The plant, however, took him nearly a week. After he succeeded, he was awarded with System messages declaring his Spirit Walk spell had ranked up to “improved” and

that he'd be able to "more easily bring lesser beings and objects with him onto the spirit plane with an increased Energy expenditure." The message felt like it had been a long time coming, and Victor's relief and pleasure at seeing those words was on par with when he'd pushed his Berserk into the "epic" rank.

Dar was there to welcome him back to the material plane with words of praise and encouragement. They sat together in the grove of tall, quiet trees and enjoyed a meal together that Dar provided. They spoke about Sojourn, the political scene, and then, at much greater length, about the goings-on around the Lake House. Lesh had been entertaining sparring guests in Victor's absence, just as he had been while Victor had been on Fanwath and secluded in his cultivation cave.

Victor nodded as Dar described Lesh's guests—Drobna and Dovalion Boarheart, the plate-wearing, giant swordsman. He was glad Lesh was keeping up with his practice and also maintaining relationships with some of the stronger fighters in Sojourn. It alleviated some of his guilt for, once again, disappearing for days on end. In truth, he'd tuned out those feelings of guilt along with his recurring despondency regarding Valla. "And what about Lam and the others?"

"They've yet to return from their dungeon expedition." Dar watched him polish off the last hunk of smokey, tangy boar meat. "Well? Are you ready for the next task?"

"I guess. I feel like I learned a lot from my struggles with that stubborn little plant."

"I'm sure you did! The plant's lesson will serve you well as you struggle to convince your physical form to join you on the spirit plane."

"Yeah, I figured that was the point of it." Victor sighed and handed his polished silver plate and fork to Dar. They disappeared into some hidden storage vault as Dar nodded and stood. Victor frowned. "You're leaving? No words of advice?"

"Hah! You know what to do; it's the same task as before, just...harder."

So, just like that, Victor's struggles began anew. Dar hadn't lied; the task was the same, but it was strange as hell—in Victor's colorful opinion—to be battling his own body. Beyond the strangeness of it, he found that his "self" was unreasonably stubborn. It wasn't until three days later, with no sign of success, that he finally had a breakthrough in his thinking; if he couldn't convince his entire body to come with him to the spirit plane, perhaps he could force part of it through.

"What the fuck would that look like?" he asked himself, staring at his hand, wondering what would happen if he dragged his little finger with him into the spirit plane. Would it simply be gone on the material plane? Would a void appear? Would his stump bleed, and would his regeneration begin to grow a new finger? He laughed at the idea and realized his most prominent fear—that he'd somehow permanently remove a piece of himself—wasn't such a terrible worry; his ability to regenerate would make short work of a pinky.

So, with renewed excitement and inspiration—he'd constantly been operating under the influence of his inspiration-based spells—he began to try anew, this time simply focusing on the stubborn

flesh, bone, and blood of his left pinky. The battle of wills was still there, but he could feel the difference. Those living cells put up a fight, but they were not, collectively, as strong as his entire body. When he appeared on the spirit plane and looked down at his hand, he laughed uproariously when he saw a solid, living pinky jutting out from his faintly ethereal, luminescent hand.

When he returned to the material plane, his fears of spattered blood and a stubby, slowly regrowing finger were for naught—the pinky was there, and he could find no evidence of bleeding. Whatever strange magic allowed him to bring just a part of himself onto the spirit plane seemed to defy the rules of physical flesh. With his confidence renewed, Victor got to work trying to bring more and more of himself onto the spirit plane. He managed his hand right away, but his arm defied him.

That resistance drew out Victor's stubbornness, and he doubled down, focusing his will with long hours of meditation. He listened to the Energy in his body and worked to understand its desire to remain where it was. It wanted to be part of the light of the sun and stars. It wanted to be grounded to the planet. It wanted to be surrounded by air and to taste the moisture in the breeze. It wanted to feel the waves of sound bouncing against and through it—sounds of animals, plants, people, and things. Victor used each of those desires against himself, making levers out of them and pressing his will against them.

The hours bled into days, bled into weeks, and it wasn't until sixteen days later that Victor finally achieved victory over himself, dragging his stubborn, recalcitrant flesh and blood—his entire body—with him onto the spirit plane. When he finally did it, when he opened his eyes and saw his solid, living, naked flesh sitting on the luminous loam of the magical, ghostly forest of the spirit plane, Victor tilted his head back and howled at the stars.

He stood and danced, howling and crowing, struggling to believe his battle was over; those weeks had been the most frustrating, annoying, mind-bogglingly boring days he could recall, and it was like a wave of constant relief and new-found excitement kept rolling through him every time he looked at his hands, flexing his fingers into fists in front of his very real, very solid eyes. Only after he'd howled his lungs out several times did he notice the heavy drain of Energy on his Core. When he looked inward, his eyes bulged when he saw he was nearly drained and that Energy was pouring out of his Core at an astonishing rate.

Before he ran himself dry, Victor hastily ended his Spirit Walk spell, and as soon as the material plane snapped into existence around him, he was bombarded with System messages:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have learned a new spell – Spirit Walk: Advanced.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Spirit Walk – Advanced: Prerequisite: any spirit-based Energy affinity. Using the fundamental, primal nature of your Energy, you send forth and sustain your spirit on its essential plane of existence. You've mastered the innate resistance of your flesh and can now walk physically upon the Spirit Plane. Be warned that your body will be vulnerable to harm in ways your projected spirit would not. The duration of this spell is dependent on your Energy stores. Manifesting a physical presence on the spirit plane is extremely costly. Energy Cost: Minimum 50 - scalable. Cooldown: Short.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 69 Herald of the Mountain's Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Voice of the Angry Earth – Basic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Voice of the Angry Earth – Basic: Prerequisite: titanic, colossal, or gargantuan bloodline. Channel the volcano's fury, projecting it in a roar that will brutalize the senses of your foes. Drive them to their knees with the power of your voice, reminding all who stand before you that just because it slumbers does not mean the mountain is at peace. The power of your roar will be influenced by the strength of your aura and the amount of Energy you pour into the spell. Energy Cost: Minimum 2000, scalable. Cooldown: Medium.\*\*\***

Seeing those messages made Victor feel like the many days he'd spent struggling against his own body had been worth it. A broad smile split his face, exposing white, straight teeth, and he laughed, clapping his mighty hands together. "Yes! That's what I'm talking about!" With eager anticipation, he looked at his attributes:

**Name:**

**Victor Sandoval**

**Race:**

**Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 2**

**Class:**

**Herald of the Mountain's Wrath - Legendary**

**Level:**

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

**69**

**Breath Core:**

**Elder Class - Improved 3**

**Core:**

**Spirit Class - Epic 2**

**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:**

**433/35458**

**Strength:**

**478**

**Vitality:**

**628 (691)**

**Dexterity:**

**190**

**Agility:**

**213**

**Intelligence:**

**172**

**Will:**

**661**

He laughed when he saw his current Energy level; he really had almost drained himself by bringing his physical form onto the spirit plane, and he'd only been there for a couple of minutes. He turned toward the lake, thinking it might be amusing to try out his new spell, but Dar was already standing there.

“That was well done, Victor. I was pleased when I saw you work on bringing your body through piece by piece. I thought I might give you that guidance, but my master did not do so for me, so I thought it might be wise to follow his example. It seems I was right; you gained much from the effort.” He stepped closer, resting his large, heavy hand on Victor’s shoulder. “While you were on the spirit plane, I noted the Energy infusion hanging heavy in the air—you gained a level?”

“Yes!” Victor was too exuberant to hold back. “My Spirit Walk is now ‘advanced!’ and I gained a new Class spell—Voice of the Angry Earth.”

“A shout ability? This will pair well with your feats and bloodline boons!” He nodded, tugging Victor’s shoulder. “Come, let’s walk toward the house. You’ve secluded long enough and accomplished the only thing that was absolutely necessary before your journey to Ruhn.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I have the strength and reserves of Energy to pull a being like you onto the spirit plane, but I would have struggled to pull you all the way to Ruhn. Now, you can do the lion’s share of the lifting where you are concerned.”

“Um, I don’t know about that; I ran dry on Energy after only a couple of minutes —”

Dar waved his hand. “You’ll work on that over the next few months. Each day, before you rest, you’ll project your physical form onto the spirit plane. With practice, you’ll extend the time you can hold yourself there. Our journey will take less than an hour. As long as you can hold yourself on the spirit plane for that duration, I can do the work of moving us.”

Victor nodded. If there was one thing he understood, it was grinding out incremental gains. “So I have time?”

“Yes. The hardest part is getting yourself there. Imagine how much work it was to do that; now imagine doing it for another person. You’ll be able to, eventually, but it’s taxing.” As he spoke, Victor and Dar descended the path to the lakeshore, where a small wooden boat bobbed in the shallow water, bumping into the shore with each gentle wave. Dar pointed to it. “Climb aboard, and I’ll ferry us back to the house. Tomorrow, you’ll begin that routine you pestered me about.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how ready I am to get some sparring in, Lord Dar. I was going nuts sitting in that grove day after day.” Victor sloshed through the shallow water, his boots and pants sloughing the water off like a seal’s skin. He climbed onto the little boat and added, “If I hadn’t figured out how to bring myself over to the spirit plane little by little, I would have gone mad. Seeing the progress day by day kept me going.”

Dar nodded. “You’ve earned some exercise. The mastery of your body’s will and the ability to physically walk on that plane are both keys to greater powers.” Dar nudged the rudder, and the boat turned and began to speed silently over the water, leaving a long, deep wake as it rushed toward the center of the dark water. Dar continued, “For example, you can now move, unseen, unfelt, and much more quickly, from point to point on the material plane. When you’ve gained more Energy and an even stronger will, I’ll teach you how to bridge worlds. The spirit plane doesn’t have ‘worlds’—it is all-encompassing, but the expanse between planets is too vast for a normal walk.”

“I was wondering about that!” Victor took in the stars and moon, enjoying the rush of cool lake air against his face and through his hair.

Dar was quiet for a minute, but as the lake house came into view, he said, “You’ll spar in the mornings, as I promised. Your follower has arranged for new partners each day for the two of you. After sparring, you’ll be given two hours to cultivate your breath Core. After that, I’ll have lessons for you. I’ve decided that a course on runic structure will serve you the most at this time. Many rituals—like the one we did for your friend, Lam—require knowledge of sigils and runes. They serve as a way to channel and direct your Energy, giving it purpose much the way that a spell pattern does.”

Victor nodded emphatically. “I’ve wanted to learn about that stuff!”

“Good! Moreover, the knowledge will help you on Ruhn. If you’re victorious in your duels, you’ll be given treasures and gifts, and many will likely be enchanted. It would be dangerous to expose a gap in your education by relying

on others to explain those treasures. Never mind that you wouldn't know if you could trust the person aiding you."

Before Victor could check himself, his tongue got away from him. "What about Elder magic?"

Dar looked at him and frowned. "What of it?"

"Do you know how to read it? The spell patterns and sigils and—"

"Better to avoid curiosity about that, Victor. Many have found their downfalls dabbling with pre-System rituals." He sighed, and as the boat sped toward the pier outside his home, he turned his blazing eyes on Victor and, in a much sterner voice, said, "People more powerful than I have destroyed themselves pursuing Elder magic—literally and figuratively. I've seen a man rip himself apart, atom by atom, and I've seen a woman go mad to the point where even a racial advancement treasure was wasted on her, unable to salvage her wits."

"Really?" Victor frowned. "I had it in my head that maybe part of being a steel seeker or becoming a veil walker was learning to do Elder magic. Like, it was a time for us to learn to grow without the System guiding—"

"That's not correct." Dar turned the rudder, slowing the boat and bringing it up alongside the pier. "The System will still be there. It will still award you and provide guidance, but you'll have more freedom to direct your development—this all begins at level one hundred when you build your Class."

"Ah, I see. Yeah, I knew about that—the Class building, I mean. I just thought maybe it was the first step of being free of—"

"Turn your mind from such fantasies, Victor." Dar stepped out of the boat, hardly causing it to dip into the water, and it took Victor a moment to realize the huge, weighty man must be adjusting his weight somehow; how else could he keep the little vessel from shifting in the water? By contrast, Victor had to use every ounce of his agility to avoid falling as the boat tipped and rocked under his feet. When they were both on the solid planks of the pier, Dar clapped his shoulder and walked with him toward the stairs leading up to the house. "Tell me, what got you so interested in Elder magic?"

Rather than be caught out in a lie, Victor shared part of the truth: "When I was on Zaafor, in the city of Coloss. I met another traveler who claimed to be from a world where the System had been rebuked; she said the people there used Elder magic."

Dar stopped and pressed Victor's shoulder, turning him until they were face to face. "Is this one of the secrets you've held back from me?"

Again, Victor didn't want to lie. He knew better. "Yeah. She made me swear not to reveal her identity."



Dar nodded. “It’s good that you understand the weight of such a promise. Well, you’ve heard my words of caution. You’re no child. I do hope you’ll heed me, however. Now,” he turned back toward the house, “let us feast and share your good news with your follower.”

As they walked up the steps, Victor thought about Dar’s warning and his earlier assumptions about Elder magic and the System. There was certainly something that he was missing. He didn’t believe that Dar knew nothing about Elder magic; it simply didn’t make sense. The man had been around for millennia, and Victor had only been walking in this part of the universe for something like two or three years if he were guessing—he really didn’t know. How could he know more about such a subject than Dar? He could believe he knew more than the other iron rankers in Sojourn; they’d led sheltered existences, but Dar had been places—conquered worlds.

He supposed Dar’s admission that he’d seen people ruin themselves pursuing Elder magic was enough to spell the truth: his master knew much more but wanted to shelter Victor from dangerous knowledge. As they made their way into the house and Dar sent one of the servants to look for Lesh, Victor sat down, still deep in thought. His mind kept returning to the book he’d found in the Iron Prison. He was sure it contained writings in the same script of the spell Tes had taught him. Despite Dar’s warnings, he hoped his lessons with the master Spirit Caster on runes and glyphs would help him wring some secrets out of that book.

“You seem very lost in thought, Victor. Are you still dwelling on our earlier discussion?” Victor looked up to see Dar, a drink in hand, taking a seat on one of the plush couches.

Victor smiled and tried to steer the conversation to a safer topic. “I was, but now I’m thinking about my Class and the spell I just learned. I’m going to be choosing a new refinement at the next level. Do you think there’s any chance I’ll reach seventy before I leave for Ruhn?”

“Not likely. Not unless you kill someone—or many people, depending on their strength.” Dar chuckled. “The last level in any tier is always the steepest, and gaining levels through cultivation or skill and spell improvement is a slow way to go about doing it. You did so tonight, thanks to the fact that you were already on the cusp.”

“Right. Yeah. I suppose that makes sense.”

“I’ve been thinking, Victor. We should talk about your strategy when you get to Ruhn. I’ll keep it brief for now since you’ve had a long day and deserve some rest before tomorrow’s tribulations, but consider this: My granddaughter has two kingdoms practically laying siege against her. They’ve been pressing her for duels, so they’ll be quick to receive her acceptance of their challenges. I believe it would be wise for you to win those battles using very few of your abilities, perhaps even using a weapon other than your precious axe. The less you show,

the easier a time she'll have when she moves to consolidate her new position and challenge other neighboring kingdoms.”

“Wait a sec.” Victor chuckled, shaking his head. “You want me to fight some steel seekers without Lifedrinker? Without using my abilities?”

“They'll likely not be steel seekers. Those kingdoms are small and weak—not far above Kynna's in terms of might and prosperity. In my estimation, it won't be until you've had a few victories before you begin to find yourself faced by a steel seeker.” When he saw Victor's scowl, he added. “It's just a thought. Think about it as you train; the less your enemies know about you, the better.” He nodded his head toward the hallway leading to the foyer. “I hear your draconic follower approaching. Enjoy the night—tomorrow your training will be...intense.”

Book 9: Chapter 7: A Review

On the third day of the fourth week of Victor's new “routine,” Dar called him into the library late in the evening and asked him to sit down. Dar stood facing out toward the lake, but Victor saw a tea service arranged on the small table between two chairs, so he chose one of those two seats, wondering what the late-night meeting was regarding. This was the hour Victor usually reserved for reviewing his lessons on runic structure, writing correspondence to his friends and loved ones, and, occasionally, cultivating Energy in his chamber beneath the house.

He hadn't done much cultivation for his Spirit Core, but he didn't feel guilty about that; Dar had instructed him to put it lower on his list of priorities simply because Victor gained so much Core development from eating hearts—a boon most Energy cultivators couldn't fathom. He had been working on his Breath Core, however. After sparring each morning, he and Lesh gathered Energy in the garden. Victor kept his magma-attuned Energy heart next to Lesh's acid-emitting plant, and by the time they sat down to cultivate each day, the canopy they'd built over the plant was thick with roiling Energy. His Breath Core had gained two ranks and Lesh's nearly four—only to be expected, considering Lesh was starting from the “base” ranks.

“Pour yourself a cup of tea, Victor.” Dar didn't turn away from the windows, but his voice seemed relaxed, so Victor's budding unease about the unscheduled meeting receded. He did as Dar suggested and poured himself a cup of steaming, slightly green-tinged liquid. “It's an herbal mix from the world of Jovir—one of the twelve Radevian Empire worlds. The Radevians discovered Sojourn nearly a thousand years ago and established robust trade channels with other worlds under Sojourn's influence. There are some beautiful fresh-water seas on Jovir, and their agricultural exploits are renowned in this part of the universe.”

Victor sipped the tea and found it slightly bitter with an odd ginger aftertaste. Rather than profess his less than enthusiastic reception to the flavor, he asked a related question, “Do you know how many worlds are...I guess I don’t know the right term. Subjects? Of Sojourn, I mean.”

“Sojourn doesn’t rule other worlds, at least not directly. However, many of the veil walkers who call Sojourn home have led conquests—military, financial, humanitarian, and even evangelical—of nearby systems. It’s more accurate to say that many worlds are influenced by Sojourn and not ruled over. Last time I heard the matter discussed, there were nearly two hundred thousand worlds under Sojourn’s influence.” Dar turned and walked over, sitting in the other chair by the tea service.

“That sounds like a lot to me.” Victor frowned. “I suppose you’d be including Fanwath in that number, considering Sojourn was the first ‘hub world’ the System provided a teleportation to?”

“Indeed, not to mention the rulers of Fanwath have been coming to Sojourn for hundreds of years, absorbing our culture and sharing bits of yours.”

“Not really mine,” Victor chuckled.

“You understand my meaning.” Dar didn’t wait for Victor to acknowledge the fact. He poured himself some tea and asked, “Let’s review your progress. Start with your sparring. How go things with the various brawlers you’ve brought in from Sojourn?”

“Um...” Victor gulped the rest of his tea, set the delicate cup on the table, and leaned back, crossing one ankle over his knee and clearing his throat. “They go well. One thing I’ve come to learn, being immersed in the System, is how much we all come to rely on it to measure progress. Fighting with Drobna, Valeska, Sora, Brontes...” Victor paused and held out his fingers, running the names through his mind as he counted. “Oh yeah, and Dovalion—they each have different styles, and I’ve learned something from them all. The System doesn’t reflect that. My axe skill is still epic; my strength, vitality, and agility are all the same as they were a month ago, but I know I’m better. Does that make sense?”

“Indeed it does, Victor, and now you begin to unveil the truth of levels and tiers—the reason you have pounded the blood and shit from men and women more than thirty levels above you is because what you’ve noticed doesn’t just stop at weapon skills. Talent, heart, drive, muscle memory, bloodlines—I could go on and on; all the little intangibles add up to something very tangible indeed. You aren’t the first to feel that way. Tell me, can you think of a single person you’ve met recently who reminded you of yourself, perhaps uncomfortably so?”

Victor’s answer was immediate, “Ronkerz.”

“Hah!” Dar slapped his hands together. “Just so! Ronkerz was much like you in his youth—challenged at every turn, hardened in a crucible of suffering and opposition. Unlike you, he didn’t have the benefit of a Spirit Core or the wise tutelage of a kind master.” Dar smirked. “Still, there’s much about you that evokes his memory. I’ve made contact with him; you should know.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. He’s determined to have vengeance against the great masters of Sojourn, but I’m working with him to think of a wiser plan. Even if he raised up a hundred veil walkers in that dungeon, he’d be outnumbered twenty-to-one if he assaulted the city or the Council Spire.”

“How do you communicate with—” Victor grinned and leaned forward. “The spirit plane?”

“Indeed, lad. No place is beyond the bounds of the spirit plane. When you learn to bridge worlds through that misty realm, you, too, could come and go from a place like the Iron Prison. Of course, wards could be put up, making such travel impossible, but the Iron Prison wasn’t meant to hold the likes of me—or you once you have the Energy and will to travel that way.”

“It’s not something an iron ranker could do?”

“Only a tiny percentage of them might be able to. I won’t be surprised if you pull it off before you become a steel seeker. We’ll see.” Dar drained his tea and poured a new cup. “Now, you’ve mentioned your axe skill, but didn’t I suggest you begin your duels on Ruhn with something other than your beloved weapon? Have you practiced with another weapon?”

“Oh!” Victor snapped his fingers. “Yeah! My ‘Spear Mastery’ is up to improved.”

“Good. Focus on that until you leave; it would be wise to have the forms and knowledge granted with advanced mastery at your disposal before your first duel.” Dar took a sip, sighed heavily, and looked toward the window where the moon hung large in the star-filled sky. “So your sparring goes well. Tell me of your Breath Core cultivation.”

“It’s good. I’ve gained two ranks—halfway to advanced now.”

“Good. You should see a large increase in magma-attuned Energy when you break through to advanced.” He reached up to straighten the collar of his flowing purple tunic. He tsked as he pulled a loose thread away. “We both know how you’re doing with runes. You’ve mastered two alphabets and can decipher basic System enchantments and the most common Artificer script. I’ve decided that I’m going to teach you a set of Elder glyphs.”

Enjoying the story? Show your support by reading it on the official site.

Victor's eyes bulged. "I thought you said—"

"I know what I said, and I stand by it. Elder magic is dangerous. If you don't harm yourself, there's a good chance the System will mark you and label you a disruptor."

At those words, Victor's heart began to pound, and he had to look down so Dar couldn't read the guilt in his eyes. Wasn't that what the strange duo, Fox and Three, had called him on the spirit plane when he created his Wild Totem spell? He coughed to cover his reaction, then, clearing his throat as though his tea had gone down the wrong pipe, he asked, "What happens if the System decides I'm a disruptor?"

"It will try to weed you out, issuing quests to powerful folk to remove you. So, I will teach you, but I must stress caution."

"Why?" When Dar looked at him and scowled, Victor hastily added, "I mean, why will you teach me, not why should I use caution."

"Because you are not a child, and I know that, were I in your shoes, I'd likely seek the knowledge on my own, and then my risk would be magnified." Dar shrugged. "So, we'll learn a bit about Elder scripts, starting with a set of glyphs used to enchant items by people who lived in this section of the universe a hundred millennia before I was born."

"That's..." Victor fumbled for words and decided to turn his filter off for just a moment. "That's fucking awesome, Dar! Thank you!"

"Hah! There's the enthusiasm I was looking for. I've meant to ask you, Victor, how fares your heart? Are you sleeping well? Do you keep a journal?"

Victor fidgeted, suddenly uncomfortable. "Journal?"—he chose the least troubling of the topics Dar mentioned.

"Do you write how you feel each day? It's a routine that has served me well over the years."

"Not exactly, but I write in Farscribe books—to friends back home and Edeya when she and the others are out in dungeons. I have a book I share with my cousin, Olivia, and I have one with Valla." He didn't mention the fact that Valla had written to him twice, and he'd yet to respond.

Dar narrowed his eyes, clearly not buying it. "If that is so, I applaud your ability to process feelings. Of course, I say that without reading what you write, but it's good that you confide in people you feel close to. If you find it difficult to share some things, even with those loved ones, you might try a journal, however. I write in one each night before I sleep."

"Really?" Victor had difficulty imagining the Master Spirit Caster would need any such mental therapy.

“Yes, ‘really.’ You say that word far too often.” Dar chuckled, shaking his head, then added, his voice a good deal sterner. “You’ll begin writing in your journal each night. I don’t care what you write, but you’ll write something. If you only describe your day, that’s fine. If you begin that way and find yourself writing more heartfelt things, all the better. This journal will be private; I won’t ever expect you to share it with me. Understood?”

Victor felt himself grinding his teeth together, but he nodded and asked, “Is there some reason? Am I acting...bothered?”

“You’re acting a bit too unbothered, in my estimation. I believe using a journal to express your feelings will be good for your spirit. Enough about that for now. Tell me about your spirit walks. How long can you hold your physical form on the spirit plane now?”

“Last night, I managed nearly fifteen minutes.”

“Excellent! Another example of how one can improve without any notification from the System. What you’re doing is strengthening and widening the tiny pathways in your body where the Energy of that spell takes root, pulling your flesh onto the spirit plane. Keep it up, and the System will eventually notice and rank up your spell. At the epic tier, you’ll be able to hold yourself there with ease.”

“That’s encouraging.” Victor poured himself more tea—it was beginning to grow on him.

“Have you given thought to your gift for Kynna?”

“Ahem...” Victor coughed, sputtering tea into his cup. “Gift?”

Dar chuckled. “Didn’t we speak about this? Didn’t I say—”

“That I should have a gift ready when I meet someone of note.” Victor sighed and knocked his knuckles on his forehead. “Yeah, of course, meeting the queen would qualify.”

“Don’t despair; I know you have much on your mind. That’s why I’ve reminded you. I would provide the gift for you, but she’s crafty; she’ll know if it came from me.”

“Dar,” Victor groaned, leaning back, “I don’t know a thing about her. Does she like weapons? Tea?” He gestured to the delicate white kettle with its fanciful blue, hand-painted flowers.

“Let’s see. Like most people on Ruhn, she’s of giant proportions, not unlike you and I. She’s a skilled huntress, and her preferred weapon is a great-bow. From the letters she’s sent me recently, though, it’s clear her duties at court have

taken the forefront in her life. Every spare moment is spent countering the schemes of her besieging neighbors. When you arrive to replace her current court champion, I'm certain there will be much fanfare; it will be seen as the kingdom's last chance to climb out of ruination. I'm afraid she's already done much to advertise your impending arrival."

Victor groaned again and waved a hand. "I'm nervous enough already! You're supposed to be giving me ideas for a gift!"

"Oh, yes. Where was I?" He began to tick qualities off on his fingers. "Tall, hunts with a great-bow, spends her time trying to save her kingdom—queendom, really—I believe she wears dresses, appreciates fruit and flowers, and—" Dar cut himself off as he began to laugh, shaking his head. "I'm no help, Victor. Half of those qualities are guesses. I don't know her at all. Her letters talk about the kingdom, its dire straits, and the things she does to counter the undermining efforts of her neighbors."

"All right, hold up. We always talk about Kynna's 'kingdom' or, yeah, 'queendom,' but what's it called? What are her neighbors called?"

"An excellent point, Victor. It's time you began to learn these things. My erstwhile kingdom was called Gloria. Can you guess why?"

Victor smirked. "Because, like me, you have an affinity for glory?"

"Precisely!" Dar slapped his knee with a cacophonous report. "Kynna's neighbor to the north is Frostmarch, a kingdom that spans her entire border and half again as far to the east and west. It's a country rich in acreage, but most is rather bleak. Frostmarch is ruled by a man named Wil Vennar, and his champion goes by a single name: Obert."

"Obert?" Victor raised an eyebrow.

"A giant, hairy, hard-headed man who cut his teeth fighting hordes of snow ogres along Frostmarch's northern border." Dar tilted the teapot to fill his cup, and Victor realized the thing must have a dimensional container built into it; they'd drained more than a gallon of the stuff since he'd been sitting there. "The Kingdom of Xan occupies Kynna's southern border. Bors Groff is Xan's king, and his champion is Qi Pot, of whom I know very little."

"Kee?"

"Yes, but it's spelled with a 'Q' and an 'i.' Kynna says he's formidable, and her current champion, Foster Green, is terrified that he'll have to duel him."

Victor nodded, rubbing his chin, visualizing a map in his head. "So those two countries are larger than hers, and they sandwich her?"

“More than that—Xan has conquered her neighbor to the east and Frostmarch, her neighbor to the west. Between the two, she is utterly surrounded. Her people starve, and soon, barring intervention, she’ll be forced to yield her lands or force poor old Foster to duel, in which case he’ll die, and she’ll lose her lands anyway.”

“Damn. Are you being literal? Are people actually starving? I feel like we should send me over there right fucking now!”

“The risks involved, should I fail to hold you on the spirit plane while traversing worlds, are too great. No, you must be able to hold your spirit there long enough to make the journey. You’ve worked hard and done your best; any delay is on my shoulders. Recall that I’ve had Kynna’s request for years. Though, in my defense, the perfect solution wasn’t apparent until I knew you better.” Dar waved his hand, dismissing the notion. “Now, let’s get to the point of this meeting.”

“Oh, this wasn’t it?” Victor waved a hand between himself and Dar, indicating their conversation.

“Partially, partially, but I wanted to tell you that I’ll be gone tomorrow, so our lesson will be canceled. I have an alternative assignment for you: Go into the city, find a gift for Kynna, and purchase the armor upgrades you’ve been pestering me about.”

Victor grinned. He’d been wanting to go to the Sojourn City Stone and upgrade his set pieces since getting back from Fanwath and simply hadn’t had the opportunity. “Is there anyone else I should purchase a gift for?”

“Yes! Good question, student! Foster Green will retire when you arrive, and you should give him a token. For him, I’d suggest a fine, aged liquor. Don’t skimp.”

“Got it.”

“Good. As soon as you finish your morning practice and cultivation, you may have Mr. Qwor drive you into the city. Any questions?”

“You’ll be back the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, and we will begin your lesson in the Elder glyphs.” Dar stood and, as he smoothed down the front of his silken tunic, added, “Now, go and practice your Spirit Walk. When you finish, write in your journal.”

Victor stood. He smiled, and it came easily; he was a good deal more relaxed after his talk with Dar than he had been coming into the meeting. “All right. I’ll do that.”

Dar reached a hand to his shoulder, grasping it firmly. “You know, Victor, I would never eavesdrop on you in your private room. I might have dominion over this house, but I respect your privacy. I won’t watch over your shoulder, just as I wouldn’t listen to your voice. Whatever you put in that



journal, whatever you mutter aloud in your sleep—those things are yours alone and will never leave the walls of your chamber.”

“I...” Victor frowned, then sighed and nodded. “I appreciate that, Dar. I think I get why you’re saying that. I’ll write in my journal tonight, and I won’t hold back.”

When Dar released his shoulder with a nod, Victor left, walking down the short hallway to his quarters. He closed the door behind him with a resounding click, then looked at the bed and his nest of blankets beside it on the floor. Despite his bravado and denial, it was true that something was up with him. Why else could he barely summon the courage to look at the empty bed?

With a growl, he dug around in one of his storage rings for a blank notebook, and then he stomped over to his writing desk, stacked high with books about runes and magical scripts. If Dar thought he should write about what he was feeling, he supposed he could do that. Scowling, pressing much harder than he needed to, he began to write, and the first words that came to mind surprised him:

*Dear Valla,*

Book 9: Chapter 8: Ideas

Drobna laughed—an exhausted, wheezing laugh, but a laugh all the same—and fell to the sand, rocking side to side on his leathery shell as he clutched his sore shoulder. “Old gods, Victor! I’ve had enough!”

Victor grinned and leaned against his spear, the butt firmly planted in the practice ring sand. It was a bright, sunny morning, made brighter still by the glowing orb of inspiration-attuned Energy that hung over their heads. He watched Droba lying there, rocking side to side, using his “inner eye” to observe the rage fleeing the man’s pathways and retreating toward his Core. Drobna had been berserk during their last match—Victor hadn’t.

It said a lot that he could beat the warrior, enraged as he’d been, even though he’d only used his inspiration-based spells and a spear. It was a matter of toughness, he supposed. Add to that his uncanny ability to heal and his potent secondary abilities like Sovereign Will, and he was just too much for a guy with nothing but brute force going for him. Drobna was tough and had a great attitude, but Victor had learned the secret to beating him was simply to outlast his rage, and, surprisingly, the spear made that even easier. It was an excellent weapon for creating distance between himself and his foe.

He stepped forward and held out a hand, hauling Drobna to his feet. “I take it you haven’t broken through with your Berserk yet?”

“Nah. Still advanced.” Drobna bent to brush the sand off his legs. He looked toward the edge of the ring. “Lesh? Up for a rematch?”

Lesh was seated on the ground, Belagog, his massive cudgel resting on his shoulder. “Thanks, Drob, but I’m eager to head to my cultivation garden. I’m close to a breakthrough of my own.”

Drobna looked at Victor with his smooth brows arched. Victor shook his head. “I’ve too much to do today. When’s your next day on the schedule?”

“Five days hence,” Drobna sighed. “These sparring matches are wonderful! I wish I could come every day.”

“Well...” Victor looked at Lesh, frowning for a moment as he contemplated. “Why don’t you get the names of the other people on the schedule? I think Valeska’s coming tomorrow—check with her; if you two want to spar when Lesh and I are done, I don’t mind you using this space.”

“Ah, thanks, Victor, but it’s just not the same without your inspiration Energy thick in the air like this. My time between sessions is better spent in a dungeon or cultivating.”

“All right.” Victor shrugged. “I’ll be gone in a couple of months, though. Might be good for you to make some connections. Lesh will be wanting to do some dungeons, and I bet between you two and the other folks we’ve been sparring with, you could build a solid team.”

Lesh grunted his agreement. “I’ll write up some plans, Drobna. Don’t worry, I won’t forget about you.”

Drobna nodded, and that conversation marked the end of their sparring for the day. Victor, still leaning on his spear, watched him leave. The spear was one of the better-made mundane ones he’d taken from Karnice in Coloss. He had a few very nice spears but had yet to pick his favorite. The terror-attuned spear was potent, but it didn’t have the proper heft for Victor’s robust frame. A couple of others, though, like the fourteen-foot one he currently held, must have seemed enormous to Karnice. Still, he had the mind to trade it and some others for a spear made for a giant like himself—something heavy and long and with an oversized, nigh-indestructible blade that he could use in situations where Lifedrinker wasn’t ideal.

As Drobna turned the corner and his footsteps faded with distance, Lesh asked, “You’re disappointed?”

Victor frowned in puzzlement, turning his gaze back to the darkly scaled, hulking figure. “About?”

“Drobna. I can tell you’d hoped to learn more about your Berserk, but it seems you are the one doing the teaching.”

“My abuelita always said, ‘The best way to learn is to teach what you know.’ It’s funny because she didn’t say it to me; she said it to my older cousins who didn’t want to let me play football in the street or join them playing other games.” Victor barked a short, loud laugh. “Even video games!”

“It seems you’ve taken her lesson to heart, however it was initially intended.” Lesh stood with a grunt. “To the garden?”

Victor thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “Dar gave me the afternoon off, and I just thought of another thing I want to do in town. I think I’ll skip cultivation today. I’d ask you to come, but I know you’re close to breaking through to improved...” Victor left the statement hanging, giving Lesh the chance to object. The dragonkin didn’t, however.

“Yes, I’d prefer to stay here. Thank you, though.” He frowned—a fearsome expression on his fang-lined snout. “Speaking of staying here, have you had word from Lam and the others?”

Victor nodded, stepping closer to his friend. “I heard from Edeya last night. She said they’re having a lot of fun. The dungeon they’re in is enormous. It’s set up like a perpetual war between two factions—pirates and a beleaguered city-state. The city provides missions, and the party in the dungeon has to carry them out. They have a week-long access window, but inside the dungeon, there’s some time dilation—to Edeya, they’ve already been inside for two months.”

Lesh’s eyes bulged. “I should seek such a place!”

Victor laughed. “Yeah, I think there are a few dungeons with dilations that severe, but they’re hard to get into. Trin’s connections made this one happen for them. I bet if you build a team with some of the folks we’ve been sparring with, you’ll have the clout you need to swing something like that.”

“Yes!” Lesh nodded enthusiastically. “Dovalion is something of a local hero, and Valeska was once teamed with Arona—everyone in Sojourn knows her name.”

Victor clapped Lesh on the shoulder. “Exactly, my friend. You’re going to do well here while I’m gone. I’ll see you this evening, yeah?”

“Indeed. I hope I’ll have good news for you.” Lesh thumped his chest, indicating his Breath Core. Victor nodded, gave his shoulder another punch, then walked up the path leading to the house. When he reached the front door, he looked at the servant standing there and smiled. “Hey, Wensa, can you let Mr. Qwor know I’ll need him and the coach in about twenty minutes? I’m heading into the city.”

“Yes, sir!” Before he could reiterate that it wasn’t urgent, the girl sprinted down the path toward the coach house.

“Thanks!” he called after her, chuckling as he pulled the door open, intent on taking a quick shower before leaving. Just about fifteen minutes later, after washing the blood and sweat from his hair and body, he was back outside, striding toward the coach where Mr. Qwor stood, ready to open the door.

This novel is published on a different platform. Support the original author by finding the official source.

“Into the city, sir?”

“Yeah. We’ll head to the Council Spire first; I have business with the City Stone.”

“Excellent.” Mr. Qwor opened the door, and Victor hopped inside, grateful to Dar for having giant-sized things. He slid into one of the plush leather seats and watched out the window. As soon as the coach was airborne and streaming away from the lake house, he pulled the heavy, silver-runed, black bone from his storage ring and held it in his hand. “Arona?”

With a shiver of cold air that seemed to blow from nowhere and everywhere, a luminescent blue apparition took shape in the coach with him. Looking much as he remembered her in life, Arona stood before him, her small, black-booted feet failing to make any impression on the plush carpeting. “The ether feels...the same. We’re still on Sojourn?” Despite the lack of flesh, her voice was as raspy as ever.

“Yeah. Still a couple of months before we leave. Lesh mentioned you earlier while we were sparring, and it got me thinking about you. I figured it would be safe to talk to you while flying through the air; we’re not in any lord’s domain, right?”

She nodded. “Certainly not any undead lords.”

“So? Are you doing all right?”

“I am. My phylactery is spacious and contains many of my favorite things, as I told you before. I’ve been studying and reading for pleasure. I listen to music and while away the hours dabbling with my spell patterns.” She tried to rest her ghostly hand on his knee, but it passed through, failing to do anything but give Victor a slight, chilly sensation. “And you? Are you faring well?”

“Yeah. I’m learning a lot from Dar. I haven’t told you much about where we’re going or what I’ll be doing. Aren’t you curious?”

“Of course! But our time was short while I stood whispering to you in Dar’s garden. It’s a miracle he didn’t sus us out!”

Victor smiled crookedly. “I dunno. Dar’s oddly respectful of privacy for an old master.” He pointed to the seat to his left. “Can you sit? I might as well tell you a little about what’s coming. We have a half hour or so before we get to the city.”

Arona looked at the plush couch and shrugged. “I can’t feel discomfort, but if it will make you more comfortable...” She floated over to the seat and sat down, though the leather didn’t move, and it seemed she was floating slightly above it.

“So, Dar’s got some extended family he left behind on a world called Ruhn. His granddaughter is a queen there, and...” Victor tried to abbreviate the situation as much as possible, hoping to leave room to talk to Arona about other things before they reached the city. As he wrapped up the tale with Dar’s explanation of “Gloria’s” besieging neighbors, she nodded and gently tapped her chin.

“It seems you’ll be well-situated to request meetings with high-ranking individuals in Kynna’s court. I would think you might be able to meet with a Death Caster without raising any suspicions.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. There’s something else I haven’t told you, something I can do.”

Arona's dark, angular brows shot up on her ghostly forehead. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I had a friend, back on Fanwath, who picked up an artifact that 'granted' her a death-attuned Core. It's a long story, but she ended up getting infected—possessed, really—by a Death Caster without a body. I chased him out of her with my spirit-attuned Energy, and, in the process, I gave her a spirit affinity. Since then, she's been cultivating spirit Energy and slowly altering her Core, minimizing the death-attuned Energy and—"

"Could you do this for me?" Arona leaned forward, her dark eyes wide and intense, glimmering with the strange inner light of her spirit form.

"That's what I'm wondering. I wonder if it would be a mistake to have a Death Caster help you. Maybe there's another way to get you a, uh, body."

"There are..." Arona's eyes grew distant as she contemplated things. "Some Death Casters have created vessels out of magical materials—golems or constructs. Even so, they maintained their Death Core, which was likely due to how they created their vessel. Some treasures can be used to form a Core in such a vessel, and I'm sure the materials impact the type. If I were to do as I originally planned and have a Death Caster prepare a dead body for me, then my spiritual essence would dictate the Core's type and strength; it would be just like the one from my former body. This is all beside the point you made, though—there may be a way for you to help me, regardless of the type of vessel."

Victor nodded. "I'd like to do that for you. I know you aren't happy being a Death Caster."

"You've given me much to think about, Victor! With the resources you may have available to you on Ruhn, and with the knowledge that you seem to be able to impart spirit-attuned Energy... Yes, much to think about and research!" Her excitement was evident; her tone had lightened, her eyes shone, and she leaned forward with an intensity to her gaze that Victor wasn't used to. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome. I mean, I know you wanted to get away from Ve—"

"Don't say it!" Arona reached as though to put a hand over his mouth, but he only felt a waft of cold air.

"Right. Anyway, I know you want to get away from him, but I think you'll be even safer if you somehow figure out how to not be a Death Caster, you know?"

"Yes! I agree wholeheartedly!" She glanced at the bone, still clutched in Victor's hand. "I'll return to my phylactery and study. Perhaps I'll have some ideas when next we speak."

"Wait!" Victor's exclamation halted her sudden attempt to dissolve back into formless ghostly energy. Her features solidified again, and she looked at him

questioningly. “Should I buy any books on the subject? Is there any way I can get them to you in the phylactery?”

Her smile was bright, something he’d never seen from her in life, as she shook her head. “Thank you for the kind offer, Victor, but only I can send things into my phylactery and only when I’m in a corporeal vessel. I’m afraid I’m stuck with what I have for now.”

“All right. One more question: I told you what Dar said about Kynna and—” Victor chuckled at himself and ran his fingers through his hair, a little embarrassed. “Well, do you have any idea what kind of gift I should get her?”

Arona’s ghostly lips continued to smile as she regarded his words. “A queen? Whom you’ve never met? I don’t envy you. Perhaps a piece of jewelry—no!” She shook her head, chuckling. “She’s a ruler at war. I think, as a gift, you should present a weapon and swear to use it in her defense.”

Victor’s eyebrows shot up as the idea hit home and set off a lightbulb in his brain. “So, my, uh, service is the real gift?”

“Yes. Though, she may consider the weapon as the material representation of the gift, so I’d not offer her your lovely axe, just in case she wants to keep it for sentimental value someday.”

“Nah, this is perfect—I planned to get a new spear anyway. Thank you, Arona!”

“You’re welcome, Victor. Anything else?” The edges of her spectral form began to blur as they faded to a ghostly, blue haze.

“No—talk to you soon, I hope.”

“Soon...” The word hung in the air as she faded to mist and streamed back into her phylactery.

Victor moved to the other side of the coach compartment and slid open the window between himself and Mr. Qwor. “Do you know of a weaponsmith who might specialize in spears?”

“I may know someone like that. Allow me to consult the guidebook while you’re in the Council Spire, and I’ll have a destination for you.”

“Perfect.” Victor slid the panel closed and sat down, still smiling at the idea. He was killing two birds with one stone—a decent spear, fit for a titan, and a gift for Kynna all in one. “She’s pretty smart, wouldn’t you say?” he asked the empty coach. Catching himself talking to the air like that made him feel very alone. He wished Lifedrinker wasn’t so unwieldy that he had to keep her in a storage container. He took her out at night and spoke to her often before he slept, but it wasn’t quite the same as it once had been. He was tempted to bring her out inside the coach, but she was large and incredibly heavy, and her blade was as

sharp as a shard of obsidian glass—he didn't want to slice one of Dar's lovely leather seats in half.

Perhaps because he was feeling so alone, he brought out the Farscribe book he shared with Olivia, his distant cousin—possibly from another timeline or universe—and opened it to the most recent message she'd sent him just the day before:

Victor,

*I recently traveled to Rellia's budding city in the Free Marches—Seaside. While there, I was regaled by tales of your adventures in the city of Sojourn. I'm jealous! It seems that the people of Fanwath have, indeed, been intentionally kept ignorant of the greater universe around us. Of course, the Ridonne are to blame for that, though my investigations into similar matters have led me down strange paths that indicate that some of the blame is on the System, itself. It seems that when a new "System" world is formed, it makes certain demands on the ruling factions. I don't hold the Ridonne blameless—regardless of the System's demands, they took things too far. Still, it's an interesting topic to my mind, and I would enjoy learning more. The travel cost to Sojourn is steep, and I have many demands on my time here, but I intend to make the journey sooner rather than later. I wonder: will I see you there?*

*I look forward to hearing from you,*

Olivia

Victor thought for a moment, then with a shrug, he took one of his favorite pens and began to scrawl out a neat reply:

*Hey Olivia – Things are good here, and I'd love to show you around, but my mentor, a very powerful and influential man here, is sending me on some pretty important business soon. Don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to sound like a big shot. It's just that Dar has some family who are in trouble; their kingdom is under attack, and he thinks it will be a good learning experience if I help his granddaughter kick a little ass around that place for a while.*

*Anyway, I have a lot of friends and connections here, and I'll give you their names. Shit, I'll leave a letter of introduction for you at Dar's place. Any coach for hire in the city will know how to get you there. If you're hurting for money, I can leave you some funds, too—enough to purchase some books or buy you access to one of the better libraries. Just let me know.*

*I'm not sure what level you are now, but be careful while you're here. There are people on Sojourn who could flatten you with a thought. Don't worry too much—laws here prevent the powerful from squishing us mere mortals. You'll love it, by the way; there are tons of opportunities for growth for "iron rankers." That's what you are, by the way—everyone under level 100 is called that. Shit! I just thought of something: Lam, Edeya, and Darren—hah! Remember him from First Landing?—are all closing in on level 20. They might be over that by now, in fact. If you're not too much higher than them—I'd say under level 40—you might have a good time adventuring with them in the dungeons around the city.*

*I'll write you again with more instructions about how to get in touch with everyone. Stay safe!*

Your cousin, Victor

Victor was smiling hugely by the time he put the pen down. It was nice to remember the people he cared about were still there, even though he was alone at the moment. He figured it would be even more important to remember that when he was on Ruhn, separated by billions or trillions of miles from all those people. As he stowed the Farscribe book away, the coach set down, and he heard Mr. Qwor climbing out of his compartment to open the door. Victor climbed out with a heavy sigh, looking up the steps to the massive, crystalline heights of the Council Spire. “Time to get some shit done. See you in a few minutes, Mr. Qwor.”

## Book 9: Chapter 9: Departure

Victor stood in his room, staring at himself in the mirror. The figure looking back at him was monstrous—huge, dragon-faced, with scales, leather, and thick, metallic plates hiding all but his muscular right forearm and strong, clenched fist. His armor had taken on a new kind of vibrancy since he’d fully imbued it at the Sojourn City Stone. He’d spent more than two million beads to get the enchantments, and each one had altered his armor-clad appearance.

Of course, he’d already had some “class A” enchantments: self-cleaning, repairing, sizing, and disguising. The two “class B” enchantments he’d chosen were a bit more combat-oriented. He’d decided to shore up his resistance to electrical damage, largely because he’d been shocked and stunned in battle more than once. The second enchantment was a boost to his fire-attuned damage—why not capitalize on one of his strengths?

His armor also had slots for one “class C” and one “class D” enchantment. The “C” choice was easy—between enhanced mass or a “Lava Blast” ability, he’d taken the one he felt would always benefit him. Enhanced mass meant that he’d be harder to move, he’d resist physical damage more efficiently, and his own attacks would have more weight. Looking at himself in the mirror, he, once again, marveled at the enchantment’s visual effect. The metal of his helm and gauntlet looked weightier. The scales and plates were denser and more prominent, and the horns and fangs glimmered with golden undertones. His leather pants, belt, and boots were now decked in red-gold scales that complimented his wyrm-scale hauberks’ dark red-black ones.

The “class D” enchantment was another story altogether. Once he’d selected the one he wanted—Flight of the Lava King—his armor had begun to glow with an inner, fiery illumination that was subtle but present enough to catch the eye. It was almost like it smoldered—like it was always on the verge of bursting into flames. He’d tried the ability a few times over the last couple of months, and, while it wasn’t true, limitless flight, it was incredibly useful. When he activated it, great fiery wings sprouted from his shoulders, and they carried him wherever he focused his gaze, ripping through the air on currents of fiery Energy. The wings only lasted about ninety seconds, but, in Victor’s estimation, that was plenty of time to bring down a flying foe.

He turned left and right, inspecting himself once more. The draconic, lava king maw that obscured his face did so via some kind of magic. He only saw shadows within, no matter the angle from which he peered into the maw. Meanwhile, the fierce, ruby-red draconic eyes looked alive and seemed to focus on whatever Victor stared at. It was an imposing visage. The reason he studied himself so was that he was torn, unable to decide if he should wear his armor when he traveled to Ruhn, or if he should keep it hidden until he needed it. He hadn’t asked Dar, but he had an idea what his mentor would say.

Inside his helmet, he grinned as he spoke to himself, “Something like, ‘Victor, only reveal your cards when you need to play them.’ Hah!” He laughed at his near-perfect impression. His mind



made up for him by an imaginary Ranish Dar, Victor sent some Energy into the runes that converted his armor to simple, fine clothing. He touched the key and marble-sized vault hanging from the chain around his neck, almost like he wanted to ensure it was still there, and then he looked through his rings, reviewing the things he was taking with him to Ruhn.

Dar had given him nearly a library's worth of books to study. Victor had sorted them as neatly as he could, but he still felt overwhelmed by the stacks of books in the enormous, high-quality storage space he'd taken from Fak Loyle. As the thought crossed his mind, Victor thought about Cora, and his lips spread into a smile; he'd received a note from Efanie just the day before describing the girl as "increasingly happy and making fast friends with Deyni and Chala." He shook his head, pushing the happy thought aside, and refocused on the books.

Foremost among them were his tomes on runes, sigils, and glyphs. He'd made much progress with Dar over the last few months, but there was still a lot to learn, especially where Elder magic was concerned. Dar had, begrudgingly, taught him one set of glyphs, but he'd also given Victor tomes on two others, again urging caution and patience in their study. Beyond those books were ones on spell patterns, enchanting, and artificing. Dar had expectations for Victor to study them while he was away, along with several accounts of military history and other general areas of study like—to Victor's dismay—math, poetry, literature analysis, and even philosophy.

The enormous list of study materials and lessons Dar had given him—enough to fill a small leatherbound book—drove home the point that Victor would be on Ruhn for a while. In his estimation, Dar had given him at least two years' worth of study materials, and that only accounted for the academics. Victor would also be expected to continue to practice his martial prowess between duels, maintain his daily Spirit and Breath Core cultivation, and, of course, pursue his social duties and goals among the elite of Gloria.

After several minutes of perusal, Victor felt satisfied that he had everything he needed packed away in his storage rings, and he began to feel a twinge of nervous energy as he realized he'd run out of excuses to stall. It was time to say his farewells and meet with Dar. With a heavy sigh, he gave his room a final, lingering look and then left, walking quickly down the hall and into the main parlor. Just as they'd promised they would be, Lam, Edeya, Darren, and Lesh were all there, ready to see him off.

Edeya was first on her feet, fluttering her blue, shimmering wings as she raced across the large area rug to wrap her tiny arms around his waist, hugging her cheek against his stomach. "Promise you'll visit when you can!" she said as he gently pressed her close.

Victor laughed and nodded. "Dar says it's cheaper to stop here on my way to Fanwath if I want to visit home, so you can believe I'll spend a day or two catching up with you all." He directed his words to the others who'd all stood and approached. Darren cocked his head, eyeing him down his beak with his predatory, perpetually angry seeming eagle face, and Victor couldn't help a chuckle as the tall, feathered man made deep, resonant clicks in his throat.

"Oh?" Lam asked, arching an eyebrow. "You'll only stop here because it's cheaper?" At her teasing tone, Edeya tightened her squeeze, and Victor laughed.

“No, of course not. I suppose I was just saying I could kill two birds—” He stopped abruptly, glancing at Darren with wide eyes.

“Oh, very funny!” Darren chuckled and folded his arms, putting on a show of being offended. Victor could tell he wasn’t, though, because he was still making that happy click in his throat. He and his groupmates, including Trin, had been running through dungeons nonstop over the last few months. They were all well into tier two but had, thus far, failed to pull any treasures to advance Darren’s bloodline further. Victor had offered to help him buy one, but, to his credit, Darren insisted he wanted to earn it.

Lesh stepped closer, holding out a hand. “If it weren’t so many jumps, I’d travel with you to see you settled in, Lord Victor.”

“Oh, come on, hermano! Don’t start with the ‘lord’ this and ‘lord’ that again.” He grasped the dragonkin’s hand and squeezed.

Lesh chuckled and returned the pressure. “I’m feeling formal, seeing as you’ll soon be gone. Rest assured that Darren and I will continue to make a name for your household here on Sojourn.”

“Hey!” Edeya released her grip around Victor’s waist and turned to glare at Lesh. “We’re all making our names known here, and, of course, we know it reflects on Victor.”

“I didn’t mean—” Lesh floundered.

“Well, you big, scaled—”

“Whoa!” Victor laughed, wrapping an arm over Edeya’s shoulders and pulling her into his side. “I’m proud of you all, and I know one thing: there’s nothing any of you can do to mess up whatever reputation I have around here. Hah! That’s the last thing on my mind. I’m just going to miss you all, but I know you’ll be doing great things while I’m gone.” He turned to Darren. “Did the page I gave you work?”

Love this novel? Read it on Royal Road to ensure the author gets credit.

“Yes! I messaged Olivia, and she’s aware that if she writes on that page of the Farscribe book, I’ll see the note. So far, she doesn’t have a firm date for her arrival, but I’ll be checking the page daily.”

“Good.” Victor looked at Lam, met her eyes, and smiled, then at Lesh and nodded his head. Finally, he squeezed Edeya’s shoulders one more time. “I guess that’s that. I gotta meet Dar down in the catacombs.”

Lam’s wings flickered, and golden motes sprinkled to the carpet like fairy dust. “Where he helped me?”

“Yep. I guess the veil is thinnest there.”

“Bye, Victor,” Edeya said, turning into his embrace so she could look up into his eyes. “I love you, you know?”

Sudden moisture sprang into Victor’s eyes, and he blinked, looking up. “I love you too, dummy.”

“Hey! That’s my name for you!”

With a chuckle and a sniff, Victor looked around the room one last time. “Stay safe.” He turned and started toward the hallway, but plenty of well-wishes chased him as he made his way to the kitchen.

“Be safe, yourself!” Lam called. “Take care!”

“Thanks for everything, Victor!” Darren’s newly deep voice rang out.

“We’ll speak soon! Good luck, brother!” Lesh boomed.

Only Edeya was quiet, but her earlier words still rang in Victor’s ears. She loved him, and that felt wonderful. Of course, he knew it before then. He knew there were people here and on Fanwath who loved him, but it felt good to hear it, just the same. He was surprised to find most of the staff lined up in the kitchen, waiting to watch him pass through on his way to the cellar. Several of them called out fond farewells and urged him a speedy return, and Victor could only smile and wave as he hurried past.

Dar was waiting for him in the cave where they’d done Lam’s ritual. Victor, as always, had a sneaking suspicion that the Master Spirit Caster could somehow sense his location on his property and would use the Spirit Plane to travel quickly ahead of him. Victor grinned when he saw his mentor in his orange-and-teal, flowing, silken outfit and sketched a formal bow. “Good morning, Lord Dar.”

“Ah, excellent form on that bow, Victor. You’ll make me proud on Ruhn.” He gestured to the stony ground before him. “Come close. You should find it easier than usual to pull your physical form onto the spirit plane from here. Are you ready? Have you meditated on the toil ahead of you?”

Victor nodded. “I’ve been holding myself on the spirit plane for nearly an hour these last few days.”

“Good. Perhaps, after some study and advancement, when you visit me next, you’ll be ready for me to teach you the secret to bridging worlds on the spirit plane.” He chuckled and shook his head. “It depends on how long you wait to come for a visit. Don’t expect me to teach you if you come running home after a week or two.”

“Nah, I won’t.” Victor smiled, inhaling deeply through his nose. “I think it’ll do me good to be on my own for a while. I’ve got my Farscribe books if I need to hear from some familiar people.”

“Good. You have everything? Your books? Your weapons? Your gift for Queen Kynna?”

Victor nodded. “All set.”

Dar looked him up and down, nodding. “I’m pleased you chose to keep your armor concealed. Best to avoid using it until you must. I won’t be joining you for an introduction. Instead, I’ll deposit you outside the city walls. My welcome will be very short-lived; the veil walkers who watch over Ruhn will not tolerate my presence for more than a few moments. It’s best that I don’t attempt to interact with any of my descendants or those poor people foolish enough to worship my memory.”

“Will I stand out?” Victor gestured to his clothes. “Like this?”

“Not especially. Your attire is suitable, and your Quinametzin blood makes you resemble the primeval Fae quite a lot. Some of my kin will be darker or lighter, depending on the amount of Igniant in their blood, but the primary ancestral heritage of the people of Ruhn is, as I told you before, one of giantish Fae.”

“Is that a word? Giantish?”

“Did I not use it? Could I utter it otherwise? It means descended of, related to, or appearing like a giant.”

“Am I giantish?”

“Hah! Until you grow to your full potential, aye. When you’re enraged and fully in your titanic aspect, people will know that ‘giantish’ doesn’t measure up when it comes to your description.” Dar grinned and grasped Victor’s shoulder. “Well? Have we dawdled enough? Are you ready?”

Victor returned the gesture, clapping his hand on Dar’s shoulder. “I’m ready! Let’s do this.”

“Right. See you on the spirit plane.” With that, Dar faded from sight. Victor steeled his will, looking inward as he built the pattern for Spirit Walk. He wrapped his aura around himself, grasping hold of his every component cell, and as he cast the spell, he willed his body to come with him. He’d done the same every night before sleeping, holding himself longer and longer on the spirit plane each time. As Dar had promised, it was almost effortless by then, especially from inside the cave beneath his home.

When he appeared on the Spirit Plane, Dar stood there, solid and real, just like him. “Good! Now, concentrate on keeping yourself whole. Don’t let your body try to slip away from you. Moving will burn your Energy faster than simply standing still, but not by much. If my estimation is correct, we’ll reach Ruhn long before you run dry.”

“How will I guide myself? Usually, I have a destination in mind—a person or place I know.”

“Leave the guiding to me. Focus on my presence and simply move with me. This will be another test of your will: you must not let your gaze wander. If you see something that takes your attention, you will fall away from me, and then we’ll have to waste precious minutes looking for each other. Where we’re going—between worlds—vast distances can be crossed in a single heartbeat, and it wouldn’t be impossible to become lost. Even I would have trouble finding you.”

“And if I run out of Energy out there?”

“Then you’ll be pulled out of the spirit plane onto the material—in the void of space. Even a sturdy Quinametzin couldn’t last long in such a state.” Dar grabbed his shoulders and focused his blazing eyes on Victor’s. “Stay with me!”

With that, Dar turned and began to walk, and Victor fixed his gaze on a spot of teal fabric on his mostly orange tunic as he followed. The spirit plane passed in a blur as they gained momentum, but Victor refused to break his gaze from that spot. He didn’t blink; he hardly breathed as he focused on following his mentor. Soon, his vision tunneled as their speed became immense. They raced through the spirit plane as Dar guided them, and Victor focused on keeping up with him.

They never ran; it was always a normal walking pace, but that was the magic of the spirit plane; it wasn’t properly tangible. It was a place of Energy and light and the stuff between the material and the metaphysical. With an act of will, a desire to be somewhere, a spirit walker could bend the reality of distance and move great distances with a thought.

Victor never noticed when they moved beyond the bounds of Sojourn into the space between worlds. He couldn’t tell if Dar had changed directions or performed some action to create a bridge between the worlds. All he knew was that spot of teal on orange and the blur of the universe speeding by on either side.

He was acutely aware of his Energy levels; he could feel how his reserves dipped below half, then a quarter, and when he began to get nervous as he lost half of that again, Dar suddenly stopped. “We’ve arrived,” he announced, gesturing around the spirit plane. They stood in a meadow of ethereal grass dotted with shimmering blue flowers. The stars above were brilliant and clear. Looking around, Victor saw distant luminescent trees and the faint purple outlines of mountain ranges in nearly every direction.

“The city walls are a mile or so distant; you’ll see them when you look around. I won’t cross over. This is where we part for now.”

“Um...” Victor nodded, licking his lips. “And Kynna? Do you have a message for her?”

Dar waved a hand. “Your arrival is message enough. Victor, I know I speak flippantly about duels and family and...well, many things. Listen to me now, though, as I impart some final, serious words.” He stared at Victor, waiting for a response.

“I’m listening.”

Dar nodded. “Good. One: a final warning about Elder magic. Tread lightly. Two: I’ve put much faith in your ability to win lopsided contests. If you get to a point where defeat seems inevitable, I will not hold it against you if you counsel Kynna to cease her attempts to expand her nation. I’d rather you backed down than died.” Those words were the first sign of any doubt Dar had that Victor could win his fights on Ruhn, and they tickled his spine like cold fingers.

“She’s expecting to force a war of succession, though.”

“I haven’t pressed that issue yet in my correspondence with her, but once it’s begun, she will understand if you don’t believe you can win against the great nations. She’ll have to. Remember, her original request was for a champion to fight off her neighbors. This expansion is entirely my idea—a plan to gain you worthy hearts for your ritual. I didn’t want to fill your mind with doubt, but I feel I must tell you that the length of this campaign is entirely in your hands. You will be the judge of how far to push things.”

Victor wasn’t sure what to say, so he stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists. After a moment, though, he nodded. “All right, Lord Dar. I’ll try to be smart about it. Is there anything else?”

“No. I’ll look forward to your weekly reports. Farewell, Victor.” With that, Dar was gone, and Victor stood alone on the ethereal grassy plain. Looking inward, he saw that his Core was nearly drained dry, so he reached into his pathways and severed the connection to his Spirit Walk spell. The world shifted, flashing brightly as his eyes adjusted to the sunlight, and then he felt the cool breeze, smelled the fresh air with a distant odor of woodsmoke, and heard the steady trundling rumble of a massive wagon rolling on nearby cobbles.

Victor turned toward the sound and saw, down a grassy slope, a broad, brown-brick paved road leading toward a tremendous city wall in the distance. Dar had said he was a mile from those walls, so Victor took a moment to appreciate their size. They had to be a hundred feet high with an outward-flaring base that made the gatehouse tunnel look deep and cavernous. Squat ballistae towers lined the wall, and, as he squinted to look more closely, Victor counted more than a hundred soldiers patrolling just the area above and near the gate.

“If they settle wars with duels, why the hell do they need walls like that?” He looked back to the wagon he’d heard earlier and saw that it looked almost like a rolling fortress. It had four axles, was plated with heavy-looking metal, and looked to be propelled by some kind of Energy engine that hummed and glowed with orange light, belching black smoke out of a chimney stack near the rear. Half a dozen guards lined the top of the wagon, all wielding glowing crossbows.

Victor could only assume that the roads and wilds of Gloria weren’t safe. He didn’t see any other traffic on the road, but looking away from the city, he saw massive forests and looming mountains in the distance. One of the peaks was enormous, with smooth white shoulders and a rounded top shrouded in black, dark clouds. “A volcano?” He grinned at the idea. Maybe he’d get a chance to visit.

He turned back to the wagon and watched it approach the gate. Despite the size of the vehicle, it easily disappeared into the gaping maw of the gatehouse tunnel. Victor saw a couple of dozen guards form up ranks behind it, facing outward, toward the road, apparently awaiting the next traveler or, perhaps, a hostile force. “Or maybe a damn monster.” Victor shrugged and strode down the grassy slope to the road. “All right,” he sighed, squaring his shoulders. “Time to meet the people of Gloria.”

#### Book 9: Chapter 10: A Gift

As he approached the gray stone city walls, Victor realized his earlier estimation was off; he’d been gauging their height based on the size of the people he saw. His mind had let slip an important detail Dar had given him about the folks on Ruhn—they were almost all giant-sized. With that realization, he figured the walls were closer to two hundred feet high. The soldiers standing in the shadow of the gatehouse were loosely arranged in two ranks of ten, and they all watched the road through the eye slits of heavy plate helms as he approached.

The soldiers in the back rank were armed with long spears, and those in front wielded heavy metal pikes. To Victor’s eye, their uniforms made them look sort of like conquistadores—black uniform pants, polished boots, and shiny helmets and breastplates. They each wore a sky-blue sash emblazoned with a yellow rose—the sigil of Gloria. Of course, when everyone was a giant, no one really seemed like one, so it wasn’t particularly imposing for Victor, who was easily a match for the soldiers when it came to bulk, to step toward the armed, combat-ready men and women.

“State your business in Gloria!” the centermost soldier shouted when Victor was no closer than thirty yards from the gatehouse. The term ‘Gloria’ referred to both the nation and the capital city of Dar’s descendants, so Victor wasn’t sure of the spokesman’s exact meaning, but he supposed it didn’t matter.

“I’m here to see the queen.”

Murmurs and even a few sniggers broke out among the soldiers, and the speaker turned to shout, “Quiet!” before addressing Victor again. “The queen is quite busy. If you’ve no other business in the city, then it would be best to turn around; we’ve little room or charity to spare for a vagabond.”

Victor chuckled and stepped closer. “That’s quite an assumption. ‘Vagabond?’ Why not wanderer or stranger? It seems you’ve chosen to label me with negative connotations.” Victor laughed inwardly at his words; if the man he’d been a few years ago had heard those words come out of his mouth, he would have lost his shit laughing. What a poser!

“Whatever you call yourself, we’ve no room. Do you wish to declare yourself? Are you from Frostmarch? Xan? You had to come through their blockades! Turn around or be seized for questioning. This is your final warning.”

In unison, the guards took a stomping step forward and lowered their polearms so the points aimed toward Victor. He wondered what hidden signal the leader—captain?—had given. He didn’t back down, in any case. Instead, he stepped forward again, closing the distance between himself and the soldiers to just a few long strides. He sighed, shaking his head. “Is this the welcome I’m getting? I expected more.” The guard began to speak, but Victor held up a hand. “You asked me to declare myself, so I will. I’m here at the behest of Ranish Dar to serve as a champion to Queen Kynna, and I’d appreciate you guiding me to her. If you can’t do that, then at least get the fuck out of my way.”

To his amazement, a good third of the soldiers fell to their knees at the mention of Ranish Dar. As he continued speaking, many of the other soldiers lifted their polearms, perhaps loathe to seem threatening to a man making claims like the one Victor just had. The captain, though, stepped closer, his pike still leveled menacingly. “Have you any proof of these claims?”

Victor held up his right hand, displaying Dar’s signet. “I have Ranish Dar’s signet. Maybe you could recognize that? If not, just take me to the queen, and she will verify my words. I would have thought she’d put out word that I was on my way, but...” He trailed off, sighing, as he looked past the soldiers into the depths of the cavernous gatehouse tunnel. His gaze drifted down to the now-quiet soldiers, especially those kneeling. Did they worship Dar like a founding ancestor, or was it something more? They certainly seemed pious in their bowed obeisance.

“Will you demonstrate your strength to back up your claim? A show of your aura, perhaps?” The captain had stepped even closer, and now, if he wanted to lunge, Victor felt sure the man could bring his gleaming pike into play.

“That’s an odd thing for a captain of the queen’s soldiers to ask. Why would I display my strength so that spies could run tattling to the borders and alert the Kings who hold this nation under siege?” Victor stepped toward the captain, allowing his pike to brush against his hip as he held out a hand. “I’m Victor, and I come from a place called Tucson. Ranish Dar has seen the plight of his nation on Ruhn, and he wants me to help set things right. Now take my hand and then guide me to the queen.” He’d rehearsed such words with Dar that they were starting to feel natural on his tongue. He hoped he was convincing to the soldiers.

Something about his tone and the sureness of his body language must have convinced the soldier because he slung his pike onto his shoulder and then clasped Victor’s hand. He had a firm, strong grip, and when he nodded, looking through the slit of his visor, Victor saw hard, pale eyes. The soldier released his grip. “I’m Captain Wash. Red Wash—if we meet again while I’m not on duty, please call me Red. The queen has people who can verify the signet you bear. Please follow me to the palace.” With that, he turned and began striding through the ranks of soldiers, who were either bowing or kneeling by that point.

Victor could tell the soldiers were struggling to remain disciplined, and by the time he’d marched halfway through the gatehouse tunnel, one of them, a woman, called out, “Is it true? You’ve seen Ranish Dar?”

Victor smiled and turned, walking backward as he waved. “It’s true! He’s doing well and sends his regards to the people here! He’s proud of your hard work!” Dar never said such a thing, but Victor thought it wouldn’t hurt to boost morale a little. As he turned and continued to follow Red, he could hear the excited chatter behind him, and his grin grew.

As they exited the tunnel, several soldiers approached Captain Wash, but the man waved them off and hurried onto the street that ran parallel to the wall. Victor followed, his neck craning to give him



a view of the tall stone structures. Gloria reminded him of what he'd always imagined a true medieval metropolis would look like. The buildings were mostly built from stone blocks like the great wall surrounding them, and they were tall, with many towers and minarets capped in glittering metallic and glass-studded tiles. Those tiles and the many crystalline windowpanes picked up the light of the pale yellow sun, bringing the heights to life with their reflections.

More than that, pennants and tabards flew from nearly every structure. They bore coats of arms and fanciful designs and added splashes of color everywhere. On every corner and in the courtyards of every great building, rose bushes bloomed, and their pleasant aroma was ever-present as he and the captain made their way through the clean, orderly streets. The populace was another story.

Everywhere Victor looked, he saw gaunt, hungry faces—mostly among the young. He'd been prepared for this; Dar had explained that while Ruhn's population was largely of a high iron-rank average, the children would be the ones who suffered the most when there was a shortage of supplies. The adults, who'd had time to gain levels, didn't require as much food to survive; the Energy was rich, and their bodies would sustain themselves on it. The children, however, were still low-tier, and the Energy in the air did little for their mostly normal, mortal constitutions.

When he saw those groups of sickly children with wan faces and wide, staring eyes, he felt warring emotions—anger at those responsible and pity for the pathetic individuals before him. He wanted to stop and hand out food, but he knew it would cause a riot and that he'd, at best, put off their suffering for a day or two. Instead, he steeled his resolve to end the stranglehold Gloria's neighbors had on the nation's supply lines.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

As for their looks, Dar hadn't been wrong; for the most part, the people of Gloria looked like large humans. Here and there, Victor saw signs of Fae bloodlines—large, bright eyes, pointed ears, and a general beauty and grace that outshone some of the more mundane-looking folk. He and the guard captain didn't draw many stares; Victor was dressed nicely but plainly, and he wasn't so out of line with his looks that he stood out. Plenty of the Ruhnish folk had dark hair and tanned skin, and, as he'd observed earlier, the people who weren't "giantish" were few and far between and obviously not native to the world.

The palace was an imposing and beautiful structure, and it reminded Victor that, while Gloria was down on its luck as a nation, it had a proud heritage. It was a sprawling compound with many courtyards, gardens, wings, and outbuildings. He saw minarets domed in turquoise and glittering precious metal, stained-glass windows, and structures built entirely of seamless, polished marble. Everywhere his eye went as he followed Red through the echoing corridors, Victor saw liveried servants but only caught glimpses of the nobility through archways or around corners. He wasn't sure if Red was trying to keep him away from those folks or if they were just very thinly spread out on the palace grounds.

After a while, they came to a room with a vaulted ceiling, plush carpets, and many antique-looking, high-backed chairs lining the walls. Red pointed to one of the chairs and said, "Please take a seat, and I'll fetch the chamberlain."

“If you must.” Victor sat down and folded his arms over his chest, glaring as the captain hurried to a closed door. He then paused and looked back.

“Please don’t wander.”

Victor’s frown deepened. “If you thought I meant harm to the queen, it would be foolish to leave me alone here.”

“I don’t.” Red cleared his throat and spoke again, “I mean, I don’t believe you’re lying. Having the chamberlain inspect your signet is merely a formality, um, sir.” With that, he bowed briefly and then departed. The gesture reminded Victor of his lessons on Ruhnric tradition, especially those regarding honor. If Red had indicated that he thought Victor was being dishonest, it would have been within his right to call him out, forcing an honor duel. He shook his head, tsking, as he thought it through.

It wasn’t two minutes later when he heard the click of boot heels on marble, and then the door swung wide, and Red appeared with another, older man. He was dressed in attire similar to the servants but finer: black pants, a sky-blue, silken shirt with a yellow rose embroidered over his left breast, and polished, black leather shoes. He looked very sharp—everything was pressed to perfection, and his curly gray hair was coifed like he’d just come out of the barbershop. Victor stood, and though he, too, was nicely clothed, he somehow felt sloppy as the man stepped toward him, looking down his long, sharp nose at Victor’s hand.

Red cleared his throat and announced, “Chamberlain Thorn, may I present Victor of Tucson, emissary of the great Ranish Dar and prospective champion to Queen Kynna Dar.”

At his words, Victor grinned. He wasn’t sure why he’d said he was from Tucson, but it was nice to hear the name again. He’d learned the customs well, so he bowed deeply at the waist. Chamberlain Thorn also bowed, then stepped forward and held out his hand. “May I see Lord Dar’s signet?”

Victor held up his hand, making a fist so the signet ring stood out proudly among his plainer storage rings. Thorn leaned forward, and Victor felt a small surge of Energy as his gray eye glittered with silvery sparkles. A moment later, he straightened, and his smile was enormous as he said, “Welcome to Gloria, Champion.” He sharply about-faced and barked, “Hurry! Assemble the Court. I’ll present Victor to the queen personally!”

Red turned and bolted, his clomping boots loud at first, then fading with distance. Chamberlain Thorn’s smile never faded as he slowly studied Victor from head to toe. “It’s truly a miracle! I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to see you, sir! There have been rumors, of course. The queen’s attendants whispering about secret correspondence. Of course, we all dreamed. Surely, the great Ranish Dar wouldn’t let his first kingdom come to ruin. Still, it’s many a generation since anyone has seen or personally heard from him. Yet here you are, bearing his signet, with a promise to fight for us! Queen’s mercy!” The man had tears in his eyes, and Victor struggled to maintain a little distance between them as the fellow kept encroaching into his personal space.

“Well, it’s good that you’re happy, Chamberlain. Now, since I seem to have you in my corner, can you give me any information about those who might wish to see me fail?”

Thorn’s eyes shot wide at those words, and he nodded emphatically. “There are those among the nobility—landholders and distant relatives of the queen, who would benefit if they made underhanded agreements with the Kings of Frostmarch and Xan. I’ll draft you a document, sir, an accounting of Gloria’s great lords and ladies. Will that be suitable?”

Victor nodded. “Yes. That’s one thing Ranish Dar couldn’t properly prepare me for; he’s lost touch with the political scheming of the noble houses of his former home.”

“I will be your guide, milord.” He opened his mouth to say more, but just then, many stomping boots sounded from the corridor outside, and soon Red was striding through the door, flanked by four other soldiers in matching attire. Victor didn’t love that all the household guards seemed to wear full helmets; he liked seeing a person’s facial expression when he spoke to them. Still, he couldn’t argue that it made for a more imposing presence.

“Lord Thorn, Her Majesty awaits in the throne room.”

“Very well.” Thorn turned to Victor. “Please accompany me to meet the queen, milord.”

Victor nodded and gestured for the man to lead the way. Dar had driven home that it would be fruitless to insist on informal titles in the court of Queen Kynna. The Ruhnians put a lot of weight on the formality of rank. Chamberlain Thorn led the way through a new corridor, this one very broad and with a soaring ceiling. Paintings of stern-looking men and austere ladies lined the walls above the fanciful, pale-blue wainscoting, and Victor occupied his mind wondering who they were as they approached a junction. He saw servants scurrying in the distance and imagined they were scrambling to do whatever servants did when the queen called an impromptu gathering of the royal court.

Red and the other soldiers stomped in near unison behind them, and when they turned the corner, Victor saw four more similarly armed men standing guard outside an ornate, massive double door. Two guards pulled the doors wide as they approached, revealing a picture-perfect, fairytale throne room. The cynic in Victor remembered the hungry, haunted faces of the children in the city outside, and he wondered if some of the opulence on display before him could be somehow traded for food.

The silver-flecked marble floors shone with a high gloss, reflecting the dazzling sunlight streaming in through high cathedral windows, and, at the center of their focal point, a dais rose to support a massive throne of blue crystal. Victor lost track of everything else—the nobles lining the sides of the room, the elegant furnishings and art, even the softly playing string quartet in the corner. All he could focus on was the incredible vision of the queen sitting atop that crystal throne.

Queen Kynna was, as Dar had supposed, far more Fae than Igniant, but Victor could see traces of her ancestor in her visage. Her skin looked like flesh, unlike Dar’s stony appearance, but it was a lustrous pale-gray color with hints of something beneath the surface that sparkled like glitter or

maybe diamonds. Her eyes drove home her relation to Ranish Dar, though; they shone like two tiny suns, brilliant nuclear reactions beneath heavy, black brows. Victor couldn't deny she was beautiful, if a bit severe and cold.

Kynna had high cheekbones, a regal countenance, and full lips, painted a shade of blue that picked up highlights in her dark eye shadow and the midnight blue, gem-studded, form-fitting gown she wore. As for a crown, five sharp, black crystal spires rose up through her thick, curly black hair, gleaming with some kind of inner light. She looked statuesque—too perfect to be real—even as she leaned on one elbow on the arm of her throne and gazed down at Victor and his procession.

As Victor stood, a little dumbstruck, Chamberlain Thorn stepped forward and bellowed, breaking the spell, “I present to you Lord Victor of Tucson, disciple of Ranish Dar, whose lineage and wisdom are reflected in the grace of our queen and whom we revere for the founding of this great nation.” Thorn bowed so low that he continued down onto his knees and lay prostrate by the time he finished speaking.

Victor took the hint and performed a perfect, formal bow at the waist. He didn't wait to be given permission to stand, however. He straightened and moved into the suddenly silent hall. He could hear the nobility breathing to either side of him, but not a soul uttered a word as his boots clicked on the marble. Kynna straightened, shattering the illusion that she was a statue carved from crystal. He stopped a few strides away from the dais where her throne sat and waited, locking his eyes with Kynna's blazing ones.

After a few heartbeats, her voice rang out, strong, strident, clear, but utterly feminine, “You may approach.”

Victor stepped forward to the edge of the dais and fell to one knee, summoning the spear he'd had crafted for this occasion. He held it aloft on the palms of his hands—no easy feat, for the thing weighed several hundred pounds. The haft was crafted from something called ebon oak and was sturdy enough to withstand everything Lesh and his other sparring partners had been able to dish out. They'd tried cutting it, smashing it, and snapping it with a hundred different methodologies, but, just as the weaponsmith had promised, it was very sturdy stuff.

The top three feet of the spear were taken up by the blade—a length of magically hardened steel that the weaponsmith had staked his reputation on. Victor wanted something sturdy, something he could drive through a hunk of similarly hard metal, digging for a gap without worrying about snapping the blade. It had held up to the demand through quite a lot of testing. The blade gleamed and winked in the light, a shimmering length of razor-sharp, mirror-finished metal that ended in a point so needle-sharp that Victor felt confident he could use it to dig a splinter from a child's foot.

Edeya had given him a “charm” to loop around the butt-end of the spear haft—a couple of Darren's Thunderbird feathers fastened by a thin lock of Lam's golden, wire-hard hairs. It didn't do anything except make the spear look cool, and Victor figured, knowing the way he fought, that it'd be ruined soon, but he liked it. The weapon was heavy for two reasons: the materials were tough and dense, and it was enchanted to grow with him, doubling in size if he took on his titanic form.

With all that being said, the gathered nobles—and Queen Kynna herself—could not deny the quality of the spear Victor held aloft as he knelt. He let the anticipation hang heavy in the air before

speaking, “Queen Kynna, I offer you a gift for this auspicious occasion. I present this spear and vow to wield it in your name, vanquishing the champions of Frostmarch and Xan. The time has come for your house to ascend to its rightful place of prominence on Ruhn.”