

Victor BK9: Ch41

Book 9: Chapter 41: Azforath

Victor stepped through the portal into cool air and lighting that suggested dusk was fast approaching. He stood on a grassy slope, looking down into a verdant valley marked by the checkerboard of a dozen different crops. He could see lights in farmhouse windows here and there, and in the distance, he heard the trilling twang of stringed instruments. Turning toward the sound, he saw, perhaps a mile away, lights strung up between the fruit trees in an orchard and the unmistakable movement of people as they milled about a brightly lit barn.

“Idyllic, don’t you think?” The deep, melodious voice came from behind him, and Victor whirled to see a man sitting on the grass just a bit further up the slope. He was surprisingly human-like, though there were some stark differences. His skin was a shade of red that reminded Victor of a Shadeni, but it was darker—almost black around his knuckles and eye sockets. When he smiled, the man revealed the sharp teeth of a carnivore, but his braided silver hair spoke to a certain level of refinement, much like his loose, comfortable-looking white linen pants and shirt.

“It’s...not what I expected.” Victor shrugged. What had he expected stepping into a “soul space?” Perhaps he’d thought he’d be in a dark chamber with a ghostly flame at the center, or—

“This is a world of my creating—a world I carry in my very soul. Have you ever seen such?”

Victor stared at the man, unable to wrap his head around the idea that he was speaking to Azforath, the titan slumbering under Iron Mountain. How could he be...inside his soul while looking at him directly? Was this just a representation of the man? He realized he was taking a long while to answer, so Victor cleared his throat and forced his vocal cords to begin doing their job. “I haven’t, no. Is this,” Victor gestured toward the man, reclining on the grass, “how you look in the, um, outside world?”

“Nay,” Azforath chuckled, shifting to lean on one elbow. “Sit down, lad. We’ll talk awhile.” He waited until Victor began to comply, settling down on the lush, cool grass. “This is how I see myself, how I was in my youth. Even to those of us who’ve existed for eons, those early years create indelible formations in our minds. Ask yourself the question: how do you see yourself?”

Victor smiled and nodded. “Sure, I get it. Sometimes, when I look in a mirror, I’m a little surprised by what I see.” Victor tilted his head to regard the distant figures near the brightly lit barn. “Are the people here real?”

“Are you?” Again, Azforath chuckled, his voice rich and deep and the sound so pleasant that Victor had to smile along with him.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“So it is with those folks—people I’ve grown to love or care about. People who sought refuge from the travails of the world outside. They’ve built a peaceful existence here in my soul space.”

Victor leaned back and looked up to the stars over their head, brilliant and colorful—more so than he’d ever seen, even looking up through Sojourn’s too-thin atmosphere. “Are the stars real? How big is your...”

When Victor seemed to fumble for words, Azforath filled in the silence. “My soul space is as vast as I need it to be. I craft what I desire here. This world is complete, but those stars are but fanciful décor, I’m afraid. I could expand, but I’d do it slowly—a moon, then a nearby planet, and so on. I’ve yet to find a need for it. There’s much to create and enjoy, even with just this single world.”

“Is that why you sleep? I mean, outside? Is it because you prefer this reality to the one where...” Victor’s words failed him again; he didn’t want to be insulting by saying “real” people or places. Were those people down there really alive? How many souls did Azforath carry within his own?

“Where you come from, lad? Where things seem more real to you? Aye, I sleep because I began to spend more and more time here, among the folks I took in from one century, one millennium, one eon to the next. I built that world out there, you know? It wasn’t the first, either! When I learned to pull the stuff of the cosmos together and shape it how I wished. When I learned the slow, laborious process of eons, I was fascinated by it. I built my first world and fought for it as great powers sought to invade. What fun that was! When I built the one where I rest—Ruhn, as I’ve heard you infants label it—I toiled to create something beautiful and unique.”

“But now you build in here?”

“Now I build here where all the rules are mine to bend or change. For instance, you and I have spoken for less than a second—I’ve paused the passage of time here. I do this for you because you did me a favor, and though the travails of you and yours are but minor amusements to me, I have not lost my empathy. I understand your fear of being late for your ‘important’ event, despite the inconsequential nature of it all from my perspective.”

“I appreciate it...” Victor trailed off, looking the titan up and down, narrowing his eyes as he fumbled with his thoughts, fighting to keep them from slipping off his too-loose tongue.

“What? What, lad?”

“Are you really as big as a mountain out there?”

“I can be. At the moment, I believe my physical form is closer to the size of a small hillock. The mountain grew around me over the eons.”

Victor nodded to the handsome, maybe ten-foot man before him. “But you started out like this?”

“I did—even smaller! I was but a mewling babe when I first began the great journey of my life.”

Victor laughed, amazed by how natural and easy the ancient being was with him. He imagined Azforath’s mind must be strange and complex. How else could he while away “eons” and still seem an ordinary man, sitting there under a starscape of his own design, speaking to Victor? “So, the dungeon outside...” Victor trailed off, unable to think of a way to describe the mountain and the dungeon in relation to Azforath’s soul space. “I mean, um, outside of here, was bothering you? You don’t know about the System?”

“I know of the Other and its intrusion into the universe of my origin. I know it plants its greedy roots on worlds it has no claim to, though it seems most are willing to abide it for the meager services it provides—a god of convenience, it seems.” *rÄÑöBÈš*

“You think it’s a god?”

“Do people worship it? Do they sacrifice each other for its causes? Do they follow its dictums and preach its truths?”

Victor thought about quests and dungeons and conquests and all the other ways the System encouraged people to contend with each other. He thought about the System’s Classes and skills and spells and how entire universities were built with the intent of teaching young people how best to pursue them. “Yeah, I suppose it does feel like a religion in some ways.”

“I’ve seen them come and go, though this one does seem rather pervasive. Perhaps I’ll need to rid Ruhn of it, but for now, I’m content in my space. If it doesn’t bother me again, attempting to leach from my Energy or steal from my hoard, I’ll see what another eon brings.” Azforath shifted, looking

at him more directly, and as Victor looked into his dark eyes, he glimpsed the depths of the ancient titan's power again. He felt like a speck of dust before a sun's raging heat. "Well, young titan, from what world do you hail?"

"Um," Victor leaned on one hand, stretching his feet out on the gentle, grassy slope, "from a world called Earth. My titan ancestors were called Quinametzin."

Azforath looked up at the starry sky for a few moments, and though he didn't speak or indicate that he was thinking, Victor could tell he was. How must it feel to dig through millions of years' worth of memories? After several long, quiet minutes, Azforath nodded. "I know of them." He looked at Victor, smiling that sharp-toothed smile again. "Now I see it. I find it intriguing; I won't deny it—to see a young titan walking among the lesser folks again, making his way toward greatness. How stunned they must be when you reach up from your lowly rank to snatch their pride away!" He chuckled, his deep, rich voice rolling out of his chest unhindered.

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"I mean, I've won some unexpected victories, that's true, but I've been challenged pretty damn hard before, too."

"Of course, of course. Forgive my pride; it's a titan's fault, you know? There are other species, other 'Elder' beings with formidable abilities, but a titan, boy, is a force of nature—inevitable as gravity. Your enemies, if you have any, made a mistake letting you get this far. I can see it in you; the seed of greatness has sprouted, and it will take much to snuff it out."

"Were all titans like, well, like you?"

"Hah! Did I not just mention my pride? Of course, they weren't! When I walked the worlds, none matched me! Of course, there were those who might try, but we knew better; such a clash would ruin too much, destroy too many lives." After a brief pause, Azforath gestured down the hill toward the warmly lit barn. "I have friends and children celebrating below. They'll want me to join them, and it's not right to hold them outside of time without their consent. Allow me to give you some guidance in your development, and then I'll send you on your way."

Victor nodded eagerly. "I'd appreciate anything—even just speaking to you is amazing. I've met people claiming to be descended from titans, but you're the first, the only—"

“As I said, titans are prideful creatures, Victor. Not all will be eager to speak to you. Not all will be pleased by your progress. If you come upon others, ancient ones like myself, tread lightly—at least until you’ve grown powerful enough to defend yourself. Speaking of prideful, tell me, have you had visions? Have you been visited by the ancestor motes that dwell in your blood?”

“I have. I’ve also had my ancestors speak to me from beyond the veil; they’ve given me aid a couple of times.”

Azforath nodded. “Good. They’ve no doubt found your manifestation of their bloodline intriguing. Ours is an ancient line—you won’t find new titans in the current era of the universe. Not easily. We are beings of calamity and strife, of creation and primal forces. As we grew in power and spread our might through the cosmos, as the eons came and went, most of our kind moved on to new planes of existence. Some, like me, remained content to expand inward, unwilling to leave behind those people and things that grew so dear to us.”

“Will that happen to me? Am I doomed to be apart from everything? A lonely titan in a world with no others?”

“Hah!” Azforath shook his head, his low chuckle bubbling forth from his chest again. “The strength of titans is our adaptability. Have you not claimed the breath of a great wyrm? Have you not learned to regrow your flesh like a monstrous behemoth? Have you not sculpted the shape of your flesh to make yourself fit in better with the little people of your homeworld? Many species might mimic one or two of these talents, but Victor, you’re only scratching the surface of what you can do.

“As you grow in power, you will make yourself fit in for as long as you like! I walked among the lesser folk—a god among men—for a million years before I grew weary of such an existence. You can do the same if you survive long enough to claim your true power. You’ll be a different man by the time you decide whether you’ll leave this universe, slumber like me, or...well, or die. Many titans have lain down to sleep only to find themselves too lonely, too despondent to bother with a soul space. Moving through the veil to seek a new existence is not an unusual way for a titan to end.”

“In one of my visions, my ancestor told me I had to fight the System to be a true titan.”

“What is a ‘true’ titan?” Azforath shook his head. “I think your ancestor meant well. He likely wanted to steer you away from the easy gifts this Other throws your way. I don’t believe you must wage war with the Other, however. Look at me—have I not told you that if the Other leaves me be, I will let it run its course? You must simply find a way to make the Other leave you be—to stay out of your way as you progress as you should, without the...limitations it imposes.”

“Like the dragons do?”

Azforath leaned forward. “Have you met dragons?”

Victor nodded. “I’ve met one.”

“Excellent! Is that where you learned that bit of Elder magic I can smell wafting from your pathways?”

Victor frowned. He hadn’t cast Alter Self for days or weeks. Azforath could still smell it? Or was it Wild Totem? He’d cast that in the dungeon, but it had still been a long time since. “Yeah,” he replied. “My friend taught me how to alter my size, and I learned a lot by studying her spell.”

“That way lies success, lad. Learn to craft your own spells. Learn to do things your own way. Learn to build your talents into an archetype of your design. Don’t let the Other do it for you. Don’t let it impose its limits and siphon its toll of Energy. Wage your battle for freedom bit by bit, though, lad. Don’t attempt to throw off a god-like being until you can match the strength of its greedy, clutching hands.”

Victor nodded. Azforath wasn’t exactly giving him a guidebook to the universe, but the little he’d shared with him had given Victor some comfort. It was good to know he wasn’t doomed to become a mountain-sized, walking calamity—not unless he wanted to. It was good to know he wasn’t doomed to be alone; he could adapt to anything. It was good to know he didn’t have to battle the System, at least not directly, but it was also good to know that he could, that it wasn’t an outrageous goal if he set himself a timeline long enough.

“I won’t simply give you platitudes and anecdotes in return for your help, Victor. I called you here because the dungeon was an annoyance, true, but the main reason was that I wanted to meet you. I wanted to see you with my own eyes. I wanted to feel your aura for myself. A young titan! How wonderful! I can see you’ve developed a beautifully balanced Spirit Core. The magma in your Breath Core is well paired with the blue ice, as well. I sensed you channeling the rage of the magma inside the dungeon. Have you not done so with your blue ice?”

“Um, I can use the magma because if you look closely enough, you can see that it’s a mixture of fire and rage—to berserk, I need the rage.”

“Have you not studied your blue ice similarly? Blue ice, Victor, is the ice at the heart of a glacier. If you think volcanos are angry, lad, you should feel the smoldering ancient rage of a glacier!” Suddenly, a beautifully tooled leather sketchbook was in Azforath’s hands, and he opened it to reveal a blank sheet of white paper. He drew his finger over the surface, and tiny motes of sparkling blue light darted forth, marking the page like glittering ink. “I’ll gift you with a bit more Elder magic, Victor.”

“I’ve been trying to learn about Elder magic. I have some texts on it, and I’ve memorized most of the known runic symbols and languages associated with it.”

“Good, good. This will be clear to you then. This first page is a template you can use to begin formulating your own spell patterns. I’ll label the various components of the pattern and write a brief description about when and why you’d use them. I shall also draw you a pattern for Glacial Wrath—a spell much like your Volcanic Fury. Moreover, I will draw a modification that will allow you to assert your will while under the influence of such spells. I won’t put the modification into your spell patterns for you. I want you to figure out where it would fit; it will be a good lesson and help build your confidence.”

“Confidence?”

“With crafting spells using Elder magic, Victor. You must continue to experiment. Such knowledge will be crucial when you breach the mortal stage of your development.”

“Mortal stage?”

“Yes! You are currently gaining power by harvesting Energy, yes? As the Energy feeds your Core, your Core feeds your body. You grow stronger, healthier, and faster, and your intellect and the force of your will strain the fabric of your mortal vessel. When you reach the peak of that stage, Victor, you’ll need to break through and craft an archetype for yourself, one that is more than mortal.

“Don’t let the Other guide you on that process. You can use its tools—the template of Energy-charged runes that pattern your perception of yourself—but build the archetype without guidance. Use your knowledge of Elder magic to do it properly. You’ll be a hundred-fold more potent than if you accept some limited pattern for existence that the Other tries to foist upon you.”

Victor folded his arms over his chest as he contemplated the ancient being’s words. He was talking about the iron ranks—the “mortal stage.” Crafting his “archetype” would be the steel-seeker stage. Azforath was telling him to do it himself and not to allow the System to guide him through it. “You seem to know more about the ‘Other’ than you let on.”

The ancient titan chuckled again. “True, lad. I observe. From time to time, my curiosity is tickled, and I spend a moment watching the people who clamber about the mountain where I rest.” He closed the book, and the big pages fluttered as the cover came down, showing Victor that Azforath had densely populated a dozen or more pages with beautiful glittering patterns and text. “This book is for your eyes alone, Victor. Should you let the knowledge in these pages wander to the wrong hands, I’ll not be held responsible for the ensuing wars.”

Victor took the tome as the elder titan passed it to him, and within the leather, he felt a swirling depth of power reminiscent of the royal jelly he held in his vault. He knew better than to try placing the book into one of his storage rings, so he nodded and tucked it under his arm. “Thank you, Azforath.”

“Not ‘big brother’?” The titan chuckled at Victor’s expression, which Victor knew damn well was mortified. Had he really been so flippant with this mighty being? True, it had been one thing when he’d felt the power under the mountain—awesome but comprehensible—the Energy and power inside this soul space, though, was another matter. Just as Victor wouldn’t have cracked wise to the ivid queen, he felt he had to restrain himself in Azforath’s presence.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about—”

“Fear not, lad. I appreciate your fervor and zeal. I hope you’ll visit me again, but now that I’ve felt your Cores and caught a glimpse of your spirit, I’m sure I’ll be able to keep an eye on you from afar.” He waved a hand, and the pale, shimmering blue portal reappeared. “Go now, Victor. I have loved ones to attend.”

Still clutching the book under his arm, Victor nodded and held out a hand. Azforath took it and, to Victor’s surprise, shook it warmly—no great shocks of Energy or awful strength that massacred his bones, just a warm, friendly handshake. “Thank you, sir.” The titan nodded, watching Victor with his depthless black eyes as he stepped through the tingly, almost soothing portal and back to the universe where everyone he cared about was waiting.