

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is great, Tria.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pleased, Victor closed his eyes and tried to relax during the short flight back to the lake house. Upon arrival, he walked through the house and out onto the deck, looking for any sign of Valla and their friends. Following sounds of splashes and laughter, he looked down the steps to the pier, where he saw Edeya, Lam, and Darren playing some convoluted game of keep away with Lesh. Darren leaped out of the water, something bright red clutched in his hand, and Victor could hear the breathless, almost panicked nature of his laughter as Lesh erupted like a damned crocodile, roaring as he gave chase. Edeya’s high-pitched cackle was too much, and Victor turned away before he jumped down there and joined the fun.

Of course, he wanted to, but he wondered where Valla was, and he’d also made a promise to himself to meet with Khul Bach before he found another excuse to put it off. So, he returned to the house and proceeded down the hall to his bedroom. He found Valla inside, sound asleep under the covers, her left eye still covered by a thick white bandage. He knew she didn’t need the bandage, that she was just hiding the damaged eye, either because she was self-conscious

or because it was unpleasant to look at. He wanted to pull it aside, wanted to see what some damned dungeon monster had done to her face, but he knew it would just make her angrier.

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

Rather than drag the furniture around, moving it to the other room, he just pulled the table and chairs into one of his storage rings; he'd put them back when he moved out of the house. He closed the study door, then, on the big woven carpet, he twisted the key in the marble-sized vault and watched as it hissed with steam, slowly expanding to fill most of the empty space in the room.

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

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

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

"Hello, Khul Bach. I've changed a bit and learned a lot. Have you been doing well?"

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

"Nah, not all that long. Less than a year."

"Yet you have a gravity about you that speaks of great advances. Tell me, then, lad, what have you been about?"

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

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

“So?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“An optimistic outlook. I won’t pretend to know as much as this man, this Ranish Dar, who has lived for thousands of years and reached pinnacles of power unheard of on Zaafor. No, learn what you can, but please be cautious, Victor. You are a gifted warrior. A man with potent blood and deep potential. It wouldn’t be the first time, nor even the millionth, that a powerful man promised great knowledge to a protégé who had something he coveted. Perhaps my caution is misplaced, and your new mentor is so far beyond you that anything he may gain from your abuse would be too small, too trifling, to warrant such betrayal, but . . .” It was Khul Bach’s turn to let his words die out, leaving Victor to draw his own conclusions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Victor felt Khul Bach’s push and relented, pulling his Energy back into himself and slipping out of the domain of the Ancestor Stone shard. He looked around the curved, rune-inscribed walls of his vault and let his eyes drift toward the vivid royal jelly. The fact that he was hiding it in there said a lot; he clearly didn’t fully trust Ranish Dar. Was there something to Khul Bach’s warning?

Hey sighed and stood. Moving over to the satchel, he slipped the bracer with the Ancestor Stone shard inside next to the silk-wrapped jelly, and then he stooped to pick up the ivory box containing the geists. Dar would want to see them when he helped set up Victor's "cultivation chamber," and he didn't want to have to awkwardly try to sneak them out of the vault, exposing the jelly.

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

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