

“Normally immigration is a very extensive and intrusive process,” said Varrin. “Hiward is a comparably small nation, and given the presence of the Creation Delve and the general quality of life that its citizens enjoy, there is a high demand for immigration. Hiward keeps it tightly controlled and monitored.”

“*Normally*,” I said. “I presume I’m about to hear a ‘but’.”

“But,” said Varrin, “Delvers are highly desirable citizens to have, which makes it easier. Even so, there is always the risk of an immigrating Delver acting as a spy or something of the like for a foreign power. So, *normally*, even immigrating Delvers are subject to a level of scrutiny.”

“Normally,” I repeated.

“*But*,” said Varrin, again, “my family owns a thundry, and has autonomy over who we allow to immigrate into our own territories.”

“What is a thundry?”

“Big plot of land,” said Xim.

“How big?”

“It’s roughly a sixth of Hiward,” said Varrin.

“Damn,” I tried to think of an Earth equivalent to what he was telling me. “Is that like a duchy?”

“The Littan equivalent would be a duchy, yes.”

“Wow.” I wondered why the Littan term translated to something I understood, but the Hiwardian one didn’t. “So you’re saying you can get me in without much trouble?”

“Either my mother or father can,” he said. “I just have to figure out how to convince them to do that. I could tell them the truth and trust in their understanding and discretion. You are already in their good graces for what you did inside the Delve, insomuch as you can be without them having met you.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I asked. He pondered that question for a long moment.

“I trust my parents,” he said. “And I believe they are good people. There are sometimes aspects of their station that cause them to make decisions in a way that may seem

harsh from the outside. By getting them involved at this level, they would be courting a degree of... I don't want to say treason. It would likely be an abuse of power."

"Even though you have the discretion?" I said.

"It's the fact that they would be using their discretion to immigrate an individual from an undiscovered nation for the express purpose of avoiding the exposure of your alienage."

"When you put it like that, I guess it sounds a bit improper. Still, if *you* get them to do it through deception, then you'd be the one aiding in my border-hopping."

"Which is more or less the same," said Varrin, "from a legal perspective. They would be held accountable for my actions."

"I could make you a Third Layer citizen," said Xim. "That'd be no problem."

"That might help him avoid questions about the U.S., but it's not as though he looks like he belongs in the Third Layer. That would invite different questions..." He rubbed at his chin. "Though, those questions would be easier ones to field. He'd still need permission to reside in Hiward, and he would have to return to the Third Layer for at least six months every two years."

"You Hiwardians have a strange desire to make everything inappropriately complicated," said Xim.

"Would that be a big deal?" I said. "It's not like I have a huge attachment to Hiward. I haven't even been outside yet. Maybe the weather sucks."

"If you don't like Hiward weather," said Varrin, "you will *not* like the weather in the Third Layer."

"He'd survive," said Xim. "He's got the Fortitude for it."

"Wait, what kind of place is the Third Layer?"

"Does your culture have a concept of hell?" said Xim.

"Yeah. Different types, but yeah."

"People up here say it's like that. It's an exaggeration though."

"It was literally regarded as a hell layer," said Varrin, "up until a century ago."

"It feels like a lot of things happened a century ago," I said.

"It's roughly when the Delves were discovered," said Varrin. "Let's avoid the history lesson for the moment though."

"Does it *hurt* to live in the Third Layer? I was raised Southern Baptist and they think hell is literally a lake of fire where you burn for all eternity."

"There's a lake of fire," said Xim. "But it's not like anybody swims in it. That's where the Hunger lives. Besides, *everywhere* hurts to live in if you don't know what you're doing."

"I don't think that's true," said Varrin.

"Please," said Xim. "You trip on a rock and break your arm, you don't go around screaming "This world is hell! I've fallen into damnation! Waaah waaah!" No. You learn not to trip over rocks and you go on with your life."

"Rocks aren't able to literally animate your nightmares and feed off the fear they cause."

"Just stay away from nightrippers. Same thing. I mean, by the gods, this world has *ducks*." Xim shivered as she said that.

"I thought you didn't know what ducks were," I said.

"I try not to."

Varrin rolled his eyes.

I needed to find a duck.

"Arlo, it looks like you have a couple of options then," said Varrin. "Trust my parents with your secret and risk cooperating in an illegal scheme to make you a citizen of Hiward. Or, live in the Third Layer for six months every two years."

"Xim, are there any legal issues with my background in the Third Layer?"

She laughed.

"Legal issues? No. There would be no *legal* issues."

"Uh... are there any laws in the Third Layer?"

"We have ritual, rather than law. Things aren't nearly as convoluted as they are here."

I didn't know what that meant, and I was having misgivings about living somewhere *any* culture considered hell. Then again, maybe it was boss. Like an endless Gwar concert.

“I think I should visit the Third Layer before I make a decision.”

“Sure!” said Xim. “But, you’ll have to wait a month.”

“Maybe longer than that,” said Varrin. “You’ll both need to stick around for the inquisition.”

“Boo,” said Xim.

“Why a month?”

“Breaching the surface requires the favor of Sam’lia, which shouldn’t be spent lightly,” she said. “My family likes to take their time up here when we do. I also have to spend a month in prayer and give offerings for using my transformation. I’ll be stuck in the temple while my family vacations.”

“Won’t the inquisition be a huge point of risk for exposing my nationality?”

“You’re right,” said Varrin, beginning to pace back and forth. “You’re already exposed to some degree with Lito and Myria, but they probably won’t be in charge of the inquisition.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never heard of either of them,” said Varrin. “Since I was involved I expect them to send someone well-versed.”

“Mr. Big Deal over here,” said Xim.

“It comes with the territory,” said Varrin. “In any event, having your nationality changed before the inquisition is preferable, if you want to maximize damage control.”

“So then, I can either trust your family to protect me while we commit a criminal conspiracy to hide my alien superhero origin story, or spend six months in a hell layer every two years?”

“It’s not a hell layer,” said Xim.

“That about sums it up,” said Varrin.

“I appreciate your offer, Varrin. I don’t want to put your family at risk and I especially don’t want to end up being taken prisoner if the sham is ever exposed. I think my chances of falling into the hands of a nefarious organization bent on extracting portions

of my brain for experimentation would be more than marginally higher if I were a convict or outlaw.”

“I see,” said Varrin. He looked both relieved and disappointed.

“Awesome!” said Xim. “You can join my tribe then.”

I took a deep breath.

“I mean, you’re sure that’s fine?”

“He’s from another dimension,” Xim said as she shoveled a forkful of whatever the local equivalent of beef was into her mouth.

I’d been invited to join her family for dinner, which was thankfully hosted at a private venue bought out for the night to celebrate her Creation. A few servants stood nearby in the shadows, but they were all citizens of the Third Layer as well, and Xim didn’t seem to mind the possibility of them overhearing.

“That’s very nice,” Xim’s mom said, as though Xim had just told her I was nothing any more remarkable than a mechanic, or a chef. The woman’s dark horns glittered in the candlelight as she cut a bite from a leafy vegetable. Her name was Xorna, and her soul glowed a magnificent gold with veins of silver woven into it, the base layer looking like a series of blooming and decaying roses. There were also subtle striations of violet; something I hadn’t seen before. The level floating above her head said forty-two, and her presence emitted far greater pressure than Lito’s or Myria’s had. She also ate her food with much greater delicacy than her daughter. “What dimension in particular?”

“Uh, I don’t know if it has a proper name,” I said. “Earth is the planet.” Xorna frowned thoughtfully.

“That sounds difficult.” She chewed the vegetable, smiling in approval at the taste.

“Is being from another dimension...normal in the Third Layer?”

“No,” said Xim’s father, Drel’gethed. Or, Drel for short, which is what Xim told me to call him. His Delver level and aura matched Xorna’s, but the base of his soul looked like innumerable eyes, all of which gazed into me. His voice was deep and smoky, and

wispy tendrils of black energy moved over the meat on his own plate, leaving only bone behind. I couldn't tell where the meat went, only that it disappeared. He looked at me with a pair of violet eyes, far more human in appearance than the rest of him. The specks of white on his skin shifted and twinkled like stars. "It is not a strange thing. We are not from this layer of reality. Like you, we are travelers. You are merely from a more distant land."

"That's very open-minded of you." I took a bite of my own food. It was delicious, and as soon as the first morsel hit my tongue my stomach roared to life. I hadn't eaten in at least twenty hours, unless you counted chowing down on a concentrated chip of mana eating. The stress of the day had so far pushed back my hunger, but with my fight-or-flight impulses switched to the 'off' position, my body loudly pronounced that Fortitude was not a replacement for food. I immediately began tucking in to the meal, though with only about sixty percent of the enthusiasm of Xim. I still didn't want to be rude, not that either of her parents seemed to mind Xim's Kirby impression.

"Why do you want to become a part of our tribe?" Xorna asked, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin.

"Legal issues," said Xim, before downing an entire goblet of wine in one go. She held it up and a servant approached to refill it. "Thanks!" She took another big swig, then went back to attacking her plate.

"As much as I'd like to say it is for a more noble reason, Xim's right," I said. "My Delver records show my home nation on Earth when viewed, and I have reason to believe this will cause me difficulties here in Hiward, and in Arzia at large."

"The Hiwardians love their laws," said Drel. "They make things complicated. They think the world is chaotic. They attempt to exert control. These laws do not help. They are only a burden." Xim nodded vigorously as Drel said this.

"I was actually a lawyer in my old life," I said. "I can appreciate the utility, but agree that it often becomes labyrinthine to navigate or understand."

"Laws serve those who understand them," said Drel. "Laws oppress those who do not. Those who write the laws know this. They use this to their advantage."

"I think I can get on board with that idea."

The man seemed to have put a lot of thought into the nature of legal structures, despite his own society being governed by a different system altogether. He floated up from his seat and drifted over to me. I looked up into his penetrating gaze as he loomed, and took a bite off my fork.

He looked up to Grotto, who still hovered just above my shoulder. The Delve core returned the look, and I could almost feel electricity crackling between them.

"I like your companion," Drel said as he looked over the mini-C'thon. "It exudes a sense of power. It is more than it seems. It will join the tribe as well?"

[This is a great man,] Grotto thought to me. [He has a discerning eye for the quality of an individual. You may tell him that I would be honored to assist in ruling over his territory. I will, of course, accept a humble position to begin with. Perhaps the governor of a minor region, such as a small country or vassal state.]

"Grotto is my bonded familiar," I said. "I'm pretty sure he'll come with me wherever I am."

[That is not what I said. Inform him of my conditions!]

"This is good," said Drel. "He has an ancient scent. Like the seed of a mighty Irgriana tree." He looked down at me. "The tree grows broad. It grows great thorns. It consumes many dreams. The sap distills into a lovely spirit."

"I'll have to try it some time." I absently wondered what dreams tasted like.

"The liquor sends First Layer denizens into a coma. You are strong, though. Perhaps you will have sweet night-terrors instead."

"Oh. Maybe I won't have any." Then again, what did *nightmares* taste like?

"That would be a shame. You are not of the First Layer. You are of another. I would like to see what happens."

He drifted away from the table into the shadows and whispered something in the ear of a servant. The servant bowed and left the room, taking another pair of attendants with them. Drel returned and gestured for more servants to approach. They came forward, picked up the table, and carried it away. It was a little disappointing. I still had half my dinner left. Xim grabbed her own plate off the table and brought it to her lap, finishing up the last few scraps on its surface. Xorna let her meal go, barely touched, but smiled as she sipped from the goblet she still held.

"Does it have to be right now, dad?" Xim asked. "Arlo didn't finish eating. I didn't finish eating."

“Your hunger will not shorten your life,” said Drel. “The seconds passing are gone forever. Arlo shall join the tribe at this moment. I have decided, and no more time will be lost.”

Xim sat her cleaned plate on the ground and raised her eyebrows.

“He likes you,” she said. “He wants your roots to enter the tribe as soon as possible.”

“I’m... flattered?”

“Oh, I meant to ask before,” said Xim. “You’re not weird about nudity are you?”