

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

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

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

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

"Grasper?" Victor whispered.

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

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

His mind wandered down paths of elder magic and his last experience on the Spirit Plane when he'd claimed Guapo. Should he tell Dar about those strange, powerful beings who'd visited him? How would they match up to Dar in power? Could his new mentor protect him from those two who'd seemed intent on finding him again once he'd 'ripened'? It was hard to say because they'd only given him a glimpse of their power, and he'd changed a lot since then. His musings were interrupted when the ground lurched under his feet, and a great *whump* of stale air, dust, and debris was thrown from the cave mouth.

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

"It comes! Grasper is no more!"

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

Lifedrinker had grown significantly as she'd evolved, but she was still more of a hatchet than a battle axe when he gripped her in his titanic fist. He held her outstretched in one hand as he flew through the air and grinned savagely when a target for his wrath emerged from the cave.

The lich-wyrm was much as he'd imagined—a great, slithering creature of desiccated flesh and bone, wreathed in cold, blue mist.

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

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

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

Victor knew all too well how much that spell hurt. He glanced back at Arona as he waited for the flaming boulders to do their damage, unwilling to dive into the fray only to be blasted back by the concussion. Arona was standing, arms wide, sheathed in a scirocco of blue Energy as her black bone stretched and multiplied, taking the form of a gargantuan, four-legged skeleton. It reminded Victor of museum exhibitions—displays of predatory dinosaurs. The thing, composed of black bones and claws, looked like a cross between a Tyrannosaurus rex and an elephant. It had four legs ending in scythe-like claws, a body fifteen feet high at the shoulders, and a head like an enormous crocodile.

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

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

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

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

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

"Your axe feeds," Arona noted.

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

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

"He gets stronger?"

"Yes. He gains power from the foes we defeat together." She pointed to Arcus standing on the hillside opposite them, still firing spells into the dying monster. "Does he think to win a bigger stake in the kill? Can't he see it's over?"

Victor shrugged. "I think he just likes blowing shit up."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The reward was significant, and he knew it moved him well toward the next level, but still, it wasn't as much as he received from defeating the ambush at the dungeon entrance. By the time he settled back down to the ground and the waves of euphoria began to fade, he'd been joined by Tyn, who hadn't received anything from the kill. Victor looked up the hillside to see Arona and Arcus sitting on the slope, both looking dazed. "I don't think they're used to infusions that size," he said.

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

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

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

"Don't!" she cried, halfway down the hillside on her way, no doubt, to collect the bone herself. Victor held it up to show he meant no harm, striding toward her. It was dense and heavy like lead, and the cold that radiated from it was almost uncomfortable, but it didn't bother his

Quinametzin flesh much. When he held it out to her, she snatched it quickly, and then it disappeared.

“Isn’t it conscious?”

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

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

Beyond the hills and the ruins where he’d come into the dungeon, it looked like some dark, massive mountains climbed toward the sky in the extreme distance. He was surprised to see a faint yellow glow in the side of one of those distant peaks, and, squinting against the gloom, he was reasonably sure they were either hundreds of little fires or, perhaps, the lights of a town. “Rumble Town, maybe,” he mused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’ll bring it forth,” Arona said. “I’ve delved into many a dungeon with that man-child. That disc is something he uses to carry burdens.” Victor nodded, suddenly feeling like he was missing out

when it came to utility spells. He wondered if he could convince his bear to drag a chest out of a cave for him. A few minutes later, sure enough, Arcus and Tyn came marching out of the cave with a large, iron-bound chest atop Arcus's magical, floating table of fiery Energy.

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

"It's safe," Arcus said. "I disrupted the trap runes." His words, once again, reminded Victor of his ignorance, but he shrugged and opened the heavy lid, exposing a pile of glittering treasures, one of which was a brightly glowing, rainbow-hued orb just like the one Arona had gotten from the death wind. He heard Arcus's intake of breath and Arona's shifting feet, so Victor stepped back, afraid spells were about to start flying.

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