

"You do?" Lam leaned forward, hope in her eyes. Victor wanted to comfort her, to give her good news, but he felt such an overwhelming sense of frustration and defeat that he had a hard time keeping it out of his voice.

"Yeah. Victoria or Catalina, whatever the *bruja*'s name is—I'm pretty sure she was capturing Edeya's spirit when you and Kethelket interrupted her."

"What does that mean?" Lam pressed, kneeling before Edeya, grasping her hand between hers.

"She took it with her, well, most of it. There's a sliver of her spirit still in here, a shard." Victor gently stroked Edeya's pale hair, pushing a loose tendril away from her face. "It's what's keeping her alive."

"Took it where?" Valla's voice was hard, hinting at pent-up violence.

Victor groaned and stood up, looking away from Edeya. He felt frustrated and angry, but worse, he felt the warm, painful heat of shame flushing the blood up the back of his neck. He squeezed his eyes shut and, while he spoke, thumped a clenched fist against his forehead. "She slipped past me. Through the portal. She's back on Dark Ember, I guess."

"Dark Ember?" Lam frowned and continued to massage Edeya's hand. "Can't we call her back? She's still alive; there's still part of her spirit here! You said so yourself! Will she recover? Can this fragment be strengthened?"

"I don't know," Victor groaned. "God dammit! I should have chased that lying . . ." Victor frowned from Lam to Valla, saw the anger and frustration in their eyes, and knew he couldn't be the one to act out right now. As much as he cared about Edeya, Lam cared more. As much as he wanted to blame himself for everything, that wouldn't get her spirit back. "She interrupted me fighting with Hector. She almost helped him escape, too, but he couldn't go through the portal. I don't know why, but his last breath was spent cursing the System. Maybe it was something to do with the quest, the conquest challenge."

"Is the portal gone?" Lam asked, her eyes drifting to the exit as though she'd charge away, up into the volcano, right that second.

"Yeah, it's gone. Nothing would last through that eruption, but it was closed before the mountain blew. Screw this." Victor took Lam's shoulders in his hands, turning the woman he'd once idolized to face him. "I'll get her spirit back, Lam, or I'll die trying." She stared at him with those glittering jewel-like eyes. She was a woman so beautiful he'd struggled to breathe in her presence when he'd first arrived as a slave to Greatbone Mine. Where once she'd looked at him with pity, kindness, and encouragement, she now looked at him with hope, a kind of beseeching, searching look in those eyes as she stared into his.

"I believe you, and I'll help."

"As will I, Lam!" Valla reached out to grasp Victor's shoulder with one hand and the back of Lam's neck with the other. They stared at each other, and it was evident in their eyes what they were saying, even without words; they'd do whatever they could to get Edeya's spirit away from Victoria, no matter what. "Victor, claim your reward from the System. I don't know how it works, but we've yet to get the promised colony stone. I think, if we plant it, whatever settlement we build around it will be our capital."

“And if we have a capital stone, it might open up options for world travel,” Lam said, finishing Valla’s point. “Rellia will be angry if we plant it without consulting her . . .”

“I don’t care.” Victor let go of Lam’s shoulders and turned toward the exit. “If you want, send her a message. Tell her what’s going on. If she has another idea, I’ll listen.” He took two steps, then paused. “Valla, can you show me where the wounded are? I’d like to see if Chandri . . .”

“Of course!” Once again, she took his hand and started walking, tugging him toward the exit.

“I’ll stay with Edeya.” Victor glanced back at Lam when she spoke and saw her sitting in the seat she’d pulled close to Edeya’s. She held the girl’s hand and stared at her face, whispering something clearly meant for her alone. He wondered if it was a prayer or a promise.

When they stepped outside into the courtyard, Victor came face to face with Kethelket and, beside him, the gigantic stranger who’d intervened in the battle with Hector and his dragon skeleton. In the light of day, the man was no less impressive. If Victor had never seen the people of Zaafor, the giant Degh, the animalistic Vesh, and the snake-like Yazzians, he might have been more taken aback by the newcomer’s massive, draconic form. With his size currently reduced, even Victor had to look up to meet the man’s gaze. After staring for a half second, Victor reached out and took the hand Kethelket held out. “I’m glad you made it.”

“As am I, Victor. Your victory and survival won the day, however. Ancestors! I would have loved to see that battle!”

“I as well,” the big stranger rumbled. Victor let go of Kethelket’s hand and looked at the scaled man, frowning with suspicion. He knew he didn’t have a right to accuse him of anything, but after Victoria’s lies, after learning she was really Catalina and had been playing him all along, he felt it would be stupid to trust anyone blindly.

“I’m sorry, but your name . . . did you tell it to me during the fight? I was enraged . . .”

“I am Lesh’ro’zellan, and I hail from the world of Ashenshoal. Simply call me Lesh.” His voice was deep with a kind of guttural edge, especially when he pronounced the Z in his name.

“I know you helped Valla against Hector, so you have my thanks, but tell me, what brings you to Fanwath? Why were we so lucky to have your aid?”

The big, darkly scaled man’s mouth was surprisingly expressive as it twisted into a snarl. He practically spat as he growled, “The System.” Victor watched his taloned hand twist on the heavy, black metal haft of his huge, staff-like cudgel.

“Can you elaborate?”

Kethelket’s nervous fidget and sour expression weren’t lost on Victor as he said, “Perhaps now isn’t the time for that tale, Legate. It’s a lengthy one.”

“Just a quick summary, maybe?” Victor stared hard into the draconic man’s darkly gleaming green eyes. Victor might have expected an answer or a polite refusal, but he didn’t expect Lesh to fall to a knee before him, holding his enormous cudgel lengthwise on his open palms.

"I offer you my service, Lord Victor. As such, I cannot build upon a foundation of lies or deceit. I came here, to this world, to slay you."

Victor felt something in him break free, something he subconsciously always held in check. Without thought, he severed his connection to his Alter Self spell, surging in size while he ripped Lifedrinker from the temporary loop at his belt. His aura fell around him, heavy and dense with murderous intent. As his muscles bunched and coiled, as Valla stumbled away from him, he loomed over Lesh and growled, eyes red with rage and smoldering heat, "You *what?*"

To his credit, Lesh didn't flinch. "I answered a System quest, months and months ago, to come to this world and slay the one known as Victor."

"You dare to challenge me?" If he thought about it, Victor would have recognized his Quinametzin pride asserting itself. As it was, he was barely cognizant of his ancestral need to be respected and dominate his surroundings. Victor twisted his hands on Lifedrinker and felt her vibrate with eagerness. Was this a worthy foe at last? He could smell something in the man kneeling before him, something ancient that echoed in his blood memories. "Kneeling . . ." his voice rumbled. Again, something deep in him recognized the respect Lesh was showing, and that recognition gave Victor just enough control to stay his hand.

"Yes, I kneel. Months ago, the thought of it would have broken me. Months ago, I would have sooner dug out my own heart than bend the knee to anyone. That was before I met you, Victor, before I watched you battle a thousand powerful undead. It was before I saw you breathe fire that would have shamed every dragonkin on Ashenshoal. It was before I followed you through these lands and saw the respect your actions demanded. When I measured myself against you, I found myself wanting. Lord Victor, I stood tall on Ashenshoal because strength is what earns respect there, and I was stronger than any in my clan. I believed myself stronger than those in the capital, Garspire. When I witnessed your might, I knew I must follow you rather than attempt to slay you by underhanded means."

"And I should believe you?"

"Victor!" Valla tried to interject, but he ignored her, staring at the kneeling dragonkin as he'd labeled himself.

"I have rejected the System's quest, forfeiting my reward. To return to Ashenshoal would be shameful, for I will not lie. Nothing matters more to me than my honor, and so I give up my life, my love, my people, and my home. I will follow you, or I will die by your hand." He lifted his huge staff-like cudgel higher as though offering it to Victor, and that angry voice in Victor's heart subsided, appeased by the man's obeisance.

"Keep your weapon," he growled, pushing his rage back into his Core and straining to pull in his aura.

Lesh didn't move as he spoke again, "Will you accept me into your service?"

His instinct was to say yes, but Victor had newfound doubts about his instincts. Hadn't he decided Victoria wasn't a threat? Hadn't he nearly trusted her to go free on more than one occasion? Hadn't he refused to let Sarl collar her? Wasn't Sarl dead now because of his sentimentality and desire to see the good in everyone? Rather than say yes or no, Victor looked down at Kethelket, and the heroic, dark-eyed prince nodded to him. He trusted Kethelket's

judgment, even if he couldn't trust his own right then. Still, he had questions. "Why the hell did the System give you a quest to kill me?"

"I have no idea." Lesh didn't offer anything more, but his words rang true to Victor.

"It's not unheard of," Valla said, "For the System to take an interest in a person. There are stories of heroes, champions of the Ridonne . . ."

Victor didn't want to speculate right then. He had a million things on his mind, and the System's apparent vendetta against him wasn't something he could spare the mental bandwidth on. "I accept your service, Lesh, but we need to talk about what that means. Later though, this isn't the time."

The man's draconic face split into a grin that exposed fangs that would've given a Bengal tiger a run for its money as he leaped to his feet. "Thank you, Lord . . ."

"Just Victor."

"Thank you, Victor! What task shall I busy myself with?"

"I'm going to visit the wounded. Can you and Kethelket meet me by the System stone?" Victor turned to Kethelket as he spoke.

"We can," the dark, one-time prince said with a salute.

"Kethelket. Lesh." Victor held up a hand, forestalling their departure. "Thank you for fighting with me against Hector and his people. Thank you for saving the lives of people I care about. It's not lost on me that if it weren't for you, I'd be mourning a great deal more today. I'm grateful."

Kethelket didn't object, nor did he belabor the issue. He nodded and turned, and Lesh followed suit. Victor watched them march up the steps and into the keep, a giant, leather-clad, scale-covered hulk and a much smaller, slender man with moth-like wings glimmering with bright, ochre patterns. He couldn't imagine a more dissimilar pair, but they seemed easy in each other's company. "They've made friends quickly."

Once again, Valla's fingers entwined with his. "After you chased Hector up the mountain, the two of them laid waste to the undead, rallying the soldiers and driving them away from the encampment. I believe a strong bond was forged that night."

"And you?"

"Oh, I slew my fair share." She squeezed his hand. "Come, make yourself smaller again, and let's see if Chandri's in the barracks."

Victor took her advice, recasting Alter Self, and followed her into a different keep entrance and down a short hallway that opened into a much longer one lined with doors. A soldier sat at a desk in the hallway, and she jumped up, face flushed, saluting Victor and Valla. She stood, straight as a board, staring into the wall opposite her desk until Valla said, "At ease, Sergeant. Do you have a list of the wounded?"

“Yes, ma’am!” She turned to the desk and lifted a clipboard, dense with script. “Who are you looking for, ma’am?”

“A soldier named Chandri. I don’t recall what unit . . .” Victor started to say, but the young sergeant perked up and lowered the clipboard.

“She’s here, sir! Healer Breeva just approved and administered one of the regeneration draughts for her. She’s in the first room on the left.” She might have kept speaking, but Victor didn’t hear her; his blood had rushed to his ears, throbbing and pounding as he hurried to the door and yanked it open. He didn’t know what he’d expected, but it wasn’t a room filled with six beds, most occupied by sleeping soldiers. He barely got hold of the door, halting it before it slammed into the wall. When he, more calmly, peered through the doorway, scrutinizing the beds, his eyes finally found her on the third bed to the left. She was lying on her back, eyes closed, tightly swathed in blankets. Thick bandages covered her forehead and right eye, but the unbandaged side of her face was visible, and Victor recognized her immediately.

When he felt Valla next to him, also peering through the door, he asked softly, so as not to wake the sleeping soldiers, “Regeneration draught?”

“We’ve won quite a few from the System chests. I just looked at her patient notes—Chandri lost an eye, and her right arm was badly smashed. She was on the wall when Hector’s dragon skeleton tore it apart.” She wound her cool fingers around his wrist and added, “We should let her rest. The regeneration magic is powerful but works slowly.”

“Shouldn’t I sit with her?” Victor kept his voice hushed. He knew he should be worried about Chandri, upset that she’d been hurt so badly, but the fact that she was alive overwhelmed those feelings, filling him with relief that was so tangible he could taste it.

“Give it a little time; there’s still much for you to do today, yes? We can sit with her after we have some answers and plans regarding . . .”

“Edeya. The stone. Right.” Victor slowly closed the door. Then it was he who led Valla out to the courtyard and up into the central hall where straggling soldiers were still lined up, waiting for their turn with the System stone. Victor stood at the entrance, taking in the scene, amazed by how much the hall had changed since he and Valla had left. The garrison soldiers had been hard at work, it seemed.

Long tables lined both sides of the hall, three on each side, leaving a long central aisle strewn with colorful but mismatched rugs, likely taken from personal storage rings or those looted from the dead wampyrs. Warm light shone down from two Energy chandeliers hanging on the high rafters, and the smell of cooked food wafted from the plates and bowls in front of the many soldiers who’d gathered to eat. The mood was festive, and Victor could see why—these people were celebrating being alive, celebrating victory and a bright future despite their loss of comrades. More than that, every couple of minutes, another soldier received a magical chest delivered in clouds of green, blue, or even golden, steamy Energy.

“There’s Kethelket,” Valla pointed to the Naghelli leader sitting on a bench near the far end of the hall, watching the soldiers interacting with the System stone. Lesh was beside him, though he sat on the hard floor, his legs folded before him, studying a text of some sort. Victor walked toward them, nodding to the soldiers who grew quiet and stared as he and Valla passed. Her

wings were folded tightly against her back, and Victor draped an arm over her shoulders, too happy to be near her to care what others thought about propriety.

"I can see from the lack of gloom that your friend lives." Kethelket held up a mug of something steamy and asked, "Would you like some cider? It's not something I pulled from my ring; the soldiers found an apple orchard in the hills to the east."

"Ah! I knew it smelled good in here, but I hadn't placed the scent." Victor's mouth had begun to salivate at the idea. "I'll go to the kitchen in a while. Maybe after I clean up."

"Will you claim your prize, Victor?" Lesh asked, looking up from his thick book.

"I'll wait for the soldiers to finish. Looks like only a dozen or so still in line." Victor studied the dragonkin momentarily, then asked, "How'd you get here, Lesh? A portal?"

"I used the System stone in our capital."

"I know there are ways to open portals to worlds without using the System stones, but it's not easy, is it? We had a powerful friend help us travel here from Zaafor."

"No, not easy at all. None in my clan have the knowledge."

Valla sat beside Kethelket and interjected, "Didn't your cousin say she knew how to open portals? Or was that her powerful friend?"

"I . . . don't remember. We talked about a lot in a short time. Even if she can make portals, do you think she can open one to anywhere?"

"What's all this about?" Kethelket asked. "Portal to where?"

Valla turned to him and bluntly summarized, "Catalina has Edeya's spirit, or most of it. We're trying to figure out how we can get to her."

"That's the girl with the pretty blue wings?" Lesh asked, closing his book and, perhaps unintentionally, growling deep in his chest.

"Yeah." Victor sighed and scratched his head, running his fingers through his stiff hair, for a moment wondering why it was so stiff and clumpy before he realized his sweat had soaked up the ash in the air.

Kethelket took a sip of his cider. "Can you not summon her spirit? Rip it from that Death Caster's clutches?"

"I don't know. If so, it's beyond what I know how to do."

"Why not go to a hub world?" Lesh asked, his frown deepening.

Valla saved Victor from embarrassment by asking, "Hub world?"

Lesh looked at her with narrow eyes, then he turned to Kethelket and Victor, and when he saw no understanding in either of their faces, he said, "You've not traveled to a hub world?"

Kethelket shrugged. "I've been locked in a dimensional dungeon for the last few hundred years."

Victor shook his head, and Valla said, "The rulers of this world have restricted access to the System stone in the capital. We can reach certain worlds from the other city stones, but I've never heard of a hub world."

The draconic man took a deep breath and began a lengthy explanation in his rumbling, rather pleasant baritone, "Aha. Well, if the System gives you a colony or settlement stone, you'll probably have limited world travel options at first, but I'm sure one of the options will be a hub world. A hub world is like a crossroads, a world where the people have worked hard to meet the System's requirements to open more and more world connections. They do it in the hopes that their singular focus will facilitate trade and the flow of travelers and wealth, offsetting their neglect of other System options."

"What other options?" Kethelket had grown very still, clearly intrigued by Lesh's words.

"Hmm, let me see." As he paused, Victor saw, for the first time, a tendril of greenish-gray vapor drift up out of Lesh's snout. "On my home world, the rulers have concentrated their efforts on opening more and more dungeons to challenge us. The central goal of my people is always to improve individual strength and advancement. Every dragonkin lives with the ultimate desire to achieve evolution into a true dragon and, failing that, to have a clutch of strong children starting further along than their parents."

"So, a hub world concentrates on world connections rather than dungeons?" Valla clarified, nodding her head.

"Yes, though there are myriad other ways to spend Energy at a colony stone."

"No wonder those bastards have held onto power so long," Victor growled, and he knew Kethelket and Valla would understand who he meant—the Ridonne.

"Uh, yes, well," Lesh held up his thick book, "you can find knowledge about nearly any topic in a hub world."

"All right," Victor nodded, rubbing his chin. He turned back to the stone and saw that only three more soldiers were in the queue to interact. "It's time I find out what the System decided I deserve as my award."