

When Victor woke up, he had a message from Valla in the Farscribe book:

*Victor – We failed the boss fight but escaped without serious injury. We’re resting at an inn near the entrance. We’ll return to the house after breakfast.*

“Shit,” Victor grunted, sliding out of bed and pulling on his clothes. A glance at the window told him it was still early; the sky had yet to brighten with sunrise. He summoned a pen and wrote a quick reply:

*Valla – We’re all staying at Dar’s lake house. I’m coming to pick you up. Wait there!*

That done, Victor went into the kitchen and asked the staff, the only people already awake, if one of them could wake Mr. Qwor to let him know he wanted to leave even earlier than planned. When a young woman nodded and hurried away, Victor went outside and stood by the cobbled drive, waiting. The coachman was quick to arrive, and Victor had a feeling he was an early riser because he was dressed sharply in his uniform, looking alert when he pulled the levitating vehicle around.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Hey, Mr. Qwor. Sorry to change things up, but I just found out some friends are out of a dungeon and need picking up. Do you know about a dungeon called ‘Desperation Gap?’ They’re waiting at an inn near the entrance.”

“Of course, sir. It’s southwest of the city near the Opal Sea. I’ll have you there in an hour.” So, Victor climbed into the coach, wrote Valla another message saying he’d be there in an hour, and then leaned back in the cushions, comfortable and relaxed, knowing he’d soon be with her again.

The Opal Sea wasn’t as big as the lake on Dar’s property. Victor looked out the window to watch as they approached, and that was his first thought. Not only was it smaller, but the shoreline was rocky, barren, and lined with hundreds of piers, all crowded with fishing boats of varying sizes. The sight gave Victor a new perspective on Dar’s power and influence. Clearly, this “sea” wasn’t privately owned and was in high demand for fishing, if nothing else. How much would the working-class folk of Sojourn love to gain access to the beautiful, clear, fish-filled waters on Dar’s vacation property?

The inn at the mouth of a narrow canyon where the “Desperation Gap” dungeon was situated was a tall, five-story, asymmetrical building that looked like only the force of Energy-fueled enchantments was keeping it upright. Victor stepped out of the coach amid a busy little market square. They’d flown over many homes, and it was clear that this area near the Opal Sea was sort of a smaller town center away from the larger city.

Victor wondered if it was still considered part of Sojourn, which made him wonder just how things on the “city world” were structured. The world and city were called Sojourn, but was every other community part of that? Were they all ruled by the same council of powerful beings?

He’d reduced his size to that of the majority of the local populace—something close to an average human—so he didn’t have to duck when he stepped into the tavern on the inn’s ground floor. Valla had yet to respond to his messages, but he hoped she and Lesh would be waiting there.

When he pushed open the door, still clad in regular clothes but with Lifedrinker on his back, it was apparent the inn was still waking up and that breakfast was being served. The space was noisy and crowded, and Victor had to stand there for several seconds before anyone looked his way. He didn't care, though; he was scanning the crowded tables for Lesh's hulking form or Valla's silvery wings.

To his relief, he spotted them in the front, far corner by a window, and when he started toward them, Lesh caught sight of him first and stood up, knocking his chair back with a clatter. "Lord Victor!" he roared, which got Valla's attention, whose back was to him. She shifted to look his way, and Victor almost fell over when he saw her face. She had a bandage over her left eye and, above and beneath it, on her forehead and cheek, was a deep, fresh scar that stood out, red and swollen, on her beautiful silvery-blue flesh.

Victor rushed to her, indiscriminately shoving people, chairs and all, out of his way. He hadn't realized he was doing it, but by the time he stood before her, he'd released his size-altering spell and easily lifted her into an embrace, gently cradling her head onto his shoulder as he held her. "*Pobrecita!* What happened?"

Valla squirmed in his embrace, and he heard her muffled reply, "Victor! Put me down!" He did as she asked, gently lowering her, oblivious to the outraged clamoring of the customers he'd left in his wake. He had eyes and ears only for Valla.

As for her, all she could see was Victor, his giant form looming before her. She sighed, reached out to take his left hand with both of hers, and said, "I knew you were going to overreact! I got hurt; that's the whole story. Nothing more to say. It's a risk that comes with the territory . . ."

"Fuck, Valla!" Victor reached toward her bandage, but then he was jostled, and a heavy hand gripped his biceps, pulling with enough strength to turn him.

A deep, guttural voice growled, "You owe me a god's damned breakfast, you great oaf!"

Victor released Valla and whirled, rage rushing into pathways primed by his shock at seeing Valla wounded. His vision turned red, and he laid eyes on the man accosting him and . . . fought to get himself under control. The man was old and gray with a bent, hunched back, but judging by the size of his forearm and his powerful grip, Victor knew he was someone who'd worked hard his whole, very long life. More sobering than that was the mess he saw behind the old fellow. In his haste to get to Valla, Victor had overturned several chairs, sent a few folks sprawling, and even upended an entire table.

"Shit," he said, his eyes widening. "I'm sorry about that. I, uh, saw my . . ."

"He saw me, sir," Valla said, stepping around to get a look at what Victor had done. "He saw me and my injury and lost all sense. We'll pay for the damages, of course."

The old man released Victor's arm and nodded. "Shoulda guessed. Well, I've lost my head a time or two for a pretty face." He nodded and turned, stooping with a grunt to lift his table upright.

"Help him!" Valla hissed, and Victor, his rage utterly washed away by his embarrassment, cast Alter Self again, reducing his size so he could more nimbly help pick up the mess he'd created.

He was still worried about Valla, but the initial, instinctual need to get to her had been banished by shame, especially as he watched her, injured as she was, helping to clean up the mess he'd created. When the innkeeper came around to see what the fuss was about, she was the one who handed him a pouch full of beads and said that she wanted to buy everyone's meal.

Lesh, too large to help easily, sat back down and continued to eat while he watched. When all was righted, Valla urged Victor to sit at the table, and then she said, "I know this looks bad, and I know how upset you are, but I will recover. My eye was damaged beyond a healing potion, but a regeneration mixture will probably restore it. I have one, a treasure from the war, but Lesh and I also won racial advancement elixirs, and my hope is that the process will mend my eye."

"You did?" Victor glanced at Lesh and saw the big dragonkin grinning a toothy, reptilian smile.

"Aye, Lord Victor. We gained three levels, too, and a great many minor treasures. We got far, much farther than the guidebook said we would as a duo."

"The truth is, we went too far!" Valla chuckled. "We should have stopped before the boss encounter."

"You got to the boss?"

Valla shook her head. "Only of the section we were in. The dungeon is strange; it's not arranged in levels but rather like a long beach along a stony cliff. There are inlets and coves, caves, and beached ships—all swarming with scaly, water-breathing men and women. Some are small and come in great numbers, while others are huge and monstrous and fight alone, too savage for even their own kind to approach. It was one such that seemed to be the 'boss' of the area we were exploring, and it was he who took my eye and forced us to retreat."

Victor found his vision clouding with red again and clenched his fists until his knuckles noisily popped. Valla grabbed his hand and said, "Stop it! Stop acting like I'm a doll you have to protect. I'm an adventurer, Victor." He could hear real frustration in her voice, and that, more than anything, allowed him to push the rage out of his pathways. While Lesh continued to feed his bottomless hunger and Valla looked away, perhaps trying to think of the right thing to say, Victor struggled with his conflicting emotions.

Part of him wanted to tell Valla it wasn't worth it. What was she trying to prove? He loved her and didn't care if she was as powerful as he was. Didn't she understand that? She didn't have to go into dungeons and push her limits; he wouldn't leave her. Their relationship was based on more than that. Of course, Victor wasn't stupid, not if he really tried to think through a problem, and he knew that saying those words would only infuriate her. He knew they weren't fair. If he didn't think Valla had anything to prove, then what was he doing? How was it fair for him to constantly push himself if he didn't want her to?

Worse than the hypocrisy of his feelings was the knowledge that he had another objection that would only hurt and alienate Valla if she ever knew he harbored it: He didn't think she would be able to catch him, so what was the point of risking her life? It was a shameful thing to admit to himself, but Victor knew he wasn't normal. He'd thrashed not one but several tier-nine combatants in the challenge dungeon. He sparred with Valla frequently—she wasn't any tougher than those folks.

Victor knew that if he wanted to challenge himself, he'd be doing things that she couldn't participate in, whether she was level sixty or a hundred. Would things be different if they both broke through the "iron ranks?" Would it be different once they passed their "test of steel?" He wanted to hope so, but that would also mean that other people at that level would be a risk to him and, by that virtue, a risk to Valla. Would they be safer at that tier of power, or would they simply have more dangerous enemies? After all, the only thing keeping Victor safe from the masters of those he'd thrashed in the dungeon was some sort of agreement among the powers of Sojourn that people outside the iron ranks wouldn't harm those still climbing through them.

Would that even matter if he didn't have Dar's backing? He supposed the city's laws stood for something, even to those without an influential mentor. While he sat there, lost in thought about his self-centered ambition and desire to keep Valla safe, he must have had a scowl on his face because she eventually said, "I've upset you." Before he could deny it, she scowled further, pushed back her chair, and said, "Amazing. I'm the one who should be irritated, but you've somehow made me feel like I've done something wrong!"

"No, I . . ." His objection died on his lips as she walked stiffly past him to the door and out.

"Deep thoughts?" Lesh rumbled, wiping his toothy maw with a napkin.

"Unpleasant ones."

"Valla grows powerful, Victor. She has more than one solution for the eye . . ."

"It's not the eye. It's . . . I guess it's my own insecurity. She's trying so damn hard to catch up to me, or, if not that, at least keep up. What will she do if she can't? She's not a housewife, Lesh." As he said the words, his real fear clicked into place, and sudden understanding dawned on him. The root of all of his angst wasn't that he feared leaving Valla behind or that he was already too far ahead; it was more that he was afraid she'd figure it out and realize she couldn't catch up. Could she live with that? Before Lesh could respond, he said, "Don't repeat that."

"No, I wouldn't. You speak to me from the heart and seek advice; how could I even consider betraying that trust?" He made a face, and Victor wondered if he'd alienated yet another person. Lesh didn't storm off, though. He took a moment to consider and then said, "Why do you worry about something you can't control? You are what you are. Valla is what she is. You both love each other and, at least for the moment, you're together. Enjoy that."

Victor knew Lesh had a strange perspective on love. He'd given up his life with his actual wife to follow Victor. Thinking about that and realizing they were talking about personal things, he voiced a question that had been on his mind since he'd learned about the man's wife. "Will your wife wait for you? Are you planning to return to her someday?"

"Yassa is my *mate*. I suppose it's similar to a wife in your culture, but . . . it has some nuances. She will wait for a time, but if I tarry too long, she will seek another mate." Lesh's words were matter-of-fact, but Victor could feel some emotion behind them.

"I mean, do you hope to get back to her?"

"Ah, Victor, I know you mean well, but this is a topic I've settled my mind about. I'd rather not dwell on what may have been or what may be; I've set my course for different shores. Fate's winds move me now."

The dragonkin's mild rebuke stung more than it should have. Victor realized he'd been harboring some hope for wisdom or advice to see him through this, hopefully, minor conflict with Valla. As he had the thought, he wondered if the conflict was really with Valla or with himself. Sighing, feeling like nothing had been resolved, he stood and said, "I better go after her."

"I'll be right behind. I need to visit the toilets." Lesh stood and lumbered toward the back of the restaurant, and Victor silently wished the plumbing luck. He went outside to find Valla sitting on the edge of the wooden boardwalk that lined the row of buildings. Her feet dangled toward the cobbled street, and she held her wings slightly open to make it easier to sit down. When Victor hopped down to the cobbles and turned to face her, she scowled and pointedly looked to the side.

"That mad? Won't even look at me?" A corner of her mouth quirked up, and he knew he had her on the ropes. "Come on! I'm sorry I reacted that way." He reached out to take her chin and turned her face toward him. "Let me see that cut. I bet you look tough as hell." To his surprise, her cheeks flushed, and she looked away again. "Are you being shy?"

"Stop it, Victor!" She slapped his hand, and he sighed. He turned the hand so his palm was facing up.

"Well, take my hand at least. I'll walk you to the coach." She relented at that and put her hand in his, and he pulled, making it easy for her to slide to the edge of the boardwalk and hop to her feet. "You're going to like Dar's lake house."

"How long will we stay there?"

Victor paused, looking back at the inn. He said, "Let's wait a minute so Lesh can follow us. The coach is over there." He pointed to the oval, black-lacquered vehicle, where it floated a few feet over the cobbles on the other side of the square. "Dar said that we can stay at the lake house until I've got enough money to buy a house that, uh, 'suits my station' or something like that."

To his further surprise, Valla sighed and shook her head. "I like our little townhome. It's cozy, and it, well, it's ours . . ." She was looking up at him while she spoke, and Victor's guilt must have been apparent because she cut off her words and took a step away, turning to look at him more directly with her single eye. "Why do you look like that? Did something happen to our house?"

"I . . ." Victor had that feeling he'd had too many times in his life when he realized he'd been stupid, and it seemed so obvious after the fact that he couldn't quite believe the extent of his mind's betrayal. Of course, he should have spoken to Valla before emptying the house and putting it up for sale. They'd picked the place together. They'd moved in together. What would it say about his opinion of her that he'd just undone all of that without so much as asking her what she thought?

"Is that the coach, Lord Victor?" Lesh asked, once again being overly formal for some damn reason. Victor nodded, his mind still on Valla and how hurt she looked. He hadn't even told her what he'd done, but she was more than clever and could read his face like a book. She slipped her hand from his and followed Lesh to the coach. Victor followed, trying to think of a way to smooth things over. Nothing brilliant came to him. When he climbed into the vehicle's spacious

interior, he wasn't surprised to find Valla sitting in one of the bucket seats rather than the longer benches, so he sighed and sat alone.

"I have to go to an enchanter's shop to get my armor. Should I take you two home first?"

Valla nodded. "Yes, please."

Frowning, almost scowling, Victor slid open the little window to the driver's compartment, "Back to the lake house first, Mr. Qwor." After a few minutes of silence, Victor looked at Lesh and said, "Tell me about the dungeon."

"Ah, my pleasure," the big man rumbled, and Victor tried to relax, sitting back in the cushions, listening to Lesh recount their experience, describing the dungeon, the denizens, and the fights. Every so often, Victor would glance at Valla, but she refused to meet his gaze, and he decided the best thing he could do was give her some space. There wasn't always a quick fix, some magical combination of words, that would end a fight, and he figured he just had to give her some time to cool off.

If their differences were just about the house and his unilateral decision to sell it, he wouldn't have felt so troubled as he sat there listening to the dragonkin. His earlier thoughts, though, his admission to fearing Valla would grow tired of being in his shadow, weighed heavily on him. He wondered if she also suspected there was more to the anger she felt. He wondered if she was sitting there drawing her own conclusions, finding rifts where before she'd thought things were smooth.

He hated how he felt. He hated that Valla was upset with him. He hated that he hadn't said or done the right thing when he'd seen her injury, and rather than make things better for her, he seemed to have made them worse. He tried to listen to Lesh, nodding along and acting impressed at the right moments, but he was only half there as he replayed one conversation after another, trying to think of the right things to say. When he failed, he finally closed his eyes and leaned back, hoping he was right and that a little time was all it would take.