

“Wait,” Lesh rumbled, nudging past Valla to better peer into the darkness. Victor felt a small surge of Energy, and then the giant warrior’s reptilian eyes began to shine with mossy green luminescence. “I see a great chasm with tunnels branching off at the bottom. It’s fifty times as deep as I am tall. There are shapes moving at the bottom—ivid, I’d wager. There’s a narrow path cut into the face of this wall. If we’re careful, we should be able to descend, though I’d brighten your globe a bit.”

Victor nodded and willed his globe of light closer to the ground, brightening it slightly. Sure enough, a narrow path led downward to the left. “Too narrow for anything but the bipedal ivid,” he whispered, stepping down and onto the path, hardly wide enough for his large, booted foot.

“Should I fly down?”

“If you do, you won’t be alone.” Lesh’s reply, for some reason, made Victor chuckle. He supposed it had to do with his dry tone without any judgment. He wasn’t saying Valla *shouldn’t* fly down, but he wasn’t saying she should, either.

“I’ll stay with you.” She didn’t sound happy, and Victor could imagine why: being forced to trudge around through tunnels deep underground when you’ve tasted the freedom of flight in an open, windy sky . . . He shook his head, pushing the thought aside; he needed to focus. The narrow path had come to a switchback, and there wasn’t much room for maneuvering. He almost slipped as he turned back the opposite way, but the resin-coated dirt was hard and gave good traction, and his boot caught well enough for him to recover his balance.

“Victor,” Lesh hoarsely whispered as they made the next turn.

“Yeah?”

“You should put your light out. Some of the insects have been glancing up at us. I’ll warn you when the next switchback is coming.”

“Great.” Victor pulled his Energy back from his globe, reducing it to a tiny flickering mote of light that he kept close to his feet. The light was barely enough to illuminate the tops of his boots, but his Quinametzin eyes used it to paint the path before him in monochromatic gray angles—sufficient to keep him from walking off into the abyss. They descended like that, painstakingly slowly, for nearly an hour before they came to the final stretch that would take them to the bottom of the underground crevasse. Victor couldn’t quite make out the furtive, clicking shapes below, so he turned to Lesh, waiting for the big warrior to tell him when to move.

“The ground is ten feet below us, and there’s a tunnel straight across from us. I haven’t seen any of the small workers going into it, so we should be safe to regroup there. Take hold of my belt, Valla, and Victor will hold your hand as we move. Straight down and across when I say. Ready?”

“Ready,” Victor replied softly. Valla said the same, and then they waited for Lesh to choose the right moment. Seconds ticked into minutes, and then, just as Victor was beginning to daydream about things he wanted to search for in Sojourn, Lesh silently dropped off the ledge. Valla made a soft yip of surprise, and then she dropped after him, and Victor followed. When he landed beside her, surprisingly without stumbling, Valla fumbled for and grabbed his hand. Then, Lesh darted forward, pulling her and Victor along. Victor could barely see the ground around them,

but when they ran forward, he could feel the weight of the space above them, and his skin crawled with the sensation of being watched by a thousand sets of eyes.

He was almost surprised when they made it to the tunnel without some sort of clicking, hissing alarm being sounded. Lesh pulled them in, then turned back and rumbled, "You can make your light brighter here."

Victor did so, finding that they stood in a tunnel very much like the one they'd left up at the top of the chasm. "At least we're still going down."

Lesh nodded. "We are deep, indeed, by now."

"Let's keep moving," Valla said, and Victor thought he heard some strain in her voice. As Lesh turned, leading the way deeper, he moved his light closer to Valla to see her face better.

"You doing all right?" he asked, motioning for her to walk ahead of him.

"Not really. I think part of my racial evolution has made me more . . . claustrophobic, I suppose, is the right word. I'm not enjoying having miles of earth and insects above our heads. What if the recall tokens don't work?" She looked back at him, eyes wide with stress as she asked her question.

"Look, I'm not loving it down here, either, but I promise you, if I have to move the earth itself, I will get you out of this hive." Of course, Victor recognized his Quinametzin ego asserting itself, but it seemed to put Valla at ease, so he went with it. Was he really sure he could get them out of there? He supposed not, but he'd die trying, and that was good enough; there'd be time in the next life for regretting poorly made promises. Valla followed Lesh, and Victor followed Valla, and they made their way steadily downward.

They passed another great worker hall, this one housing tens of thousands of the smaller workers. In that hall, narrow catwalks made of dirt and resin ran between the dozens of upper tiers of insect cells. Constant traffic flowed over those catwalks and at the ground level where Victor and the others walked. Still, the workers moved purposefully, heads down, and as long as they kept their distance, they didn't seem to pay any mind to the three outsiders.

Lesh was good about keeping a retreat planned; every time a worker or one of the "attendants" came toward them, he hastily moved back to a side tunnel or an empty cell, ducking to the side while the ivid passed. Another hour of descent became two hours, then three, and Victor lost count of the chambers full of cells and side passages they passed. Though they traversed mile after mile of tunnel, they constantly moved downward, and Victor began to wonder just how deep they were.

"There's no way we could have doubled back, right?" he asked after a long while of silence.

"We're always going down . . ." Valla started to say, but Lesh shook his head and rumbled over her.

"No. I can feel the ground around us. It's different—we make progress."

"I know patience is important and that I don't want to fight the entire hive, but I'm starting to lose it here. You guys don't think I should summon my coyotes? They're pretty damn sneaky . . ."

"I can feel vast voids below us. I think we grow close to the heart of the hive." Lesh pointed downward in illustration. "Give me another hour before you call forth your spirit scouts." Victor nodded, and the dragonkin turned and started forward. Valla followed, and Victor, still gripping Lifedrinker, brought up the rear. He felt a tremendous build-up of tension in his neck and back and yearned to feel the sky above him. He was sure Valla was suffering even more, so, with her as an exemplar, he kept himself under control, venting some pent-up energy by gripping Lifedrinker's haft tightly, twisting his hands back and forth.

True to his word, Lesh's downward path eventually took them into a vast tunnel that reminded Victor of the main thoroughfare of Great Bone Mine. It was illuminated by strange veins of yellow-white minerals, giving the whole place a kind of hazy, sepia lighting. The vaulted ceiling was a hundred feet overhead, and the sides of the tunnel were separated by a hundred paces of smooth, resin-coated ground. The tunnel that led them to that great passage was high in the wall, and down below, Victor could see rows of orderly insects, some traveling inward at a slightly downward grade and some traveling up and, presumably, out. Between the high ceiling and the ground, suspended highways of dirt and resin crawled with the hunched, earthen-toned insects. The columns of ivid stretched further than Victor could see.

"There must be tens of thousands of them marching along down there," Valla whispered from where she lay, peering over the lip of the tunnel.

"Do you see that side passage?" Lesh pointed, and Victor thought he saw what he meant. A wide, oval opening about half a mile up the tunnel. "I believe that leads down to a great cavern that way," he pointed, indicating the side of the tunnel ahead of them. "It's a bigger space than any I've sensed.

"How do we get there? There are five hundred ivid between us and that tunnel." Victor frowned, contemplating the violence he'd have to wreak to fight his way into the tunnel. Then what?

"We must choose a time when none of the attendants are near. We'll refresh our odor, then jump down and shuffle along with the workers."

"You think they won't raise an alarm?" Valla asked. So far, they hadn't stood near one of the small workers long enough to find out if they'd notice them.

"We are close. We cannot teleport or tunnel through this dirt. What option is there?" Lesh, for the first time, sounded a little on edge. Victor wondered if he was starting to lose it, being down in the belly of the hive for so long. While Lesh and Valla stared at the ground, contemplating what they had to do, Victor let his eyes drift over the many suspended walkways and the crazy architecture that allowed the ivid to take advantage of that third axis. As his eyes settled on something interesting, he nudged Lesh with his elbow.

"Look. That suspended walkway is empty." It was on the far side of the tunnel, only about fifty feet above and parallel to the ground. If they could get on it, it seemed like it would take them right above the opening Lesh had pointed out.

Lesh must have been thinking similarly because he said, "How do we get to it?"

"I can fly over there." Valla's tone was matter-of-fact.

“You could string us a line.” Victor nodded as Lesh produced a thin, silky rope rolled in a tight bundle.

“This is razzka silk; it will not break.”

Valla took the loose end and said, “Feed it quickly; I don’t want to get hung up.”

“Wait,” Victor said, producing his scent-dispensing bottle. “We should refresh this stuff before we go into that big tunnel.”

Lesh and Valla nodded, and soon, they were all breathing into their sleeves, eyes watering as the caustic chemical settled over them. Once the air had cleared enough to breathe without gagging, Valla climbed to her feet and stood at the tunnel's edge, knees bent, wings partially open, staring into the big open space, perhaps trying to choose a moment when none of the attendants were passing near. Victor wanted to tell her to be careful, but he knew it was stupid—of course, she would be. Nevertheless, he was nervous for her, and his knuckles were white where they gripped Lifedrinker.

After several long seconds in which Victor and Lesh exchanged several looks, Valla abruptly dropped off the ledge, and her wings *whooshed* back, just once, propelling her like a silvery arrow straight through the gap between two of the suspended walkways and then to land with perfect grace upon the empty, target walkway. The silky rope whistled softly as it rushed out between Lesh’s fingers as Valla flew. Victor watched her loop and tie her end around the walkway; it was only about three feet wide. She crouched low, utterly exposed out there, but so far, the insects had ignored her.

“You first,” Lesh said, holding his end of the rope tight in his scaled fist.

“How are you gonna cross without anyone to hold your end?”

“I’ll leap out, swinging from the rope, and climb up.”

Victor looked the huge dragonkin up and down and snorted. “*Hermano*, you aren’t built for that kind of shit. Let me hold it while you climb across, then I’ll do the leaping, yeah?”

“I suppose.” Lesh frowned. “You could reduce your size further?”

“Yeah, of course. If I fall, I can probably jump up to that walkway, too.”

“Very well.” Lesh handed him the rope, and then, as Victor pulled it tight, he tested his weight against it, pulling hard. Victor grunted and had to dig in his heels, but he knew he could support the dragonkin’s weight. If he got worried, he could always cast Iron Berserk—he was already channeling his Sovereign Will into his strength and vitality.

“Go on!” he urged the dragonkin. Lesh gave him one more nod, then, with surprising grace, leaped out onto the silken rope, pulling himself hand over hand toward Valla. Victor was surprised by the initial leap and had to jerk back on the rope, leaning backward with all his weight to keep from being pulled out of the tunnel, but after that, it was easy to keep the rope supported. Luck must have been with them, or the fresh dose of ivid scent must have been especially potent because, though Lesh passed between two other walkways, none of the ivid gave him a second glance as he passed over and under them.

When he was safely squatting beside Valla, Victor nodded, contemplating things. If he dropped off the ledge and hung from the rope, he'd be hanging across another walkway, and his line might touch one of them or, worse, knock one off as he descended. The only apparent way he could see himself getting to the walkway where Valla and Lesh waited was to jump past the other intervening walkway. Then, he could let himself swing and climb his way up beside Valla. "Yep, gonna have to do it." He hung Lifedrinker back in her harness, then gathered up the feather-light rope and backed up for a running start.

He wrapped the rope around his right wrist several times and then switched his Sovereign Will boost from vitality to agility. "Here we go," he breathed, then took two long strides and leaped out of the tunnel, aiming to cross the walkway about twenty feet out and five feet below the ledge. He soared over it effortlessly and had enough momentum that he was afraid he'd hit the far wall on his way down, but then the silken rope snapped taut, pulling on his right arm, and he swung upward. Victor didn't wait to swing back the other way; he immediately started to climb the strand, easily pulling his weight up hand over hand. By the time he reached the end of his swing and started back the other way, he'd shortened his hanging distance from the walkway by half.

In seconds, he slapped a hand onto the smooth span and felt Lesh and Valla grab ahold of it. Once, with their aid, he'd scrambled onto the walkway, Lesh untied his rope and gathered it up. "Very nimbly done," he rumbled as they hunkered down together.

"Let's go!" Victor didn't like being out in the open like they were. He took the lead, crouching low and hurrying along the walkway toward the distant tunnel opening Lesh had pointed out. Ivid moved along all around them. Some shuffled in the same direction, others in the opposite. They made strange sounds as they moved, like a constant susurration all around, and Victor wondered if it was their breathing or just the sound of their chitin or fluid-filled joints. Whatever it was, it was nerve-wracking being amidst it, and he moved very quickly toward their goal, trusting that Lesh and Valla would speak up if he went too fast.

They reached the tunnel, and, for the first time in the hive, Victor saw smooth stone walls and flooring. Either this tunnel had been there before the ivid, or they had another caste of workers that could shape stone. He looked back at Valla and Lesh. "Ready?" Lesh held up his rope, so Victor nodded. Could the big dragonkin really not drop fifty feet? Or was he worried he'd be too loud? Victor held the rope for him without arguing or questioning—time for that later. Lesh made short work of the climb down, and soon, he'd darted into the stone tunnel, peering up at Victor and Valla.

"I can hold the rope for you," she said.

"I can jump down . . ."

"Will that not be loud?"

Victor frowned, more annoyed that he'd been mentally judging Lesh for needing a rope than that she was right. "All right," he sighed, giving it a tug and grinning as Valla stumbled toward him. "Hold it tight. I'll put my weight on it slowly."

"You'd better!" She bared her teeth at him in a nervous smile, and he realized she was doing everything she could to keep it together. He quickly stepped toward her, trying to hug her, to

offer some comfort, but she bristled, pushing him back. “Not now! I . . . I can’t keep it together out here among them much longer!”

“Right. Sorry.” Victor gripped the rope and slowly backed off the walkway, waiting for Valla to have his full weight before he rapidly descended. He set foot on the smooth stone only ten feet from a long column of workers, and he hurriedly turned and jogged into the tunnel to Lesh. When he glanced back, he was almost surprised to find that none of the bugs had chased him or raised an alarm. With a flutter of ammonia-laced air, Valla landed beside him and passed the silken rope to Lesh.

“Come on!” she hissed, moving further into the tunnel away from the crowded ivid highway. Lesh and Victor followed her, and they’d only descended into the wide stone hall for a dozen paces before she pulled up short and slammed herself against the stone wall, trying to sink into the darkness there. Lesh followed her lead, and Victor slowed, crouching low, trying to see what had alerted her. He didn’t have to look far—about a half mile down the smooth, straight tunnel was a massive arched opening backlit by what looked like daylight. On either side of the tremendous, bright archway stood bipedal ivid with shiny, silvery, metallic carapaces and wielding enormous polearms.

“What the fu . . .” Victor started to say, but Valla slapped a hand to his mouth—one of the ivid guardsmen had turned toward them, though it seemed its eyesight couldn’t peel Victor’s shape from the shadows, as it turned forward after just a moment of scrutiny. Victor put his lips just a bare centimeter from Valla’s ear and whispered, “I can see why other groups failed this bullshit quest.”