

“Ah, damn,” Victor said, standing. “I guess I gotta go, Lam.”

She nodded, shifting to the edge of the couch as though she’d get up, too. “Should I stay here? Should I send for Edeya and Darren?”

Victor looked at the servant who’d come to summon him. “Excuse me, but is there a coach available to pick up some friends of ours?”

“Master Dar left Mister Qwor at your disposal. He can fetch your friends.” Victor had heard the name a time or two. Qwor was one of Dar’s drivers.

“Can you send him to speak to Lam? She can give him directions.”

“I’ll do better,” Lam said, standing. “I’ll go along with him. Where will I find Mister Qwor?”

“At the carriage house. I’ll guide you, milady.”

“All right. See you later, Lam.” Victor wanted to get moving before he inadvertently upset Lo’ro; he had no idea how touchy the master Death Caster might be.

Lam and the servant walked with him toward the door, and the one-time Imperial Captain said, “Keep an eye on your Farscribe book! We’ll keep you updated on any developments. Speaking of Farscribe books, have you heard from Valla or Lesh?”

Victor shook his head, frowning. “Not since they entered their dungeon. I’m not too surprised, though; it’s supposedly pretty challenging. I’m sure she’ll send me an update sometime today.” With those words, Victor stepped through the lake house’s front door and saw Lo’ro’s coach.

So did Lam, and she exclaimed, “Roots, Victor! Be careful,” as she took in the weird, spectral carriage. It was a sleek, dark wood and metallic shape—something that reminded Victor of some kind of luxury car from the 1940s, but larger. It glowed an unearthly silver-blue and had a faintly translucent quality. As he approached, Victor saw that it hovered over the cobbles on two discs of pulsing blue light, and he could feel the air being displaced by tangible waves of force. It had four doors like a sedan, but the rear ones were overlarge, and one of them opened as he stepped up to the strange vehicle.

“Get in, prodigy. We’ve a task to complete, and I’d prefer not to spend the whole day at it.” The voice that came out was raspy but loud and clear, and Victor felt the words spur him to action. He nodded and slid through the opening, finding himself in a spacious compartment that reminded him more of a parlor in an old manor than the inside of a vehicle. Two luxurious blue couches faced each other over a plush black carpet. Dark wood paneling lined the walls, and matching wooden tables sat at the ends of the sofas. A man clad in a dark gray suit with a fancy round hat and short, silk-lined cape gestured for Victor to sit across from him.

He was clearly undead; the pale skin, black eyes, and rictus grin gave it away, but his eyes shone with amusement as he took Victor in. Seeing that, Victor reflected on the other undead creatures he’d met. Had any of them ever smiled or laughed? If so, he couldn’t remember it, not unless you counted Hector’s mean-spirited, mocking laughs as Victor had gotten trapped in the volcano’s caldera. He sat on the sofa across from Lo’ro and said, “Thank you for picking me up.”

“Oh! He has manners, too! I wouldn’t have guessed from the way you thrashed those mewling pups in the dungeon.” The coach lurched, and Victor felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, indicating they were moving upward and quickly. “We’ll travel to my research tower, and from there, I’ll guide you through the veil. Don’t worry; I made it sound like this would be a difficult job when I spoke to your master, but it won’t be so bad. We’ll be done by lunchtime.” He chuckled and cleared his throat. “For those of us who eat lunch.”

“I’m still not totally clear on what we’re going to . . .” Victor started to fish for details about their task, and Lo’ro chuckled, waving a hand.

“I’ll take you through the veil into a plane of suffering and woe, a place reserved for those spirits obsessed with darker emotions, overwhelmed by them, and lost to their pitiless embrace. You’ll capture one or two of them and bring them back to this plane of existence so that your master can teach you to cultivate from them.”

“Yeah, he kind of said that, but, like, why?”

“Why?” Lo’ro lifted a hairless brow. “You surprise me! I know you’re not a dolt, so I must assume you understood my words when I said so that you can cultivate from them. That means you must question the act of cultivating itself. Hmm, do you have another way to strengthen your Core?”

Victor had not meant that, but now that Lo’ro asked, he found himself looking down, not willing to share his secret about consuming the hearts of his foes. “I have other ways to cultivate,” he said, trying to deflect. “I create constructs of my emotions, pure, essential memories of rage or fear, for instance, and reflect on them. Doing that, I slowly create Energy to add to and build my Energy pool.”

The deflection didn’t fool Lo’ro. “Ah, the lad has a secret!” His raspy words faded into a soft chuckle as he shook his head. “Keep your secret, young prodigy. You and I both know that, yes, you can cultivate a spirit Core through reflection and meditation, focusing on the powerful emotions your memories can harbor. We also both know that it will only get you so far. You must seek sources of Energy outside yourself if you want to bring your cultivation to the next level. I can tell from the strength blazing in that inferno of roiling emotions you call a Core that you’ve broken through at least a couple of tiers, so you must have something more that you’re not sharing with me. Something to do with that Breath Core, perhaps?”

Victor looked up sharply, narrowing his eyes, hoping that if he looked defensive about his Breath Core, it might deflect from his real secret. It seemed to work because Lo’ro chuckled and waved it off. “Worry not. I have my interests when it comes to Spirit Casters, but such a strange application is too novel, too bloodline-specific to be of much use to me and mine.”

“Bloodline-specific?” Now, it was Victor’s turn to show interest.

“Not just anyone can grow a Breath Core! Draconic species, elemental beings, and just a handful of Elder races with the right constitution, I’d say. Still, I wonder how you did it. How’d you get that second Core to take root in there, hmm?”

For the second time in just a few minutes and from a completely different angle, Lo’ro began to pry at the edges of Victor’s biggest secret. How pissed would Dar be if he told this guy about his ability to consume hearts for his own gain? He had no idea, of course. The master Spirit Caster

hadn't told him not to mention it, but somehow Victor knew he shouldn't. "It's a long story," he grunted, closing his eyes and leaning back on the couch. He decided it was better to be a little churlish than to spill his guts. He snorted as he thought of the word. Churlish—he must have gotten that one from Borrius.

Lo'ro rasped a soft chuckle, and when he spoke, Victor realized he'd made the right decision, "Keep your secrets, then, lad. I'm sure my old friend warned you about trading information freely among our kind. It's not as though he didn't pay dearly for what I will teach you today."

They rode in silence for several minutes before Victor said, "Dar was trying to explain the realms beyond the 'veil' to me. He said something along the lines of how spirits are influenced by their lives, by what they believe, when it comes to what happens to them after they pass beyond the Spirit Plane. Am I understanding that correctly?"

"Indeed. Consider the tortured spirits we'll be seeking today—they lived lives obsessed with negative emotion to the point that it overcame their personality, their desires, and their dreams. When they died, they embodied that emotion. Passing through the veil, they find themselves drawn to kindred spirits. Their combined will and influence carved out a piece of the universe, a plane for them to haunt and wallow in their misery. Dar mentioned fear and rage and, as luck would have it, I've found a plane on which many such spirits roam."

"What about my other affinities? Glory or inspiration?" Victor figured the Death Caster, being a peer of Dar, would at least know his affinities, so he didn't bother trying to hide them.

"Ah, think, Victor!" Lo'ro squinted his eyes once again in genuine amusement. It was plain for Victor to see that he enjoyed teaching. "What will you be doing with these spirits?"

"Cultivating from them, right? So, I'll be drawing the rage and fear out of them . . ."

"Correct!" He stared at Victor, waiting for him to make the next connection.

"So, if I found a spirit with an excess of Glory . . ." Victor trailed off, trying to imagine it. He snapped his fingers. "It wouldn't be right. Draining a positive or even partially positive affinity would be wrong."

"Yes! Now, many cultivators wouldn't care. If you wanted to be evil, though . . . why, you could capture a living soul who exhibits great glory or inspiration and cultivate from them; far easier than finding such a being on one of the many planes of existence beyond our own. Your master believes in karmic bonds, debts, and merits, however. What we do today will be a net positive in his eyes. Can you imagine how?"

"I guess, when I take these souls consumed by anger and fear back to my cultivation chamber and siphon away those negative emotions, over time, I'll be helping them?"

"Exactly so, lad! You'll be doing your part to help those spirits move on from the folly of their previous lives. If you believe Dar's preaching, the spirits we seek have built up a tremendous karmic debt. Using them for cultivation will help them pay it off, allowing them to move on to a new existence."

"I get it. So, I'll need to find different sources of Energy for Glory and Inspiration."

“Yes, I’m afraid I’ll not be helping with that. Your master will have plans within plans, however.”

As the coach lurched, and Victor felt like he was riding in an elevator going down, he asked, “Have you known him long?”

“Oh yes. We’ve been friends and foes for more years than I care to count.”

“Enemies?”

“Certainly, though only for brief spats. Overall, we see eye to eye.” The coach shuddered to a stop, and he stood, walking toward the polished wooden door. “We’ve arrived.” When Victor followed him out, he found they were atop one of the many spires of the Arcanum where he’d first met Dar. This particular tower was black as coal and just as flat and non-reflective. Victor could only see the top fourth or so, looming above the dock where Lo’ro’s coach had settled, but it fit any preconceived notions he might have had about a Death Caster’s lair. Victor turned, scanning the dozens of spires within view, wondering if the one Dar used was in sight.

“Looking for your master’s tower?”

“Yeah. Just curious . . .”

“It’s that way,” Lo’ro said, looking into the thin clouds toward an angular, pointed spire. “Past that tower a ways. I can’t see it from here at the moment, but if the sun’s just right and the clouds cooperate, sometimes I catch a glimpse.” He moved to the big, black metal door. “Come.”

Victor grunted in agreement and started after him, following the Death Caster through dark hallways down winding iron stairs and into a vaulted, black marble chamber about the size of a half-court basketball gym. Victor thought of it in that light because of the rows of tiered benches on either side of the smooth, black stone floor. The ceiling was vaulted, and weird, foggy, pale blue lights hung from the black stone arches holding the dark ceiling aloft.

“Don’t mind the extra seating; my students will not be attending us. Still, this room has wonderful resonance with the Spirit Plane, and I’ve already created a breach through the veil on the other side. Make yourself comfortable.” He gestured to the smooth stone floor. Victor nodded and sat down cross-legged in the center of the room. Lo’ro moved to sit before him and said, “First, the bulk of my debt to Dar will be paid in the form of a spell pattern.”

“Oh?” Victor hadn’t expected to learn a new spell.

“That’s right. I discovered this technique through many years of research and have only taught it to two of my apprentices. Well, and Dar, of course. The only reason he’s having me help you is because I did the same for him when he built his latest cultivation chamber. Still, this is valuable knowledge, Victor.”

“Um, thank you, Master Lo’ro,” Victor said, suddenly feeling the need to show more respect. There was no denying the man before him was powerful, and, knowing that, it didn’t rattle his Quinametzin pride to be a little subservient.

“Study this,” Lo’ro rasped, producing a paper-thin sheet of silvery metal stamped with the pattern for a complex spell. He set it on the floor between them, and Victor leaned forward,

eyeing the intricate whorls mixed with sharp angles; it was a spell unlike any he'd ever learned, but nothing near as complicated as the Alter Self spell he'd learned from Tes.

While he stared at it, Lo'ro continued to speak, "I will supply two vessels in which you will capture the wayward geists."

"Geists?"

"A term I use to describe spirits consumed by emotion." Victor was smart enough, even when he was just a kid from Tucson, to recognize a word from Earth. He was also smart enough to know the System was probably choosing a word to fit whatever term Lo'ro used. Whenever he thought about the System and its strangely powerful language integration skill, he found himself falling down rabbit holes of contradictory evidence, so he forcefully turned his mind away from it. He, instead, continued staring at the pattern, trying to memorize its many shapes.

Meanwhile, Lo'ro had produced two polished bones, densely inscribed with runes. He glanced at them, noting the harsh angles of the runes, far different from those the System used on its many artifacts. One of the bones looked like a femur, and the other was curved and thin, like a rib. Victor wondered if they came from people or animals, but he didn't really want to know. "These took my apprentices many hours to prepare properly; understand that, and be aware that I will not teach you how to replicate them."

"Okay." Victor didn't know what else to say; did Lo'ro expect him to argue? To beg for the knowledge? If he ever wanted to learn how to make vessels that could hold spirits, he doubted Lo'ro was the only person with such knowledge; even Belikot back on Fanwath had been able to do it.

"Now, once you've learned that pattern, we'll step onto the Spirit Plane where my window through the veil awaits. I'll guide you to the unquiet geists, but it will be up to you to choose the right ones and capture them. Even though I've given you the spell to do it, you'll have to overpower their will, so it's important that you don't choose spirits that are too powerful. It's also important not to find one too weak; what good would that be for cultivation?"

"No, I guess that wouldn't be much good," Victor grunted, only half listening as he studied the pattern.

"I've promised Dar that I'd show you this much and guide you, but I've no obligation to protect you from your own folly. Attempt to bind the wrong spirit, and it could overwhelm your will and follow your tether back to your body." That got Victor's attention, and he looked up and frowned.

"They could take over my body?"

"There will be geists in the realm I lead you to who are far more powerful than you. I'll protect us from their attention, but should you attempt to capture one, there's not much I can do to keep them at bay." Lo'ro reached up and took his fancy, round hat off, sending it into a dimensional container.

Victor noted his wispy white hair, and a stray thought came unbidden to his lips, "Do all Death Casters become undead?"

“Hah! Not easily daunted, are you?” Lo’ro shook his head, chuckling that raspy laugh, then said, “Not all, Victor, though the paths to power through death-attuned Energy almost all lead to that road in one way or another. It’s difficult to walk the balance between life and death without the perspective undeath provides.” He gestured to the pattern in Victor’s hand. “Well? Are you ready? You needn’t memorize it perfectly; I’ll create a circle of relative calm where you can concentrate on your first casting.”

“Oh, in that case, yeah, I’m ready.” Victor nodded. He wasn’t scared off by Lo’ro’s warnings. If it was a matter of will, he was more than qualified. It sounded like he just had to avoid being stupid and trying to bite off more than he could chew. On the heels of that thought, another came to him, and he asked, “Will it be difficult to tell how powerful the geists are? Will I be able to gauge their strength?”

“Excellent question! You will have two jobs while I maintain our calm oasis—identify the geists with the proper affinity for you to cultivate and then determine if you can overpower them with your will. Some will be obvious, but others not so much, and it is those that you must target; pick something too weak, and it will be a waste of our time, and pick something too strong and . . .” he trailed off, shrugging and opening his hands as he shrugged.

“Right.” Victor chuckled, and then he summoned his coyotes using inspiration-attuned Energy. They sprang out of white-gold clouds of Energy, yipping and whining as they paced around the two men. Their nails clicked on the marble, and one paused to lick Victor’s neck. “Good boy,” he laughed, unslinging Lifedrinker and laying her across his knees. “I’m ready.”

Lo’ro wore an amused expression, his black eyes gleaming from beneath his pale, bony brow. He watched the coyotes for several long seconds, then nodded. “Wise to have your companions guard you, though this room is quite secure. Nevertheless, I won’t hold it against you.” He lifted the two bones and handed them to Victor. “When you’re ready.”

“Here we go,” Victor whispered, mostly to himself, as he took the bones and formed the pattern for Spirit Walk. As the world shifted and he became aware of the Spirit Plane, he felt a baleful blast of death-attuned Energy and leaped to his feet, shielding his eyes from the brilliant, icy-blue rip in the fabric of reality that hung in the air before him. Lo’ro’s tear in the veil reminded him of Belikot’s half-formed one, though the Energy wafting off it was a thousand times more potent. Moreover, it reminded Victor of Hector’s veil star. As dark thoughts and memories crowded for attention in his mind, he looked to the Death Caster, only to find a nightmare standing where Lo’ro had been sitting.