

Arcus locked eyes with Victor and nodded. "Agreed. Let us evaluate the rest of this treasure before settling the matter of the orb."

"Of course." Arona took a step back and gestured at the big, iron-bound chest. "This orb is part of a treasure, likely generated by the System. If touched, it may be absorbed, so let's use caution."

Victor nodded, but part of him was thinking he should just grab the orb. If Arcus wanted to fight about it, maybe it was better to get it over with. It would be an easy way to push things to a head. Of course, it would make him the aggressor, and he'd lose any moral high ground he might currently enjoy. As it was, all he had were rumors of Arcus's impending betrayal. So far, the man had been occasionally acerbic, and his personality wasn't exactly Victor's cup of tea, but he hadn't done anything to warrant outright hostility.

"Victor," Arcus said, startling him out of his musings of betrayal. "Do you object to me taking out the other items in the chest? I won't touch the orb."

Victor shrugged and glanced at Arona. Her dark eyes were focused on the chest, and her face was impassive. "Why are you asking me?"

Arcus smiled and tapped the heavy wood of the chest with his dark metal rod. "I've adventured with Arona. She knows I won't attempt any subterfuge."

"It's true," Arona rasped. "Arcus may have character flaws, but he's no thief."

Victor grunted in assent; he figured it was easy for a guy whose family was considered wealthy in a city full of rich demigods to resist the temptation of thievery. The Pyromancer leaned over the chest and lifted out a glittering, jewel-studded golden crown. It was a massive, gaudy thing, and Victor found himself hoping it wasn't anything great because he couldn't see himself wearing it. "Mundane treasure," Arcus announced. "I'd estimate its value at two hundred thousand standard beads." He set it on the ground before the chest.

Arcus reached back into the chest and took out a broadsword. It was about a yard long with a wide, double-edged blade made of shimmering, opalescent gray-black metal. It would be a short sword to Victor, and he doubted his hand would be comfortable on the human-sized, narrow hilt. Still, the metal looked amazing, and he could sense the quality of the weapon without even touching it. Arcus cleared his throat, narrowing his eyes. "A Rhovarian broadsword crafted from sableglow steel."

"Does it live?" Arona asked, leaning close.

"There is no conscious spirit within this blade." Arcus hefted it, a thoughtful expression behind his eyes, then added, "It's well made, but I'd say the materials are worth more than the sword itself. I'd wager it would garner more than a million standard beads at auction." He set the sword down beside the crown.

Victor heard a grunt of consternation and turned to see Tyn leaning forward, hesitantly lifting a hand. "What is it, Tyn?"

"What's an auction?"

Arona answered before Victor could think of an easy explanation, “A way for large numbers of people to express interest in an item. They make offers, and the one who ‘bids’ the most wins the item.”

“Ah!” Tyn nodded eagerly. Arcus chuckled, then took another item out of the chest. It was a dark-blue crystal ring.

“A ring of Crystal Protection—two charges.” He set the ring beside the crown, and when he looked up, he must have seen Victor’s expression because he added, “It will create a shell around the wearer made of dense crystal. The shell lasts a few seconds and absorbs significant damage.”

Victor nodded. “Thanks.”

Arcus reached back into the chest and withdrew a black, leather-bound tome. It wasn’t very large—about five by seven inches and, Victor figured, probably contained around fifty pages. Arcus frowned, opening the top cover and peering at the first page. He leafed through the following few pages and then shrugged. “It doesn’t offer any information when I attempt a bond, and I don’t recognize these runes.” To Victor’s slight vexation, he passed it to Arona. “Any idea?”

She, too, flipped through the pages and shrugged. “My master has some tomes and scrolls with runes of this style on the binding. He’s never taught me from any of them, and I certainly don’t know what they mean. It may be precious, or it may be junk.”

“Can I see it?” Victor held out his hand, and Arona passed the book to him with a raised eyebrow. Victor knew what they were thinking; it wasn’t a secret that he was a berserking brute in combat. He didn’t often do things that exhibited much finesse, and it was probably becoming common knowledge that he was relatively uneducated compared to the other “prodigies” around Sojourn. With that in mind, he fought to keep a straight face when he thumbed through the pages and immediately recognized the runes and patterns as elder magic.

The book contained a spell or, at least, some of the building blocks of a spell written in elder magic. Why would the System award it? Was it because the dungeon was tier-nine? Was it meant to help people prepare for their test of steel? It wasn’t the first time Victor had postulated that the “test of steel” and “lustrous veil” had something to do with learning to use Energy without the System’s training wheels. He shrugged and set the book down next to the crown. “Anything else?”

Arcus reached into the chest, and Victor could hear the *clink* of metals rubbing against each other as he ran his hand around the bottom. “Nothing but gems, precious metal coins, and some attuned Energy beads. I’d estimate another million in total value.”

Victor sighed and stretched his neck, wringing forth some pops, trying to look impatient as he said, “Well, listen, nothing here looks all that great, and, as you said, a full level from an Energy orb is worth an awful lot for people at our level.” Inwardly, he laughed as he said, “our level.” If Arona and Arcus knew he was twenty or thirty levels beneath them, he could only imagine the apoplectic reaction his performance in the challenge dungeon would have elicited.

"I . . ." Arona paused and looked at Victor, then shrugged. "I think it's more valuable to Arcus and me. I don't know your level, Victor, but my master indicated that you had a ways to go to reach tier nine."

"Yes, I must concur with Arona, Victor. You're aware of the exponential increase in the Energy requirement for levels, yes? As I'm sure you know, the curve becomes very steep around tier seven. Do you know, though, that going from level ninety to ninety-one is nearly thirty times that of seventy to seventy-one?"

Victor, in fact, did *not* know that, but it made a lot of sense; he'd gained his first few levels almost effortlessly and had gone through entire tiers in a matter of weeks. Things were definitely slower in the sixties, and hearing Arcus, it sounded like it would only get a lot worse. It also explained why Arona and Arcus had been so excited about an Energy orb they didn't have to use immediately. What if she could save that orb until she hit level ninety-nine? It might save her years of work. Still, he didn't want them to know how little he knew. He nodded and shrugged. "Yeah, but it's still worth a lot to me."

Arcus's mouth fell open, and he looked a little flustered, like he was trying to explain to a child why he didn't need a grownup's dress shoes. Arona stepped in with, "What if we give you your pick of two of the other items?"

"And the loose coins and treasure," Arcus added.

Victor rubbed his chin, trying to make it look like a hard sell. In truth, he wanted that book. "If I take all that, it doesn't leave much for you or Arona if you don't get that Energy orb."

"It's fine." Arcus shrugged. "We'll settle the matter by chance, and the loser will have to accept the smaller award. If you recuse yourself from the claim on the orb, it increases our chances significantly."

Victor looked at Arona. "You're okay with that?"

"Yes. We've settled disputes like this before."

Victor nodded, then reached down and picked up the sword. He didn't plan to start training with swords, but he liked the idea of having a piece of metal worth a million beads. He tucked it away in a storage ring and then picked up the book, quickly storing it as well.

"Interesting," Arona said, her rough voice only a hoarse whisper.

Arcus nodded. "Indeed."

Victor shrugged. "What? It might be valuable, and I'm not interested in that crown or ring."

"No matter." Arcus pointed to the chest. "Victor, will you kindly pick a coin and show both sides to us?" Victor did as he asked and picked up a large golden coin. One side displayed a tower, and the other a blooming flower. "Now, Arona will call tower or flower when you flip it."

Arona grinned. "I get to call?"

Arcus just clenched his jaw and focused on Victor's hand. "Do it."

Victor shrugged and flipped the coin. As it spun in the air, Arona said, "Flower." Victor caught the coin and slapped it down on the palm of his gauntlet. Sure enough, the flower was showing.

"Gods *damn* it!" Arcus growled, stomping away from them, out of the cave, and onto the slope where he sat on a flat rock in a huff.

Arona sighed but didn't offer to give up the prize. She reached into the chest, and as soon as her finger touched the orb, she exploded with multi-colored light, blazing like an incandescent bulb. She groaned and fell to her knees, slowly rocking back and forth as she processed the enormous Energy infusion. Victor shrugged and touched the chest, sending it and all the coins and gems into his storage container. "Watch her," he said to Tyn, then he picked up the crown and crystal ring and walked over to Arcus.

He held them out. "Here you go."

The man sighed bitterly and quickly touched each item, sending them into a storage device. "She's a greedy bitch."

Victor sat down on a nearby rock. "Eh, can you blame her? She's tier-nine, so those two orbs she got were worth a shit load."

"Of course! I *know* that! I would have done the same, but it doesn't lessen the sting."

Victor could hear the pain in the words, and he almost felt a little sorry for the man. Arcus seemed young, but Victor knew a person's looks were deceiving after they'd gained twenty or thirty levels. "Things haven't exactly gone your way lately, huh?"

Arcus snorted. "As you well know. I don't deal with failure well, Victor. You might be amused to know I contemplated vengeance against you after that challenge dungeon." When Victor raised an eyebrow, he waved a hand dismissively. "I soon gave up the notion. I wish I could say I'd found some honor to stiffen my backbone, but it was Roil who spoke sense to me. He made me watch recording crystals of your battles with the other entrants and reminded me that my first strike against you was better than any attack I'd get off in a formal duel, considering I caught you by surprise. No, I'm afraid I had to eat my pride and accept that my loss wasn't due to anyone's failing but my own."

Victor grunted, thinking. How was he supposed to respond to that? The Pyromancer had just admitted to everything he'd suspected. Should he just accept that he'd buried the hatchet? He didn't like that idea. No, he knew that Roil hated Dar and that Arcus found lies easy on his tongue. Victor let some rage seep into his pathways, and when he spoke, he allowed some palpable menace to tinge his voice. "I appreciate your words, Arcus, but if you think I'm going to be put at ease by some platitudes, think again. I'm glad you watched my performance in the challenge dungeon, but know this: However harsh I seemed when I fought in there, I was holding back."

The sound of stones clattering as they slid down the hillside saved Arcus from having to reply. Both men looked up to see Arona and Tyn approaching. Arona may have been trying to avoid gloating, but her lips were curved upward, her face was full of vibrancy, and her step was vigorous. "I guess that was a lot of Energy, huh?"

"If I could quantify it . . ." Arona trailed off, staring into the dark sky. "No, I don't think I can. Yes, 'a lot' will suffice." She gestured to the north and said, "I have news. My ghostly scout has caught whispers of Rasso Hine. I believe he is, indeed, in that town we glimpsed to the north."

"Rumble Town?" Tyn asked, his voice rising with dismay. "But we're close to the Enclave, and I . . ."

"Listen, Tyn," Victor said, reaching out to clasp the boy's slender shoulder. "I want you to get home. We're going to handle our business here, but I promise you, I will make sure that something's changed about this place. There's no reason for families to be trapped in here." When Tyn just stared at him with wide eyes, Victor glanced at Arona and Arcus, wondering if they'd add anything. They stared back at him, and Victor felt a growl in his chest as he said, "Yeah. I don't know how, but those old bastards are going to change things. If they're so goddamn powerful, they ought to be able to think of something better than this."

"I agree," Arcus said, standing. "I'll certainly support your report, Victor."

Victor caught Arona's narrowed eyes and the slight shake of her head as the other man spoke. Still, she cleared her throat, reached out to grasp Tyn's slight hand, and hoarsely whispered, "There's a woman on the council, a good, kind, powerful woman who doesn't abide the suffering of children. We'll speak to her."

Arcus snorted, "Rexa won't speak to the likes of you."

Arona's reply was more a hiss than a whisper, "She'll speak to Victor." A chill ran down Victor's spine as she said his name, and he felt the power behind her voice. She leaned close to Tyn's face and said, "Get home, boy. Stay safe. Tell your father that things will be changing for the better and to avoid trouble."

Tyn took a step back and looked up at Victor, who grinned, nodded, and held out his massive fist. "Punch it." Tyn smiled, exposing teeth with many prominent gaps as he punched his small knuckles into Victor's. "Right. Let's go." Victor turned and started up the hill, setting a brutal pace for the shorter legs of his companions. When he reached the top, he looked down the slope to see Tyn's small, wiry frame jogging up the gully, back the way they'd come.

Arcus and Arona stopped to look back with him, and Arcus cleared his throat. "I hope you're right about Rexa. Sometimes, she acts like mortal concerns are beneath her."

"She won't abide this situation."

Victor turned and started hiking again. "She can influence the others?"

Arcus nodded. "Oh yes. Especially considering many others are always on her side of things—Your master, Lord Yon, Kreshta Griss, and Lord Venryn. Never mind the hundreds of veil walkers not currently serving as consuls who consider her a friend."

"But not my master or the other undead." Arona practically sighed as she spoke, and Victor could hear the disappointed longing in her words.

"Why?"

“She’s a Summer Fae. Well, not full-blooded, but very close. She’s been to the Faewild and served on the Summer Court.” Arona shrugged and continued, “The Summer Fae see undead and Death Casters in general as antithetical to all they hold dear.”

Victor looked at Arona as she spoke; the sadness in her voice was impossible to miss, but it was hard to see any emotion in her dark eyes. He didn’t want to get personal with her, not really, especially with Arcus part of the conversation, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Are you? Undead, I mean? I knew you were a Death Caster, but . . .” He trailed off, allowing her to assume his intention.

“I’m . . . in between. It’s hard to explain, Victor. Suffice it to say that in her eyes, I am. Given time, I will be, so why argue the fine point?”

“Oh, poor Arona,” Arcus scoffed. “Here we go again. Victor, you’ve no idea how many times I’ve listened to her get drunk around a campfire and lament her fate.” He shoved Arona’s shoulder and continued, “Weren’t you and Valeska scheming to escape Sojourn and your masters last Frost’s Day? Didn’t you betray her in the Vault of Valor?”

“Valeska—” Victor started, about to say he remembered that name, but Arona cut him off.

“Eat corpse bowels, Arcus!” She quickened her pace, and Victor sighed, looking down at the Elementalist.

“That wasn’t too cool, dude.”

“What? To speak the truth? She’s fickle, that one. She makes promises to that boy, but if killing the children in this place would somehow advance her or her master’s power, she’d do it.” Arcus shook his head, gathered some phlegm, and spat. “I’ll take the lead. We should avoid more monster spawns so we can be done with this damned place. Follow me or my bird if you can’t see me.” He gestured to the fiery, circling bird of prey high in the sky. Before Victor could agree, Arcus burst into flames and began to jog, quickly outpacing Arona. When he reached a steep grade in the hill, he leaped off and glided to the next slope.

When Victor caught up to Arona, she pointed to Arcus’s fiery form, already climbing the next hill. “He often does that in a dungeon, especially wide-open ones like this.”

“It must be hard growing up in a clique like that. I was going to say I remember Valeska; she was that tall, strong woman with the two hatchets, right?”

“Yes. Thorn and Bloom are her axes. She hasn’t spoken to me since the contest, but I heard from a mutual friend that she nearly went wild with despair when she thought she’d lost Thorn; the axe was stuck in your back when the System rescued her. Then you stabbed it into Brontes, and when the System rescued him, the axe came along. She was overjoyed. I’m surprised she wasn’t at your party.”

“Well . . .” Victor trailed off. He could think of a dozen reasons the woman might not want to come, starting with the fact that she’d broken dozens of bones during their fight. He shrugged, though, and tried to keep things positive. “Maybe we’ll be able to spar or something. I’m glad she got her axe back, too. I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly during that fight.”

“No,” Arona chuckled. “My master made me watch the battle, much as Arcus’s did. I’d say you were anything but analytical during that fight, though your battle instincts are incredible.”

Victor ignored the veiled compliment. “So, you don’t like your master much, huh?”

“Well, I told you not to trust him for a reason.”

Victor frowned, thinking, and then remembered what Dar’s friend, Lo’ro, had told him—how he meant to steal Arona away from Vesavo Bonewhisper. “How do you feel about Lo’ro?”

“Lo’ro the Grim?” Arona shuddered. “He’s a different sort of horrible.”

“Damn.”

“Why do you ask?”

Victor didn’t want to make enemies by running his mouth about things that might have been said in confidence, so he tried to skirt around the subject. “He’s a friend of Ranish Dar’s, I guess.” Before she could follow up for more detail, he changed the subject: “You think your friends are really pissed? Don’t you think they understand what you were trying to do?”

“Brontes doesn’t hold a grudge, but Valeska and Elandor refuse to speak to me. It’s of little importance. My loyalty is to my master, and I did what he expected me to do.” She didn’t say more, and Victor didn’t want to press. She sounded depressed, and he knew it was a lot deeper than her recent betrayal in the challenge dungeon. She spoke scornfully of Death Casters and the undead. She spoke longingly of people like Rexa, the Summer Fae. She was trapped by the Energy in her Core, and Victor wished he could help her.

Of course, he had some ideas. Thayla had gained a death-attuned Core in the dungeon attached to Greatbone Mine, and he’d helped her to alter it, giving her a courage affinity. Hadn’t he done something similar for Lam? Could he help Arona escape the influence of her Core’s attunement? Could he do something like that without becoming public enemy number one to all the Death Casters in Sojourn? Should he? For all he knew, she was just manipulating him. Victor was aware of his blind spot when it came to pretty women in need.

He snorted, drawing a glance from her, but he shook his head and looked away. The truth was that it wasn’t just women. Didn’t he want to help Tyn, too? He liked to think he enjoyed helping people in need—underdogs, for lack of a better term. He nodded, liking the sound of that. It fit; wasn’t he planning to return to Zaafor to help the Degh? Talk about underdogs! He just had to decide: Was Arona an underdog in need of help, trapped by her affinity and her master, or was she just manipulating him? If so, why?

He glanced from Arona’s dark-shrouded form to Arcus’s distant, fiery one on the next hilltop. They were both dangerous. They both wanted something, but Victor wasn’t sure what or how far they’d each go to attain it. He knew he could take Arcus in a fight, but what about Arona? What if she was just trying to lull him into complacency? What if she and Arcus were aligned against him? He hated the paranoia twisting his thoughts but couldn’t help it. There were too many factions and too many different motivations to consider. He wished he had an ally he could trust in that place, but without one, he simply determined to do what Arcus suggested: Finish and get the hell out.