

The following day, Victor rose with the dawn and walked, barefoot and shirtless, out to the deck to greet the warm light of the sun. The house was quiet, and one of the servants looked up from dusting and polishing the furniture and told him that Dar was already gone, seeing to one errand or another, and wouldn't be back until noon. It wasn't a surprise, really; Dar had impressed on Victor his lack of a need for sleep. Victor had meant to ask him if it was some quirk of his species or a result of his advanced level, but their conversation had moved quickly away from the topic, and it never came up again.

"Next time," he sighed, stretching, yawning, and wondering if his idea to take a quick morning swim was still a good idea or if he should get some breakfast—something smelled delicious.

A soft, sleepy voice startled him by speaking up from one of the lounge chairs, "Up with the sun, mighty berserker?" Victor took a few steps forward to better see the speaker's face and confirmed what his ears had already told him: Sora was up and about.

"Feeling better?"

"Much!" She yawned and stretched. The blanket she'd obviously brought out from her room slipped down over her shoulders, exposing the gossamer thin garment she'd been sleeping in. Victor smiled and looked away; he couldn't be sure, but he was starting to suspect she was coming on to him. She wouldn't be the first, not since he'd helped lead an army to victory in the Free Marches, becoming something of a celebrity back home. Once people learned about and saw Valla, though, they tended to back off. He hoped Sora wouldn't push the issue because he sort of liked her and didn't relish watching Valla kick her ass. She'd been through enough.

"Been out here long?"

"I woke in the early hours, and Lord Dar suggested some fresh air. He said the sunrise might help my day start on the right foot."

"He spoke to you?" Victor leaned on the railing, still looking out at the water, watching as its dark, mysterious depths took on the orange glow of the sunrise.

"Yes, he looked in on me before he left. Quite a nice mentor you have, if frightening."

"I wouldn't really know. We only met a few days before the dungeon."

She didn't respond for a moment, and when she did, she changed the subject, "Look at the sky—see how it streaks with color? It's the only time this world reminds me of home. I'm used to a sky that's blue as an agate and stars that know they're only supposed to reveal themselves at night!"

"Yeah," Victor grunted. "Same."

"Not much of a talker, are you? Even in the dungeon, you were rather reticent with your words."

"Eh, sometimes I talk too much. I'm trying to learn to listen and choose my words more carefully." Victor shifted to lean on one elbow so he could look back at her. Her hair looked more silver than gray in the sunlight, and her cheeks were flushed with vibrant color; she looked fully recovered. He said as much, "I'm glad what I did to you in the dungeon didn't cause any permanent harm."

“No. I’m well, and that ordeal feels like a bad dream. It grows fainter by the minute.” She had to squint, looking at him with the sun in the background. “Did you mean what you said yesterday?”

“Hmm?”

“About us being friends?”

“Yeah, sure.” Victor smiled. “I’m new in town. It’s good to make friends, right?”

“Even after my betrayal?” Something flickered behind her eyes, and she narrowed them, “Can you tell me about the others? Did any of them die or . . .”

“Your friends? The ones you ditched me for?” Victor grinned, enjoying watching her expression reflect the emotions playing out: concern, shame, irritation, embarrassment. He didn’t see any fear, though, and that made him happy. “Nah, they’re all ok. Even the nature guy; I guess his people paid someone Dar knew to remove his affliction.”

“Affliction?” She looked confused, and Victor realized she probably didn’t have a clue about any of the fights he’d gotten into in that dark cavern.

“Yeah. He had the same problem as you.”

“Ah.” She nodded and, once again, pulled her blanket up to her chin. He wondered if he saw a shudder run through her or if she’d just felt a bit of a chill on her nearly bare shoulders. “When you say the others are all fine, do you mean you didn’t eliminate them?”

“Nah, I did. All but that Death Caster. What was her name?”

“Arona. She defeated you?”

“No, no.” Victor chuckled and moved to sit in the lounge chair next to her. “We got kicked out before she and I fought. There was a . . . problem with the dungeon. Anyway, she’s fine and doesn’t seem to hold a grudge. I can’t say the same about the others ‘cause I haven’t spoken to any of ‘em.”

“Well, the only one I know well is Brontes, and he won’t hold a grudge, not after I tell him you helped me recover.”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. Dar said you didn’t have any family or sponsor here, but you seemed pretty friendly with Cam and seemed pretty familiar with quite a few of the others. How’s that?”

“We’re all of a similar rank, so we run into each other often in the dungeons around the city. There are also plenty of friendly competitions and social gatherings.” She shrugged and smiled. “I’d have to be a real recluse to avoid making a few acquaintances here.”

“Dar thinks some of the people I knocked out will want revenge. He thinks they might go after my friends.”

Sora frowned and turned onto her side, looking more directly at Victor. “You have some friends here? Any family or,” she smiled slyly, “anyone important?”

Victor chuckled, nodding. “Someone very important, yeah, but she’s not the one I’m worried about. I have a couple of low-level friends who are pretty vulnerable.”

Sora’s frown turned into a wistful smile as she turned onto her back, breaking eye contact. “Well, I hope I get to meet this lady of yours. I’m sure some of the rich folk around here will be throwing parties to celebrate this or that. I’m surprised you haven’t been inundated with invitations.”

“Her name’s Valla and I’m sure she’ll enjoy meeting you. Right now, she and another friend are in one of the city dungeons. As for invitations, I mean, it’s been less than a day. Dar will let me know.” He sniffed the air, his stomach rumbling at the scent of pork and fresh bread. “Are you hungry?”

“I am, but I should get going.” She stood, her blanket still clutched tightly around her, suddenly a good deal more demure.

“Why the rush?”

“My neighbors are probably worried, and I should write to my family. I . . .” She shrugged. “I just want to be home and take some time to decompress. I lost five levels in that dungeon, which will have repercussions on my finances.”

“Really? Your finances?”

“Yes. I have a fund at Voyage Trust, but my family may cut me off when news of my . . . setback reaches my homeworld.”

Victor blinked, his mind dumbfounded by the idea of interplanetary banks and trust funds. As everything slowly settled into place, he nodded; things were making a little more sense. “That’s how you paid for the exception for your dimensional quiver and bought your entry into the dungeon?”

“Yes. I make a decent living adventuring around the city, but not enough to run with the crowd in the challenge dungeon.” She shrugged. “So, I’m off to plead my case with my family and to try to avoid getting called home.”

Victor nodded but then remembered something he’d meant to ask her: “Hey, hold on. Before you go—any chance you might sell that cloak you got in there?”

“The set piece?” She wrinkled her brow. “You didn’t seem impressed by it in the dungeon . . .” Understanding dawned in her eyes. “You got more pieces?”

“Yeah, I’ve got four.”

“Well, I could try to take advantage of you, but you’d learn fairly quickly that people sell those blank set pieces at auction fairly often. I bet you could get a cloak like mine for twenty or thirty thousand beads . . .”

"I'll give you thirty." Victor figured he could shop around for another piece and maybe save some money, but thirty thousand beads wasn't a lot to him anymore, and he sort of felt sorry for Sora, seeing as she was about to go beg her family for money.

"Sold!" She laughed. "That'll cover my rent for a few months. Maybe by then, I'll be back in my family's good graces." She held out her hand, and the silky, dark gray garment appeared, draped over it. "You know, the set bonuses aren't cheap, and the best ones require you to provide magical materials."

"Oh yeah? Well, that's all right; it'll give me something to work for." Victor fished around in his dwindling Energy bead supply until he found a sack with nearly the right amount in it. He summoned it out of the storage ring and handed it over. "There might be a few hundred more or less in there."

"That's fine. I know we'll be seeing each other." She grinned mischievously and added, "That cloak smells like my perfume; don't let your lady get the wrong idea." Before Victor could think of a witty reply, she shuffled, wrapped in her blanket, into the house, and he heard her asking one of the servants about a ride back to the city. Her words got the better of him, and he lifted the cloak to his nose, giving it a good sniff. She hadn't been lying—a distinct floral scent lingered.

"No big deal," he muttered, sending the garment into the storage ring with the other set pieces. He was eager to go to the Sojourn City Stone to see what the deal was with the set bonuses, but he wasn't sure when he'd get the chance. Dar and he were supposed to help Lam with her ritual that afternoon, and the next day, apparently, he was going to be taking a field trip with Dar's Death Caster buddy. He almost reached up to grab Lifedrinker's haft for comfort, but he'd left her in his bedroom, which reminded him of his original intent for coming out to the deck in nothing but his comfortable, loose-fitting linen pants; he'd meant to go for a swim.

He turned back to the edge of the deck and took the steps, two at a time, down to the pier. He dove, sending his pants into his storage ring as he flew through the air and plunged into the water. It was chillier than he remembered it from the previous afternoon, and it instantly invigorated him. Victor swam for quite a while, laughing and diving, endlessly entertained by his body's capabilities. He could hold his breath for minutes and minutes, and his Quinametzin eyes could pick out the flicker of shiny scales and the long, colorful drifts of strange aquatic plant life dozens of yards beneath him.

After a time, he surfaced to find Lam sitting on the pier, her feet dangling into the water. She laughed when he burst to the surface in a shower of bubbles and spray, leaning back to avoid the worst of it. "It's cold, you big thunderak!"

Victor was anything but cold after swimming for a while, and he laughed with her, wiping his nose and face. "You should swim and warm yourself up!"

She shook her head. "I don't have lava for blood."

"Neither do I." He laughed again. "I don't think!" He brought back his hand, acting like he was about to splash her, and Lam squealed, leaning further onto the pier.

"Don't!" she shrieked.

"Did I find the great Lam's weakness? Brought low by a bit of slightly chilly water?"

Still smiling, Lam sat up, kicking one foot out to send a splash his way. "Stop it now, or I'm going to tell Valla." Her mention of Valla made Victor wonder how she and Lesh were doing in their dungeon, which made him remember why Lam wasn't with them. His smile fell away as he regarded the emerald-eyed Ghelli. She looked happier and more youthful than he'd seen her in a long time.

"You look like a weight's been lifted," he said, treading a few yards from her, glad the water was dark because he was naked as the day he'd been born.

"I feel so good, Victor. I slept last night more than I have in months. I just woke!" She squinted toward the sun. "It must be mid-morning, and I'm usually up at dawn."

"That's great. Edeya's gonna freak out when you tell her you can go in the next dungeon with her." He chuckled, adding, "And Darren."

Lam *tsked*. "Oh, be a little easier on that poor man. He's trying very hard to impress you and Lesh, you know."

"Yeah, I know. My first impression of him has been hard to shake, but I gotta give him credit. I thought he'd be begging to go home long before now. I'm pretty surprised he agreed to go on a dungeon dive at level one."

Lam nodded, leaning so her neck and upper chest were exposed to the morning sun. "It doesn't hurt that Edeya basically told him he was coming. She's been good for him."

"She can be persuasive," Victor chuckled.

"Roots! I remember thinking you and she would get in trouble back in the mine, flirting the way you did!"

"What the hell?" Victor's jaw fell open. "We weren't flirting!"

"Oh, please, Victor. You might have a stoic, brooding face most of the time, but when you're talking to a pretty girl, you sure light up. Edeya got a lot of laughs out of you."

"I was mostly trying to cheer *her* up if I recall correctly . . ." Victor tried to shrug in the water, letting his arguments fall away. Why did he care? "Truth is, that time isn't so clear in my mind. I think I was a little too stressed to build good memories."

"Understandable. Let's put it behind us, hmm?" She gestured expansively at the lake and the horizon beyond. "We're starting a new chapter."

"You're starting *over*!" Victor couldn't resist sending a small splash her way, darkening the fabric of her rolled-up pants.

"Brat!" Suddenly, her wings began to flutter, throwing off motes of golden Energy, and she launched off the deck toward him. Victor was too surprised to put up much of a fight as she landed on his shoulders, pushing down on his head, trying to dunk him under the water. He took a breath and went down but didn't stop there. Snatching one of her ankles, he dove further still, completely submerging her. He was amazed to see her wings continue to function underwater,

spreading their golden light in the dark water as they buzzed, exposing his nakedness. In a panic, he dove further down and summoned some trousers to pull on before re-engaging. That began an hour of horseplay that left them both starved and ready for a good brunch.

Dar's ubiquitous serving folk served platters of savory meats, fresh bread, and fruit on the deck while he and Valla let the sun and soft breeze dry them off. They were mid-meal when the Spirit Master returned, arriving on the back of a misty, flying serpent with glowering yellow and green eyes. Victor was sure the serpent was a spirit companion because as soon as Dar leaped off its back, landing on the decking, wringing forth creaks and groans from the sturdy wood, the creature disbursed like smoke in the breeze.

"You look well, children," he observed in his booming voice, sitting on the opposite side of the table.

"Children?" Lam asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, to me, surely so. It's been a very long time since I was your age, dear Lam." He glanced over the table and picked up a fat, greasy sausage. He tucked it into his mouth, chewed twice, and swallowed it. "I'm glad you're eating a hearty breakfast. This ritual will take a lot out of us all. Did you enjoy the lake?"

"Yeah," Victor said, spreading jam on a slice of fresh, dark, buttery bread. "I'm damn jealous, to be honest. My little house . . ." He thought about the many complaints he might utter about his townhome and decided to keep it simple. "Doesn't have a nice lake out the back door."

"Hah! Someday, Victor."

"He has millions of acres with beachfront property back home, though," Lam said, nudging Victor's shin with her toes under the table.

"Yeah . . ." Victor shrugged.

"Perhaps in a month or two, you can visit and check on things, hmm?" Dar said, surprising them both.

"Really?" Victor asked, pausing his food shoveling.

"Why not? After reading through your journal, I've begun to devise some training for you in the near future, which may involve that world." As Victor and Valla both opened their mouths, he held up a hand. "I won't say more because I'm still thinking about it, and there may be better opportunities I haven't considered. For now, just know that I'll certainly allow you to visit and check on your properties sometime relatively soon." As Victor nodded, taking a large bite, Dar continued, "I suppose you may have wondered where I went this morning?"

"I did!" Lam nodded, and Victor grunted his agreement.

"Lam's ritual required a few ingredients I didn't have handy here at the lake house, so I took a morning flight out to the Arcanum. The weather was beautiful, but then it usually is in Sojourn." He sighed, closing his dark eyelids, instantly extinguishing the fiery orbs of his eyes, and Victor wondered what he was thinking about. After a moment, though, he inhaled deeply, opened his eyes, and said, "Are you ready, Lam? The perfect time is nearly upon us."

“So soon?” Lam gulped her last bite of food and pushed her plate away. “Um, yes! Yes, I’m ready, Lord Dar.”

“Very well.” He pushed himself up from the table and gestured to the house. “Come, you two. We’ll perform the ritual in the cellars.”

For some reason, Victor was nervous, and when he glanced at Lam, he knew why. What if Dar made a mistake? What if his mistake was trusting Victor to help with the ritual? What if they did something wrong and Lam didn’t make it through? What if they miscalculated and her Core was destroyed, or she was reduced to a shadow of herself? Could something like that happen?

Dar must have seen the concern on his face because he clapped his shoulder with one of his boulder-like hands and said, “This is going to be an important lesson for you, Victor.” He nodded to Lam. “Yes, there’s much at stake, but all the best things come with risk.” He smiled, exposing his glittering, diamond-like teeth. “You know, I really am a great teacher, aren’t I, Lam? Did you hear that drop of wisdom?”

“I did, Lord Dar. Victor is fortunate!” She grinned and winked at him, and Victor sighed.

“Is this what the next few decades will be like? Maybe I should piss off the council some more so I can get thrown in jail or something.”

Dar nodded, squeezing his shoulder. “You jest, but that was certainly on the table at that inquest. Why, it was a much closer thing than I let on! It’s better that you avoid the dungeon beneath the council building, lad.”

“Do you mean dungeon as in . . .”

“As in filled with monsters and traps. Many a dangerous Energy user has been banished into that particular pocket dimension, never to return.” While Victor stewed on that, Dar led the way into the house and then through the kitchens to a stairwell situated at the rear of the pantry. It was a spiral, metal affair that led straight down into darkness. “Come now, we’ve work to do. There’s a natural cave down here that will be just right; its echo on the Spirit Plane has the perfect resonance.” With that, he started down, his bulk causing the stairs to creak with each step. Lam looked at Victor, raised her eyebrow, and then shrugged, following. Victor set his face in a determined mask and began his descent.