

Victor, Valla, and Lesh stood on one of the copper discs inside the World Hall, each holding a token of travel they'd purchased from a counter near the entrance. More accurately, Erd Van had purchased them, along with some "tokens of recall." Victor had been a little surprised at the ease with which they'd claimed the tokens; either the travel attendant was very trusting, or she'd had some way to determine they were who they claimed to be. Whatever the case, they had their tokens, they stood on one of the "portal platforms," and now they simply had to activate them. "We're ready?" he asked, looking from Valla to Lesh.

Valla shrugged. "As ready as I can be. We have thirty different types of poison remedies, a dozen powerful healing draughts, besides whatever we each already had in our possession, and we've got the perfume Erd says will keep the bugs from noticing us."

"Can we really call them bugs? I mean, bugs are . . . small." Victor grinned, chuckling at his stupid attempt at humor.

"I will smash them just like bugs, should they come near." Lesh lifted Belagog to his shoulder in illustration. Victor had to admit he was glad to have the big guy along.

"All right. Let's get this over with." He concentrated on the chalky blue ball in his hand. As he sent some of his inspiration-attuned Energy into it, it crumbled away, swirling on an invisible current of air, spreading into a cloud that shimmered with Energy, flickering like a billion tiny lights, obscuring his vision. When it cleared, he almost fell over—he was in a different world.

The sky was tinted yellow, the air hurt his throat to breathe, and twin suns hung high overhead—one blue and brilliant, one red and glowering. He stood atop a hill, and in every direction, all he could see was short, dry, yellow grass. Suddenly, a sparkle of blue lights erupted beside him, and when they faded, Valla stood there. As he reached out to steady her, he heard the crackling pops of Lesh's arrival behind him. "Great dead gods!" the giant dragonkin grumbled, coughing and slowly turning, taking in the sights.

"The air's terrible!" Valla said, choking out a sympathetic cough.

Victor nodded. "Yeah, it's not great. Honestly smells like cat piss. I can feel it sort of making my throat raw."

"It does!" Valla replied. "I've smelled that lingering stench after seeing Uvu relieve himself!"

"It's the hive," Lesh said.

"Where?" Victor turned in a slow circle again, but when he faced Lesh, the dragonkin was grinning a toothy smile at him. "Are your eyes that good? I can't see anything all the way to the horizon."

"Look closer, titan."

At his words, Victor looked down at the dry yellow grass under his feet, noting the fine white sand among its roots rather than dirt. "This hill?"

"Aye. I have a sense for this sort of thing, and I can tell you this mound is largely hollow. I can feel it in my bones. There's an entrance just below the surface this way." He started walking

down the slope, and when Victor looked at Valla, she just shrugged again and began following the big warrior.

“You have a sense for these things?” Victor hurried his steps to catch up.

“Yes. Perhaps one of my ancestors dwelled beneath the soil for too long, but I have an uncanny knack for finding caves and navigating beneath the surface.”

Still trying to acclimate to the harsh air, Valla coughed and spat, then, wiping her mouth, smiled at the two men. “Looks like we picked the right companion to explore a giant insect hive.”

“I led an army against the Kothids on my homeworld, so, aye, you did.”

Valla shot Victor a glance, eyebrow raised, and he shrugged. He really hadn't had the chance to get to know the guy. Most of the time they'd spent together had been sparring, and Lesh wasn't exactly talkative. Taking Valla's cue, though, he said, “Lesh, man, I know you feel like you're doing the right thing following me around, but are you sure you should've left all that behind? Don't get me wrong . . .”

“I might have doubted myself once, but when you climbed the volcano, awash with the power of a mountain, my conviction grew resolute. There's much I can learn from you and much we will uncover together. Already, we seek an artifact that may grant us an audience with a being more powerful than any to walk the craggy slopes of Ashenshoal.”

In a blatant attempt to steer the conversation away from boosting Victor's ego, Valla asked, “Tell us about the Kothids.”

“Kothids.” Lesh spat in the grass, and it sizzled and smoked. “Serpentine insects. Some were the size of my arm, others the size of twenty dragonkin laid out end to end. They crawl through tunnels on hundreds of legs, bear an acidic bite, and have shells as hard as stone. Belagog and I earned the title Kothid Bane during the war. My breath Core awoke during those long years fighting through their tunnels, pushing them back to their warrens beyond the Rukspagh Mountains.”

Valla sniffed, rubbing at her watering eyes, clearly still struggling with the vapors in the air. “Sounds awful.”

“Awful and glorious. I gained nine levels in that war and earned a fruit of evolution. Not as potent as a heart, but good. I gained many scales.” He stopped, looking around and sniffing. They were about two-thirds of the way down the slope, and Victor couldn't tell anything different about dead grass and sand under their feet. “Here. It's not deep.” He lifted Belagog from his shoulder and lifted it over his head.

Victor frowned, watching him, and, before he could stop himself, asked, “Is Belagog a he or a she?”

“Belagog? He doesn't speak much, but he's no lady.” With that, he brought the massive, jagged, pole-like cudgel down onto the sandy hillside. It impacted the ground with a dull *thud* that rippled through the sand and dry grass, even five feet up the hill where Victor stood, making him take a step to keep his balance. Lesh didn't strike again but took a few more steps down the hill and stared at the spot he'd struck. Valla moved next to him, also watching.

Victor frowned, wondering if he'd missed something. "What are we watching for?"

"If this was a Kothid nest, one of them would investigate . . ." Lesh stopped speaking as something began to happen. The sandy depression where the cudgel had struck seemed to be growing deeper. Watching it brought to mind sand in an hourglass to Victor, seeping down through some kind of opening, the depression growing ever larger.

"Did you break through?" he asked, stepping further back, wondering how big the depression would become. It was already several feet across and probably three feet deep at the center.

"Perhaps . . ." This time, when he stopped speaking, it was because he jumped back, lifting his cudgel high. Victor could see why—long, dark brown, chitinous, prodding limbs had pushed through the sand at the center of the hole he'd made.

"Ware!" Valla cried, snapping her wings wide and jerking Midnight from her scabbard. Victor didn't need the heads up; he'd already pulled Lifedrinker from her harness and was channeling rage into his pathways, getting ready to cast Iron Berserk. The ivid, if that's what the thing was, didn't plan to wait around for them to react. In a shower of stinging, flying sand and yellow, burning gas, it erupted from the hole, launching itself at Lesh. Victor stumbled back, blinded by the shower of sand and gas, but he didn't wait for his vision to clear. He cast Iron Berserk and released his aura, letting it fall around him as he summoned his Banner of the Champion—he wasn't going to take half-measures until he had an idea what they were up against.

Victor had only seen a glimpse of the carapace-covered monstrosity, but one thing was sure: Either Erd Van was a liar, or he'd been woefully misinformed—the thing was closer to the size of an SUV than a person. Suddenly, a gust of hot wind blew the stinging gas and sand away, and Victor could feel something of Valla in that wind; she'd summoned it. Lesh was struggling with the ivid. Belagog was caught between two massive pincers, and Lesh was fending off another set of pincers with his free hand. Meanwhile, the giant insect pushed him down the hill, driving with its four other legs. Victor stomped forward, skirting the much larger hole, and, without further ado, hacked Lifedrinker through one of those legs.

Hot, yellow fluid geysered from the hewn appendage, and where it hit Victor, it sizzled and burned, almost like acid. His Iron Berserk and titanic constitution handled the burn, making it only a painful annoyance, but he shuddered to imagine Valla getting doused with the stuff. His attack had sent the insect into a frenzy, and it whirled, letting go of Lesh to see what had harmed it. One of its shovel-sized, pincer-like claws snapped out at him, but Victor was fast when he was Berserk, too fast for that claw, and he dodged aside, hacking Lifedrinker down, splitting the claw's chitin and producing another spray of caustic yellow blood.

His distraction was just what Lesh needed—he lifted his enormous cudgel and brought it down with a terrible *crack* on the ivid's bulbous abdomen, splitting the hard shell and sending fragments to fall to the sandy ground amid a shower of hot, acidic guts and blood. The insect went wild, mortally wounded but not nearly ready to quit. It leaped at Victor, but Lifedrinker was ready, and he was too damn big to be pushed around by a bug, even one that size. He snatched its pincer-bearing arm with his left hand and brought Lifedrinker down with the force of a falling anvil, right at the center of its head, between half a dozen eyestalks. She cracked the shell and buried herself to the haft, and Victor felt her throbbing and vibrating, digging for the veins of Energy within the creature.

The insect's legs writhed, spreading and contracting as it died, but Victor held it still, one hand gripping the intact pincer, the other still holding Lifedrinker's haft. Lesh, ensuring the thing would truly die, pounded it three more times, nearly deshelling the monstrous insect as he broke its carapace apart. While it died and Lifedrinker took her due, Valla landed with a gentle flutter of her wings.

"I was going to call lightning down, but you two had it in hand. This thing is much larger than Erd Van indicated."

"Quiet!" Lesh growled, and Victor felt his prideful anger bristle. He almost told the guy off, but when he turned to him, scowling, he saw Lesh leaning down, one ear cocked at the ground. "Something comes. Troll shit! Many things come! We must fly!" With that, he turned and began charging down the hill. Victor yanked Lifedrinker from the insect's head, flinging the corpse aside. Then he looked at the hole and contemplated fighting; he was Quinametzin, and the thought of fleeing from bugs rankled.

He felt wind against his neck and turned to see Valla taking flight. "Summon Guapo!" she cried, then flapped her wings and dove toward Lesh, following him away from the hill. Victor growled, watching the two of them grow distant.

"Just you and me, beautiful?" Now, he could feel the shaking of the earth, and he began to wonder if he was being stupid. "Well, maybe I should follow them, you know, just to be sure they get away okay. I mean, if I get busy killing a swarm, what if they get caught up in it?" Lifedrinker hummed lazily; she was content with her meal. "All right." Victor concentrated and, using glory-attuned Energy, summoned a titan-sized Guapo from a pool of sparkling golden light. He'd just swung onto his back when something burst out of the sandy tunnel opening. Guapo began running, leaping down the hill in a single bound, and Victor looked over his shoulder to see not one, not ten, but dozens and dozens of the massive, clawed, ivid bursting out of the tunnel in a stream of black, hissing and clicking chitin.

Guapo devoured the distance between himself and Lesh, and when they drew near, Victor leaned over to take the dragonkin's arm, pulling him up behind him on the giant Mustang's back. Lesh was a big, heavy man, but in his Berserk state, Victor pulled him up like he was a child. "Watch them!" he yelled over his shoulder.

"They yet pursue us! A dark swarm that streams forth from the tunnel. Hundreds." After a few more seconds of running, Lesh amended, "Thousands!"

"Get that *pinché* spray!" Victor urged Guapo to stop; they were a few miles ahead of the swarm by then. "Valla!" he yelled. "Come here!"

"I have it!" Lesh said, holding up one of the containers of liquid Erd Van had given them. It was in a quart-sized bottle with a bulbous pump spray attached, and Lesh began dousing himself and Victor with it. He pumped out a dozen spurts, basically clouding Guapo and his passengers in the thick, oily substance. It smelled terrible—pungent and eye-watering. It reminded Victor of urine and mothballs, and he wanted to gag but stoically refused. With a *woosh* and a gust of refreshing air, Valla landed, and Lesh turned the nozzle of the spray bottle on her.

Victor watched the dark line of insects approaching. They were fast, but not alarmingly so; he could easily leave them behind on Guapo. He could see they were still coming out of the mound

and figured there had to be, as Lesh had speculated, thousands of them out on the sandy, grass-covered plains. "I think they're slowing."

Lesh looked up, having finished dousing Valla in the awful stuff. "Aye, they slow." Victor turned Guapo so he could watch the insects more comfortably.

"This stuff is terrible," Valla said, and Victor could see she was fighting back a gag.

"Don't spit," Lesh said. "They may smell it."

Valla groaned, swallowing noisily and coughing into her elbow. "From there?"

"Aye. They've slowed because they lost our scent thanks to this concoction." He held the jar aloft. "Something gives them an uncanny ability to smell intruders. Likely a natural ability boosted by the Energy they harvest."

"You think they cultivate Energy?"

Lesh shook his head, grimacing as he swallowed, clearly as disgusted by the oily spray as Victor and Valla. "No. They're more like animals, passively gathering it, evolving and advancing. Did the man who hired you say how long it had been since his last attempt at this artifact?"

Valla shook her head. "No."

"Perhaps they've advanced as a species. Hives are . . . amazing and terrible in an Energy-rich world. If their queen has made a breakthrough, her children will reflect it." Lesh pointed with Belagog. "Look, they turn back."

Victor nodded, watching the ivid slowly file back into the wide tunnel from which they'd emerged. "How much of that stuff do you have left?"

"I used a third to douse us." Lesh looked from Valla to Victor. "You each have a bottle, yes?"

"Right," Valla said. "So, we must stay covered in it, or we'll be in trouble."

Victor nodded. "Yeah, but Erd said some of the insects will be hostile if they even see us. Do you think those were their 'warriors?' Or do you think worse things are waiting for us in there?"

"Those were warriors." Lesh nodded. "There will be worse things, however. If they're anything like the Kothids, they'll have more dangerous castes deeper in the hive."

"Well, if we meet 'em, we'll have to kill them quickly. I think as long as we stay covered in this shit, we shouldn't get swarmed." He frowned, thinking, then said, "You know, if shit gets really bad, I can probably get out alive. I have some cards I can play, but it wouldn't exactly be safe for you guys to be around." Victor was thinking of his new Volcanic Fury and Wake the Earth abilities. "Maybe you should, like, keep watch out here?"

"No." Valla laughed, shaking her head. "If things get that bad, I won't argue if you want to distract the creatures long enough for Lesh and me to use our recall tokens, but we should go in with you. It's better if we try to succeed without you trying to take on an entire hive with thousands . . ."

Lesh shook his head and interjected, "Millions."

Valla's eyes widened. "Millions! No, Victor! We must do this without you trying to do battle with the entire hive!" Her voice was strained and almost pleading, and Victor had to take a second, trying to understand why she thought he'd be so hard to convince. He wasn't an idiot; he knew he could kill a thousand or more of those things, but there was no way his Energy would last long enough to take on even ten times that many, let alone millions of them.

"Yeah. All right. Only a last resort, then, to buy you guys time to use those tokens." The tokens Erd had purchased for them were single-use and would transport them back to Sojourn's World Hall. According to him, they cost nearly twice as much as their travel tokens, which Victor could only assume was at least as much as what the System had charged them to travel from Fanwath. "Let's hope Erd was right, and these tokens will even work in the hive."

Valla looked at him and frowned. "He said the magic keeping people from teleporting into the hive only guarded against entry . . ."

"Yeah, but how much does that dude even know? He said these damn bugs were only your size." Victor looked at Lesh. "Hop down, *hermano*. I'm going to cancel my rage, and Guapo's going to shrink. Might as well try to sneak in there at first." Victor looked back at the retreating horde of insects as Lesh dismounted. This job wouldn't be easy, but hopefully, it would be worth it. Hopefully, they'd earn some levels . . . "Hey, why didn't we get Energy for that big damn bug?"

Lesh followed Victor's gaze and said, "Perhaps the System is waiting for those hostile combatants to leave the field. The System can be cruel, but it usually won't interfere with the affairs of the people and creatures it governs. It might consider sending Energy streaming toward us, exposing us to that horde, as interference."

"I hope that's true," Valla said, moving to a patch of short yellow grass and sitting down. "Those things are returning more slowly than they emerged."

Victor canceled his spells, and as Guapo shrank, he hopped down. "Yep. Let's chill here for a little while, then we'll try a sneaky, stinky approach."