

In the end, after what felt like an hour of negotiating, Victor didn't pay any beads to Chori for the jade travel home. She'd started by quoting him a price that initially seemed outrageous—five million. When Victor shook his head and asked about something a little cheaper, she'd asked him about precious metals, stones, or rare objects from his travels. At which point, Victor had remembered Karnice's ring and his enormous trove of weapons, particularly spears.

As he'd pulled out the spears, selecting those that seemed the most resonant and full of Energy, Chori's eyes had widened, and Victor had only laid out five by the time Valla put a hand on his forearm and shook her head; she'd read in Chori's expression that at least one of the spears on the counter had interested her dearly. Even so, Chori was a good negotiator and never let on which of the spears was made of what material that had so intrigued her.

Victor thought about bargaining, about insisting on learning what she knew of the spears. He even contemplated taking them to a different sort of shop, a smith or a jeweler, to find out what the spears were made of and how those merchants might value them. In the end, he'd decided he didn't care that much; the spears were just sitting in his ring, and he'd hardly scratched the surface of the valuables Karnice had stashed away. So, despite his ignorance, he'd made the trade—five of Karnice's spears for a pretty damn cool and unique home that he could carry around on his belt.

After making the deal, Chori had insisted that Victor and Valla explore the home, and as they stood in the foyer, Victor took in the fine craftsmanship and elegant design. Thick, luxurious rugs lay on dark marble floors, and vaulted ceilings allowed diffuse, pleasant light in through windows that were far larger on the inside than out. Victor reached for Lifedrinker before looking around anymore and asked her, "Is it okay for you in here?"

*Is it not comfortable for you? As long as you feel well, I shall also. Do not leave me in this place when you make it small again, however.*

"Ah, right. Makes sense." Victor walked out of the foyer and looked straight to the home's rear windows down a long, wide, central hallway. True to her word, Chori's furnishings extended beyond just the fine rugs. The walls separating the various sections of the first level were all crafted from matching hardwood stained in a reddish hue that complemented the trimmings of the home's exterior. On his left, through an open archway, was a parlor filling one corner of the space with plush couches and chairs, coffee tables, lamps, and a squat brass, Energy-powered stove that sat in the corner, radiating warmth.

Opposite the parlor was a large room, the walls of which were stacked, floor to ceiling, with built-in bookcases. Victor walked around in it, admiring the hundreds of empty shelves, imagining filling them with books from the many places he might someday visit. A large, square table filled the center of the space with high stools tucked under its eaves, and he imagined it would be perfect for looking at maps or studying reference tomes. He turned to leave but found Valla blocking his way, a contemplative expression on her face.

"Why don't I start your collection with the books Tes gave me?"

"Those aren't meant for me to hoard away."

"No, that's true. On that note, we should speak to Chori about magical methods for duplicating books. I could give you a copy."

“Hey! Now you’re talking.” Victor draped an arm over her shoulders and, careful to keep most of his weight off, guided her out of the room. “Come on, let’s see the kitchen.” He led the way out of the library through an archway and found himself looking at an enormous rectangular table with more than twenty place settings. Beyond it was the back wall of the home and lining that was a row of countertops and cupboards. A stove sat in the center before a huge window that gave a brilliantly clear view of Chori’s showroom. Everything, from the table to the counters to the cupboards to the trim around the windows, was delicately crafted from rich, lustrous woods, all stained in complementing shades of brown and red.

After checking to see that the cupboards were mostly bare, Victor continued to explore the first level, finding a pantry, a bathroom with an adjoining walk-in bath—something like he imagined one might find in a fancy spa—and two smallish bedrooms. Near the dining room and kitchen, an ornate brass and jade stairway spiraled downward. On the lower level, Victor found several large, empty rooms and a much larger bedroom with an adjoining bathroom and an enormous walk-in closet. The only furnishing on the second floor was a large bed that matched the craftsmanship of the dining table upstairs.

“Your room,” Valla said, clapping him on the shoulder. “It even has a bed that might accommodate your ridiculous frame.

“Yeah. I’m sure not complaining. I’m just glad to see toilets, running water, and plenty of places to stash my stuff. You think the empty rooms down here are for adding more bedrooms?”

“That’s one possibility. You could probably design any sort of room you wanted in them—simple storage space, crafting halls, prisoner cages. Only your imagination would limit you.”

“Prisoner cages, hmm? But when I make the house small, wouldn’t they go insane?”

“That’s another good question for Chori,” Valla replied, shrugging.

Victor nodded, and after one more look around the spacious master suite, he led the way upstairs and out of the magical house. Chori stood before the front steps, her hands clasped and an enthusiastic grin brightening her eyes, though, to Victor, seeing such a goat-like face wearing that expression was so cute it was almost funny. “Well?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s amazing. I should have probably done the tour before trading away those spears, but what can I say? I’m impulsive.” Victor followed up with the question he had burning in his mind, “What would happen to someone if I made the house small while they were inside?”

“Ah, that would be inadvisable. The effects of the dimensional magic would harm a conscious mind. My father stretched the boundaries of safety by increasing the interior space beyond the exterior limitations already.”

“Damn,” Victor sighed. He saw Chori’s look of confusion and explained himself, “It’s not that I’m unhappy with the house. It’s just, well, if I can’t keep all my things in there, it doesn’t feel exactly like a home, you know. Lifedrinker,” he patted the axe, “and any other conscious treasures I might find,” he tapped his bracer where Khul Bach dwelled, “won’t be able to stay in there.”

“You want them with you, in any case,” Valla said.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. It’s not a deal breaker. I’m just thinking long-term, you know?”

“Of course, Lord Victor,” Chori said, far more respectful now that they’d done business together. “My father was the best Artificer I’ve ever met, but there are likely many others in worlds beyond Fanwath with more know-how. Perhaps the world where you found those spears . . .”

“Eh, maybe. The people of Zaafor didn’t strike me as the most creative types.”

“Tes . . .” Valla started but trailed off, glancing quickly away from Victor. Not for the first time, he wondered what she was thinking.

“Yeah, anyway, Chori, I want to buy some more stuff for the kitchen. Some of your magical appliances.”

“Oh!” Valla added, “Do you have any magical means for copying books?”

“So long as they’re mundane in nature, I have just the thing,” Chori replied, nodding and motioning toward the jade travel home, “I’ve removed my bond from the home, so you should bond with it now, Victor. You wouldn’t want someone else to gain control over the dwelling!”

“Right.” Victor walked up the front steps and rested his hand on the smooth wooden railing, and then he touched it with a thread of his Energy. He instantly felt a connection to the home, much like he did the dimensional containers he was bonded with. He intuitively found he could let his mind drift through it, seeing the different rooms and all of the objects within. “Can I access this when it’s small?”

“You certainly can.” Chori nodded.

“Oh, now that’s badass.” Victor mentally commanded the house to shrink, and suddenly the handrail he held slipped away from his fingers, absorbing into the smooth green jade along with the window shutters, door, and steps. Then the enormous rectangle of green stone shivered and, with audible *pops*, shrank down in stages until, twenty seconds later, a much smaller hunk of jade sat forlornly in the expanse of gravel. Victor bent to pick it up. As he held it, he decided it almost resembled a green, stone deck of cards, but it was heavy and dense and teeming with Energy.

“Here’s your belt case,” Chori said, holding out a tooled leather box, perfectly crafted to fit the travel home. He slipped the jade box into it and then loosened his belt to slide it through the loops on the case.

“Pretty cool,” he said, smoothing his armor down over the small object. “Imagine that! Carrying my house around on my belt.”

“Yes. It will come in handy during your travels, no doubt,” Valla replied, and Victor frowned at her. Was she being overly formal again?

“You good?” He raised an eyebrow, trying to see some clue in the depths of her bright teal eyes.

“I’m fine, Victor.” She smiled, then looked at Chori and said, “The book, um, copier?”

“Yes, yes. Follow me.” She led the way back to her shop, and while Valla and Victor perused her goods, she dug around through trunks she had stacked under the counter. After a few

minutes, she called them over, saying, "I'm sure there are other ways to copy books, but I worked on this little system as a project one summer, and I'm rather fond of its elegance." Before her, on the counter, was a shallow box made of pale wood. Charred runes had been burnt into the inside walls and bottom of the box, and between them, lines of silvery metal wove a complex spiderweb pattern.

The box was about fifteen inches by thirty and only four or five inches deep. Down the center, it was partitioned, creating two shallow compartments. Chori patted the box and said, "I call this a copybox. You put the original text in the left compartment and the blank text in the right. If they're not a perfect match, the copybox will condense or expand the text to fit the new pages. I mean that quite literally, so be careful. I copied a four-hundred-page history text onto a ten-page pamphlet, but the writing was so tiny that it was illegible. The pages were practically black with ink."

"That's exactly what I was looking for! Thank you, Chori. I'll buy it," Valla said, gently running her fingers over the glyphs inside the box.

"Wonderful."

Before they left, Victor spent thousands of beads on enchanted knickknacks for his house—kitchen appliances, pots and pans, enchanted bedding, and a map of the Ridonne Empire that showed a dot wherever the map was moved. As they left the shop, Victor felt good, and Valla seemed happy. He looked at her and said, "I should put some provisions into my house too. You know, wine, ale, and food that can be cooked—not just travel rations and prepared stuff like I have tucked away in my rings."

"Let's do that now, on the way out of town. I want to buy some blank pages and book bindings, too. I feel like we should hurry, though." Valla looked to the east, down the long, lantern-lit cobbled road and toward the city wall beyond which the army encampment waited in the darkness of the plains.

"Yeah, I guess we should get back," Victor sighed.

"Not eager any longer? You surely charged into battle eagerly."

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, let's go." Victor didn't bite; he didn't really want to talk about whether he was eager to be responsible for thousands of soldiers' lives. Feeling that stress, he began to think about the other things that had been bothering him lately. His issues with ap'Gravin and Olivia, his *abuela*, and all the expectations people had of him, from Khul Bach to Rellia to every single soldier out in that army. Perhaps feeling that stress, perhaps remembering how she'd comforted him before, he reflexively reached down for Valla's hand.

At first, she took his fingers in her grasp, but she gave them a squeeze and let go, looking way to the right. He looked down at her and stopped, waiting for her to turn and make eye contact. There were plenty of people out and about on the streets, but at that moment, the two of them were mostly alone, with only a few cloaked evening shoppers walking on the other side of that particular street. They were still several blocks from the busy market square Valla had been guiding them toward.

"What," she finally asked, looking up at him with a weird expression that seemed partly angry, partly pained, and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry I grabbed your hand. I guess I'm getting too familiar with you." As usual, Victor wasn't sure why he chose those words. Was he sorry? He decided he wasn't sorry that he wanted to hold her hand, but he supposed seeing her uncomfortable had made him regret the impulse.

"It's not your fault. I've encouraged you before. Ancestors, I welcome the affection!"

"Then why have you been acting so weird? It's like, well, ever since we got on that airship, you've been more distant. Is it the military thing? Is it, like, inappropriate for me to be affectionate with you?"

"No. Well, yes. Truly, I use that as an excuse." She sighed heavily, looked up at the clear sky and bright moons, then turned back to him. "I want to be candid with you, Victor. I want to tell you my heart," Valla's eyes started to fill with moisture. She glanced around, and it was easy to see she was embarrassed.

"Then do!"

"Will you mock me?"

"What? God no, Valla!"

She frowned, staring into his eyes for several moments, then started speaking, and her words came out like a flood, "Well, I'm 'weird' with you because I want more than simple affection. I want to be the object of your dreams, the woman you obsess about. I'm not a fool, though! I've met her, Victor. The woman who holds that position in here." She gently rapped her knuckles on his worm-scale vest right over his heart. "I've seen the spell she has on you, and I don't blame you!"

"Huh?" Victor's eyes narrowed, and genuine puzzlement clouded his expression.

"I love Tes, too! How could I ever be with you when I know, in here," this time she thumped her hand over her own heart, "that you've settled for me? I won't do it! I won't be a consolation. I won't be someone you pass the time with while you wait for the real thing. I'm sorry, but that's that."

"What? Tes?" Victor's mind raced, fumbling for words, wondering how he'd stumbled into a conversation about this.

"Oh, please, spare me the protestations. You've seen her. You've felt her. You know she cares about you and feeling that affection, that attention from someone like her . . . you'll never forget it. I truly don't think you will. We might be happy for a while. You might pretend to have everything you want. You might even believe it for a time, but now and then, when you're looking out over the lights of a city or tasting a certain food, you'll remember Tes and your heart will grow distant, and you'll start to wonder. You'll think to yourself, 'What if?' and then . . ."

"Valla! Valla, take it easy." Victor couldn't help the nervous chuckle that escaped him as he reached out and grasped her shoulders. She flashed him a furious scowl, and he clamped his mouth shut. "I'm not laughing at you! I'm not mocking you. I'm just, well, I'm nervous 'cause I didn't mean to open this can of worms! I just wanted to hold your hand!"

"I told you I'm not a fool!" Valla tried to turn away, but Victor gently grasped her arm. She had tears flowing freely down her cheeks, her words had been confusing at first, but now the picture was becoming clear. The whole thing about Tes, about Valla not wanting to be compared to her—it made sense, but it wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"Take a breath. It's all right. Listen, I'm sorry that everything's always so fucking complicated. I don't want it to be. All I know is that you're very damn important to me, and I'm not going to fuck that up. If you're worried about how I feel about Tes, then, well, shit, I don't know what to do about it. How do I fix a problem like that?"

"I don't know. You can't." Valla sniffed noisily, looking left and right. Suddenly, she produced a pale blue cloak from one of her storage rings and pulled it around her shoulders, lifting the voluminous hood.

"Are you . . . hiding?"

Valla didn't reply, but she reached up and tugged the hood further down, hiding her eyes, leaving only her mouth and chin exposed to the moonlight.

"Sheesh," Victor tried, chuckling, "I wasn't even sure you liked me like that. I can see why you wouldn't want anyone else to know . . ."

"You idiot."

"Doesn't that feel better? Come on! Hold my hand, and you can call me an idiot all you want. Who cares what people think? Who cares if there's some mythical woman out in the universe I'm smitten with? I'm just a dumb guy, and there's hardly any chance I'll see her in the next hundred years, right? I'm not trying to marry you! I just want to hold your hand."

"A hundred years is a long time." Valla still tugged at the edge of her hood, hiding her eyes from him. He saw one corner of her mouth quirking up in a smile, though, as she said, "I'll hold your hand, Victor, but that's all! I won't waste a century of my life on something that isn't real."

"Is it a waste, though?" He grinned and snatched her hand, gently folding it in his palm. "I'd say a nice stroll in the moonlight holding hands with someone you care about is plenty worthwhile, all by itself."