

As Lam uttered her request, Victor felt his eyes widening, and even Dar grew quiet, staring with his blazing eyes into Lam's. Was she serious? Victor couldn't imagine the Lam he knew giving away most of her levels and power. He found his brain scrambling for explanations. Was it all about Edeya? Was she going through some kind of identity crisis? He knew Kethelket had saved her from Catalina; had that near-death experience made her reconsider her strength, seeing weakness where once she'd seen power?

While his tongue was tied with too many questions to choose from, Dar simply said, "Why?"

Lam smiled, perhaps taking the lack of an instant refusal as a good sign. Victor saw her thumb moving, rubbing against her palm or something small she clutched there. She looked up, her eyes filling with moisture as she gathered her thoughts. "Many reasons," she finally said.

"I'd like to hear them before considering your request." Dar's voice was softer than Victor had ever heard; there was no grating of boulders for Lam, but rather the soft susurrating of gravel washed along stone by a gentle stream.

"To begin with, there's the obvious," Lam said, wiping her eyes and smiling. "I love Edeya, and I want to be close to her. It could take years for her to approach my level. Meanwhile, I'll find it hard to advance, knowing I'd continue to leave her behind. Valla and Lesh invited me to their dungeon dive; part of me wanted to go, but another part hated the idea of gaining another level while I'm already nearly forty ahead of Edeya."

"How do you love her? As a mother? An older sibling? In such a role, being more powerful is natural, it's . . ."

"Not like that," Lam said, smiling and, to Victor's horror, blushing. What had become of the stoic champion he'd so idolized? *Blushing?*

"Ah," Dar nodded. "What else?"

"I had a base-tier Class until twenty. I've only had an advanced Class since. I was preoccupied with fast levels and gaining wealth; I took Classes with those short-sighted goals in mind. I'd like another chance to make those selections, to earn more powerful options." As Dar nodded, she continued, "More than anything, I crave the experience of adventuring with friends and learning for the sake of it. I never had friends or companions when I was at a low level. I joined the Legion, and everything was competitive; everyone was scheming. The few friends I made died or moved on, constantly transferred. I didn't see my first dungeon until I was tier-three, and that wasn't a fun experience, though I did make a valuable ally." She looked at Victor and smiled, "Polo."

"Ah . . ." Victor said, nodding as he finally found his voice. "Is this really something people do, Dar?"

Dar leaned back on the railing, causing the wood to creak ominously, though he seemed unbothered by the sound. "Very few, for obvious reasons. First, it takes a great leap of faith to relinquish decades worth of growth for the chance at a second run. Few people consider their lot so bad that it's worthwhile. I had an heir to an imperial throne from a world called Rikahl as a supplicant because he'd failed to earn the Class all of his forefathers had held. He gave away eighty-nine levels. I wonder how he did on his second attempt . . ." Dar rubbed his chin,

shrugging. “Well, no matter. The second reason is that only a few Spirit Casters on a handful of worlds know how to perform the ritual. Yes, and I suppose there’s a third factor: cost.”

Victor sighed, knowing Lam had nothing Ranish Dar needed. He could only think of one thing that might pique the Spirit Master’s interest, and there wasn’t any way he was giving that up, not unless it meant saving someone’s life—the ivid royal jelly. Lam, apparently, didn’t share his pessimism. “I’m not one to be scared away by high costs, Ranish.” Victor almost snorted, hearing Lam use Dar’s first name. Had he heard anyone call him Ranish?

“No. No, Lady Lam, I’d be inclined to believe that statement. You’ve quite a determined look in your eye. In fact, you remind me of my young protégé here. It’s no wonder you took to each other when he was naught but a slave.”

Lam looked at Victor, and when their eyes locked, Victor couldn’t help smiling. He remembered the first time he saw her back in the mines, how he’d been utterly struck dumb by her beauty and power. The memory made him consider what she was asking Dar to do in a different light; she was fearless. When she saw something she wanted, she took it. If she couldn’t, she changed her life around that goal until she could. He nodded, deciding to take up her cause. “You should do it, Dar. Earning Lam as an ally is worth it—she has a spine of solid steel.”

“Is that what you’re offering, Lady? An alliance? A favor owed?” Something about Dar’s tone and the way his eyes blazed gave the words a lot more weight than their simple nature warranted. Dar was a man who might be thousands of years old; he had the patience to make long, long bargains.

Lam seemed to understand the weight of his words, too. She locked her emerald eyes on Dar’s blazing ones, and her green irises sparkled with their reflected light. They stared at each other for several long seconds, and then she nodded. “If that’s what you’re asking, then that’s what I’ll pay.”

Dar straightened up, and Victor imagined the railing breathed a sigh of relief. Dar gestured for Lam to sit down around a small outdoor firepit one of his servants was stoking. The chairs around were of various sizes. Some were just right for Victor or Dar, but several were perfect for people of Lam’s stature. Once they’d all taken a seat and were comfortably looking at one another over the faintly crackling fire, Dar said, “I’d like to explain a few things to you before we continue this negotiation.”

“I’m all ears, sir,” Lam said, suddenly more deferential.

“Ensure you pay attention, Victor. This may become one of your first lessons.” Victor was already quite piqued, but the idea that Dar might teach him how to do the, apparently, secret ritual really got his attention. He nodded and leaned forward as Dar continued speaking, “Lam, you need to know that there’s some risk involved. What you ask for is known as a type of resurrection: we’ll have to take your spirit from your body, leaving behind a tiny shard that I’ll cleave from the whole. Once that’s done, the ritual, which I won’t explain at this time, will require the greater part of your spirit to pass through a crucible, testing it and burning away your Energy to protect it in the process. Your spirit, newly reforged in the process, will be reunited with the tiny shard in your body, bringing you back to life with a stronger spirit and broader karmic ties. You’ll have a new chance at all the things you yearn for.”

Lam's eyes were wide, and she leaned forward, hanging on to every word of Dar's. As he finished, she nodded and fervently whispered, "Yes."

"However!" Dar held up a thick, stony finger, wagging it back and forth. "The crucible must be designed with precision, providing the perfect resistance to your spirit's passage. If I miscalculate, or your will is too weak, you may not make it. You may fade from this plane of existence, lost to wander the Spirit Plane until such a time that you gather the Energy to breach the veil and begin the journey meant for all once-living spirits."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"Oh, aye, I think so. I've been wrong about important things before, however. Bear that in mind." Dar looked at Lam and seemed to like what he saw. He nodded and said, "Dinner then, we'll toast to our bargain, Lam."

"Truly? You'll do it?"

"I'm here in Sojourn to recover and amuse myself between tribulations. Victor has already proven his value in that regard, but I wouldn't mind seeing what you do with yourself if given a second run. I'll hold you to your word, however, Lam. There's no escaping an oath to a master of the spirit."

Lam launched herself out of her chair, and her wings veritably blazed with golden motes, showering the deck in a carpet of bouncing, sparkling Energy as she fell to her knees before Dar, grasping one of his great, stony hands in her slender, tanned, well-scarred fingers. "Thank you, Lord Dar. Thank you!"

He nodded, suddenly sober. "You thank me now, Lady Lam, but someday you may find yourself cursing my name." When Lam's expression didn't waver, he nodded and said, "Victor and I can perform the ritual. I have plans for him in two days, but if you're ready, we can do it tomorrow."

Victor was almost startled by the use of his name. "You have plans for me . . ."

"I'm ready!" Lam said earnestly, cutting him off.

"Tomorrow, then. Victor, this will be a good lesson for you, and the day after, a good friend of mine, Lo'ro the Grim, will help you start work on a cultivation chamber."

Victor heard him, and he nodded, but his mind had drifted back to Dar's words to Lam. Someday, she may curse his name? Was he trying to say that the payment he took, whatever favor he collected, would be unbearable? He didn't doubt that Dar could collect what he wanted; he'd keep tabs on Lam, and she'd never be able to outstrip his power before he came calling. Half his mind wanted to warn Lam off, to discourage her from bargaining with the man; wasn't one of them under his yoke enough? The other half thought about how he'd feel. If someone tried to talk him out of doing whatever he could to be closer to Valla or acted like he was too weak or stupid to enter into a bargain . . . Victor shook his head at the thought—enough to say he'd be pissed.

"Why not you?" he asked, suddenly snapping back to the current topic.

“What, boy?” Dar’s chuckle sounded dangerously like a growl. “I use up a precious favor to have one of the most powerful men in Sojourn spend his equally precious time helping you earn the heart of your cultivation chamber, and you dare to imply that I . . .”

Victor held up both hands in surrender, “No, no! I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant, is there something your friend can do that’s, I don’t know, like, a specialty?”

“Yes. He can pierce the veil in the Spirit Plane and open a gateway for you. You’ll find spirits twisted into manifestations of your affinities, bargain with or dominate them, and bring them back to add to your chamber.”

Victor’s mind painted wild images for him at those words. He’d seen Belikot trying to pierce the veil, pulling spirits through to inhabit his undead armies. It didn’t surprise him that Dar’s friend could easily do what Belikot had been working for years to accomplish, but it also gave him pause. “I’ve seen tormented spirits brought through the veil before. They weren’t happy to be enslaved . . .”

“I’ll leave the finer explanations to Lo’ro, but you won’t deal with intact, mindful spirits. You’re going to be looking for spirits who have been twisted beyond rationality by their obsession with certain darker emotions. Can you guess which ones I mean?”

Victor didn’t have to think very hard. “Fear and rage.”

“In one try!” Dar chuckled, snapping his fingers with a loud *crack*. He turned back to Lam, still kneeling on the floor before him. Her eyes had gone distant as she either listened to their side conversation or, Victor guessed, thought about what she’d just agreed to. “Dinner?” Dar raised one side of his stony brow.

“Yes!” Lam jumped up, her wings fluttering to make the move look magical. Victor laughed and also stood. He was hungry and all too willing to push his darker contemplations aside. He’d had a hell of a few months, maybe years, and he was pretty damn sure Dar wasn’t going to be easy on him, so he planned to grab any chance he could to enjoy life. If Lam wanted to be happy right now, if she wanted to celebrate, then Victor wouldn’t throw shadows on the occasion.

“All right,” he said, “I’m fuckin’ starved!”

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Darren lifted his boot from the cold water onto the stone and smiled, realizing his feet had survived the passage without getting wet. “These are damn good boots,” he whispered. Edeya had already scolded him several times for being too loud.

“Victor appreciates good footwear,” she laughed, making herself a hypocrite. She visibly winced as her high-pitched voice echoed down the partially submerged passage. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“Do you think anything’s down there?” Darren pointed to the opening they’d spied upon rounding the bend. So far, they hadn’t encountered anything other than cold, damp tunnels, stony caves, and lots and lots of lichen, moss, and, probably, mold. Darren wasn’t great with identifying fungi and the like, but it seemed like all sorts of things were growing in the grotto.

"I've never heard of a dungeon without monsters and traps, so, yeah, be ready," Edeya whispered, shifting her grip on her spear. Make your light a little brighter." Since he had no other abilities to use his Energy on, he was in charge of providing the light. He pushed a little more Energy into the little, faintly buzzing orb of red electricity floating above his head, and the sparks intensified, losing some of their red tint and shedding a lot more light in the dark tunnel. The walls lost some of their gloomy shadows, and the lichen and fungi brightened, displaying a remarkable array of colors.

"Oh, nice," Edeya whispered, "It's not as red when you brighten it."

Darren nodded, feeling proud of his light for some stupid reason. He chuckled, gripped his staff, and gestured toward the tunnel opening. "Shall we?"

"We shall!" Edeya grinned, and he saw her spear start to flicker with blue electricity. He'd learned she had a wind affinity, which allowed her to create a static charge on the spear tip. She said she had other, more potent spells but that she'd have to wait until her level increased and she gained more attribute points and, consequently, more Energy to use them. She stalked toward the opening. His light reflected off the Shimmersteel rings on the back of her vest, and Darren pressed his palm to his own chest, reminding himself he had armor on. He didn't know if he was terrified or excited, but his hands felt shaky, and his breaths were quick and shallow.

"Okay, Darren," he mouthed, not really vocalizing, "get it together. It's a newbie dungeon. Edeya's a good fighter. We got this." Just then, Edeya stepped through the opening and froze. When he caught up to her, she pointed, and Darren followed the gesture, taking in the enormous cavern. It was wide but had a low ceiling, covered with more moss or whatever the green, orange, yellow, and white fuzzy stuff was. Water dripped from a dozen shallow points into pools, and about halfway across the expansive space, Darren saw some honest-to-God frogmen lazing about, in and around a large pool of water.

"Frogmen?" he whispered an inch from Edeya's ear. She flinched and brushed at her ear, and he could see she wanted to scold him, but she regained her composure and nodded.

"Never seen 'em before, but they look amphibian. See the clubs?"

Darren nodded, eyeing the big, polished, yellowed bones some of them clutched. He scanned the cavern, trying to get a count, and came up with five. He whispered as much, "I see five."

Edeya nodded. "Same."

"Is there a chance they're friendly?"

Edeya slapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a snort of laughter. "Friendly frog people? In a dungeon?"

"I guess that was dumb," Darren sighed. "What's the plan?"

"Let's channel our inner Victor," Edeya said, grinning wickedly.

"Uh," Darren pictured Victor smashing his tanks, charging headlong into ordnance that would've turned an average person to paste. "There are five!"

"I'm level seven! C'mon, Dare! Get my back!" Before he could object further, she turned and charged, spear gripped tightly in both hands. Darren stood dumbfounded for a moment, watching as she fluttered her blue, dazzling wings like a dragonfly, turning a hop into a twenty-foot leap, clearing one of the pools of water. She came down, stabbing her spear into one of the lounging frogmen with a crackling *zap*. It croaked and thrashed, and then the other frogmen jumped into action, croaking in a cacophony of alarm, a dozen different tones to the sound echoing around the cavern.

"Shit!" Darren said, realizing he was still standing there. He lifted his quarterstaff over his head and charged, skirting the pool of water Edeya had flown over, aiming for her right flank. Meanwhile, she began to dash and fly about, dodging the frogmen's retaliation and delivering punishing blows with her spear. It was clear to Darren, for the first time, that she really did know a thing or two about fighting. The frogmen might be a mottled green with yellow spots, but their blood splashed bright red as Edeya laid about with her wicked, ivory, enchanted spear.

Darren arrived in time to crack his staff into a frogman's skull, shocking himself with the decisive blow. Victor had promised the staff was enchanted to increase its bludgeoning damage, and Darren was inclined to believe him after hearing the crunch of bone. Considering how Edeya was thrashing the frogmen, Darren realized there had to be more than the five they'd counted. It was hectic in the melee, but he swore he counted more than five still up and about, warbling, croaking, and flailing about with their primitive weapons. Darren used his quarterstaff's reach and superior height to keep them at bay, delivering jabs and overhead chops whenever possible.

"Good job, Dare! Keep 'em busy!" Edeya shouted, and a spray of something hot hit him on the back of the neck. He spun to see she'd impaled a frogman holding a sharpened bone that might have managed to stab him in the ass if not for her intervention. "Don't stare at the dead ones! Look behind you!" Darren whirled, swinging his staff in a wide arc out of reflex. The length of heavy, polished wood cracked another frogman in the side of the head and carried through to drive back another two.

Just as he began to fear they'd be overwhelmed, the handful of frogmen left standing began to try to flee, and Edeya pursued them, stabbing them in their backs. She was relentless and fast, using her wings in bursts, streaking forward on showers of blue Energy motes to drive her spear home over and over. Darren knew he couldn't keep up, so he watched her flitting around the cavern, finishing them one by one. He was leaning on his staff, amused by the show and proud of their victory, when he heard a wet *thwap, thwap*, and turned to see an enormous toad, probably two hundred pounds of warty green-brown flesh, crawling out of the pool behind him. It opened its wide mouth, bulged out its huge, beady yellow eyes, and croaked a challenge.

"Ah, shit," Darren said, lifting his staff, holding it sideways before himself as Lesh had told him to do when he needed to defend. "Edeya!" he called. Then the frog flicked out its big pink tongue. It was faster than Darren's eye could follow as it streaked out and slapped against his armored chest. "Hah!" he chortled when it didn't even hurt. Then, as it began to tug him forward, he realized it wasn't trying to hurt him. It was trying to eat him.