

“Well?” Lam asked, wiping the toad blood from her cobalt-blue hammer head with a well-soiled rag. They’d all just recovered from their Energy infusions after the “boss” toad battle, and she wanted to know if Darren had hit level ten. He grinned at her, then at Edeya, who sat, eyes glazed, staring at System messages of her own. He’d hoped to have both of their attention, but Lam wasn’t going to wait. She stepped closer to him and prodded his shoulder with her boot, almost knocking him off the flat rock.

“Okay, okay!” He laughed and held up his fist triumphantly. “Level ten! And, according to the messages in front of my eyes, I’m ready to choose my Class.”

“Excellent! That was faster than I feared! Spend your points before you look at your Class options. I don’t know if it makes a difference, but I’m superstitious.”

Again, Darren glanced at Edeya, but she was still distracted, so he nodded to Lam and put his latest five points into vitality. That done, he studied his new attributes:

Name:	Darren Whitehorse		
Race:	Human - Base 1		
Class:	-		
Level:	10		
Core:	Wildarc Class - Base 1		
Energy Affinity:	Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1	Energy:	140/140
Strength:	6	Vitality:	32
Dexterity:	5	Agility:	5
Intelligence:	9	Will:	28

“Not too bad.” He nodded to himself.

“Getting some big numbers, Dare?” Edeya asked, finally done staring off into space. “Sorry,” she added, throwing him a wink with one of her big, blue eyes, “I made level twelve.”

“Ugh!” Lam laughed. “Slow down! I’m still only eleven.”

“Why did I gain four levels in the time you gained two, Edeya?” Darren knew more Energy was required as levels increased, but he thought the two women would simply receive a larger share of the rewards.

Before Edeya could answer, Lam spoke, “A few factors. For one, affinity affects how much Energy impacts you as the System awards it. Also, contributions during a battle can change your share. The main thing, though, is that levels get slower and slower the higher you climb. We’ll all get to tier three pretty fast, but then the requirements start to really get steep.” She nudged him with her boot again. “Well? Tell us about your options!”

“Shouldn’t we get out of her first?” Edeya asked, fruitlessly trying to wipe some greenish-brown sludge off her hands.

“Darren?” Lam asked, hoisting her shield and raising an eyebrow. “Can you wait until we’re out, so Miss Edeya doesn’t have to suffer this muck any longer?”

Darren nodded and stood. “Let’s get out. I’d prefer some fresh air to think.” He hopped up and, feeling fresh and invigorated after their Energy infusion, followed Lam back through the winding corridors, sunken, wet passages, and rooms filled with dead frogmen. Edeya and Lam chatted away; things were certainly different with Lam along for the dungeon crawl.

The two Ghelli had a hundred topics to talk about, and though Darren wasn’t usually involved in any of them, the two women made a point to include him—most of the time. At that moment, the women were talking about someone named Sergeant Fath, laughing about how he used to carry his shield atop his head while marching. Of course, Darren could infer why it came up; Lam was constantly stowing and pulling her shield from her storage ring.

“Lam,” he asked as they approached the dungeon’s exit. “Why didn’t your friend, Sergeant Fath, use a storage device?”

Edeya laughed and answered for the older Ghelli, “Because Fath was an indentured soldier for the Greatbone Mine. He wasn’t much higher on the pecking order than me and Victor.”

Lam shrugged her agreement, and then they all stepped through the portal, emerging in the quiet, damp cave where Sojourn City caretakers stood nearby, monitoring the portal entrance. “Out early?” asked a thin woman with pale lavender skin, massive black eyes, and half a dozen finger-length tentacles constantly wriggling under her large proboscis. “Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re fine,” Edeya announced. “Thank you. We’re done with our slot.”

“Much appreciated.” The woman bowed, pressing her slender, four-fingered hands together at chest level.

Lam sketched a quick bow, then led the way out of the cave. “Let’s get a carriage back to the lake house, and you can go over your Classes with us while we travel.”

Darren nodded, and they hurried their way back to the small outdoor market at the entrance to the park. They’d found that most of the coaches, or “carriages” as some people called them, were much slower than the ones powerful individuals like Dar owned. When they’d hired one to pick them up at the lake house and deliver them to the grotto, the flight had taken over an hour. While they might be slower, there were plenty to choose from, and it wasn’t long before they’d flagged down a strange, copper, bird-shaped coach with an open-air seating arrangement on its back.

At first, Lam had wanted to wait for a different vehicle, afraid the wind would be too distracting for Darren to concentrate on his Class offerings, but the coachman, a small, beetle-like fellow with a bright yellow shell, had insisted that his coach was enchanted to shield the passengers from the elements. So, in short order, they were soaring into the wind, comfortable on a wide, cushioned bench, with Darren somehow in the middle. The bird’s metallic wings clanked and squeaked with each Energy-fueled flap, but the ride was smooth as could be.

“All right, Dare.” Edeya scooted closer to him on the bench. “Let’s hear ‘em!”

“Okay, um, give me a minute. I have to find the right screen . . .” Darren opened his status sheet and, just as the System had told him he would, he saw a blinking round button that said, “Level Ten Class Selection.” He “touched” the button by gesturing toward it with his finger, and then a list appeared, filling the strange, transparent, gray System screen with white text:

Class selection option 1: Elemental Attendant - Basic. Control and wield Energy compatible with your elemental affinity. Your primary focus is on harnessing elemental energy to perform attacks and defenses. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence, and Vitality.

Class selection option 2: Arcane Battler - Basic. Use arcane and physical abilities in combat to gain an edge over your opponents. Master the balance between magic and martial prowess to become a versatile combatant. Class attributes: Strength, Will, and Vitality.

Class selection option 3: Chaos Sorcerer - Advanced. Prerequisites: Chaos affinity. Any Elemental affinity. Embrace the chaotic energies of the universe to perform powerful and unpredictable spells. Your ability to manipulate chaos combined with your elemental mastery allows you to bend reality to your will and create mayhem on the battlefield. Class attributes: Intelligence, Dexterity, Will, and Vitality.

Class selection option 4: Arc Reaver - Advanced. Prerequisites: Lightning affinity. Channel your mastery of lightning into both magical and physical attacks. You become a fearsome warrior who can strike with the speed and ferocity of an electrical storm, combining martial prowess with lightning Energy. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Strength, and Agility.

Darren smiled and blew out a slow whistle. “Well, I didn’t get any epic options, but I got some really neat-sounding ones.” He only mentioned “epic” options because of Edeya’s Class. “I mean, honestly, all four of my options seem really good, even the basic ones.”

Edeya groaned and punched him in the shoulder, bringing a giggle burbling out of Lam. “So? *Tell us!*”

Darren chuckled and nodded, then spent about five minutes describing his options to his two companions. Lam rubbed her chin and then, demonstrating her wisdom, asked, “Do you have any questions about those or the idea of Classes, in general?”

Darren nodded, his question already primed before she’d asked. “Yeah, I’d like to know, if the System is going to offer me an advanced Class, why does it keep the basic ones in there? Who would choose basic over advanced?”

“There are several reasons. My first time around, I skipped over an advanced Class twice to keep my basic one. I did it for two reasons: I liked my basic Class’s focus, and I knew I’d level faster. Each tier adds to the Energy requirement of your levels. That’s another reason I only gained two levels in the dungeon today while you gained four—I have an advanced Class, and the Energy the System requires to give me a level is higher than your ‘base’ levels. When I was young and first gaining levels, I was concerned with gaining power quickly. That’s not quite so important to me now.” Darren didn’t miss the sly smile Lam shared with Edeya.

“So, if I want fast levels, I should take one of the basic Classes?”

“Come on, Dare! You want Lesh to whip your hide?” Edeya gave his shoulder another playful punch, and he nodded.

“Yeah. You’re right. It wouldn’t be fitting for a member of his household to take an easy solution.” He thought for a minute, then asked, “Why does it list attributes at the end? Won’t I get to assign them where I want?”

“Nope.” Edeya shook her head. “Not with those Classes. Sometimes the System offers Classes with ‘unbound’ attribute points, but you didn’t get one.”

“Looks like the, um, Arc Reaver Class will give me more physical attributes.”

“Yes, it sounds like a melee fighter Class. Does it interest you?” Lam shifted to look at him more squarely, and Darren felt a little flustered under the scrutiny of those beautiful emerald eyes. Both she and Edeya had such big, clear eyes that it was difficult for him to focus on anything else when he looked into them.

“Ye-yeah.” He nodded eagerly, shifting his gaze to glance over the side of the mechanical bird’s passenger compartment. He almost swooned from vertigo when the thing banked, and he got a good look at the tiny trees below them. He looked back to Lam, cleared his throat, and said, “I thought it sounded tough, like something Victor would approve of.”

“Are you trying to impress Victor or trying to pick what’s right for you, Dare?” Edeya asked, nudging him with her elbow until he looked her way.

“Well, I want what’s best for me, of course. And, well, the *other* advanced Class mentions both of my affinities. Do you think it’s a better fit?”

“I think—” Edeya started to say, but Lam reached across Darren to slap her knee.

“Darren, why don’t you tell us what *you* think.”

Darren looked from one woman to the other and gathered his thoughts. Slowly at first, then with more confidence, he began to vocalize thoughts that had only been half-formed up to that point: “Edeya is fast and deadly with her spear. You, Lam, are strong and durable and also fight in melee range. I know the two of you will have spells that do a lot of damage when we gain more levels, but I think our team would benefit more from me learning to use magic as much as possible. I think the Arc Reaver Class would suit me well, but the Chaos Sorcerer Class is even more ideal, especially as it focuses on magic-using attributes. If I’m understanding things correctly, intelligence, will, and dexterity are all needed for advanced magic abilities, right?”

Lam nodded. “That’s accurate. Of course, it’s nice to have some improved physical attributes, even if you are a spell caster, but you’ll be gaining vitality, too. As for strength and agility, those may come with future Class evolutions, or you can always shore them up with enchantments.”

“I just hope that chaos affinity isn’t too . . . chaotic,” Edeya laughed.

Darren nodded. He'd yet to use the new spell Lam had acquired for him. Lesh had promised to let him test it with him in a "safe" manner, but the opportunity hadn't presented itself so far. "I wonder . . . lightning is my strongest affinity. Maybe I should just focus on it. I mean, what if chaos spells are too unpredictable or something?"

"Is that why his lightning is red?" Edeya asked, ever quick to leap down tangents. "Does the chaos in his Core change it? I've only seen Elementalists casting lightning spells that looked, well, natural."

"I've seen red lightning," Lam said, and her voice grew hushed as her gaze went distant. "You wouldn't remember, Edeya, because it was the night Catalina betrayed us. Hector . . ." She trailed off.

"Tell us!" Darren urged, eager to hear anything that might reveal more about his seemingly uncommon mix of affinities.

Lam sighed heavily and shrugged. "When Hector flew down from the mountain on his undead dragon, he threw bolts of red lightning. We know he was a Death Caster, but he could have had other affinities. In any case, he was powerful. Victor fought him more closely. Maybe he could tell you something."

"Right, well, who knows when he's coming out of that prison dungeon? I'll talk to Lesh about the Class choices, but I'm pretty settled on the Chaos Sorcerer." Darren leaned back and tried to enjoy the view. His two companions grew quiet, the mood soured by Lam's reminiscence of Hector, Catalina, and their army's near-pyrrhic victory over the ambushing undead. The flying mechanical bird proved faster than their earlier carriage, and they arrived back at the lake house much more quickly than Darren had anticipated.

Lam paid the coachman, and then they went their separate ways—Edeya and Lam to unwind and Darren to seek out Lesh. Darren cornered one of Dar's house staff and asked where he might find Lesh. The young woman squinted her angular yellow eyes, smiled, and looked down submissively as she pointed toward the deck. If Darren hadn't thought it too wild a notion, he might have thought she was being shy and that a bit of color had tinged her pale green cheeks. As the thought struck him, he grinned and turned back to her. "I'm sorry, but what's your name? I'm embarrassed that I've waited so long to ask."

She continued to gaze toward Darren's feet as she wrung her hands. "I'm Wensa, sir."

"Well, please call me Darren. I'm nobody special. I'm only here," Darren gestured to the beautifully appointed parlor, "because of the people I know."

"Thank you, Darren." Her voice had a lilting quality that sounded almost melodic, and Darren found himself grinning stupidly as he savored the sound. After a moment, the silence became awkward, and he cleared his throat and gestured toward the deck.

"I'll go find Elder Lesh. Thanks again." She ducked her head again, and Darren quickly hurried out the door, suddenly flustered by his brazen behavior—it wasn't like him. How many pretty women had he admired in his life and never approached? Too many to count, he decided. Lesh wasn't on the deck, so he stepped to the railing and peered down at the lake. Sure enough, his mentor's giant, scaly form was stretched out on the pier, soaking in the afternoon sun.

Darren hurried down the steps, and, as his footfalls echoed hollowly on the pier, Lesh lifted his fang-lined snout to peer lazily at him. “Fosterling. Your pride swells your aura.”

“I hit level ten, Elder Lesh!”

“And you’ve chosen a Class?”

“I have a preference, but I wanted your advice.”

Lesh grunted and used one of his thick arms to push himself into a sitting position. Darren could feel the heat radiating off his black scales. How long had he been lying there? “Well, tell me, then.”

Darren nodded and sat down before his mentor, crossing his legs before himself. He took a few minutes to review his four options and, as Lesh yawned and stretched, said, “I won’t take a basic Class because it seems like a weakling’s decision. I’m not trying to find the easiest route to level. If I had an option higher than advanced, I’d take that, too.” Lesh grunted, nodding, and Darren forged ahead, “I think the Class that seems tailored to both of my affinities is the one I should take. Not only will I, hopefully, learn some chaos spells, but I’ll be able to support my friends with a caster’s abilities.”

Lesh cleared his throat, summoned a bottle of pale green liquid, and took a long pull. Darren could smell the eye-watering alcohol vapors as Lesh exhaled a sigh of pleasure. “Good logic, but let me ensure you understand something: All sorts of folks can gain ‘caster’s abilities,’ as you label them. Victor can do things with Energy that would make many pure ‘casters’ jealous. Of course, someone who specializes in intelligence and will and takes Classes focused on ranged spells and support abilities will generally be better at spell casting, but don’t assume a man in heavy armor and carrying a massive weapon won’t be a dangerous Energy user.”

“Understood.”

“Other than that small flaw in your logic, I agree with your decision. Taking a Class meant to take advantage of both of your affinities now will open better options for you at level twenty. Don’t be concerned with your strength and agility. You’re young, and your future options may well shore them up a bit. If not, we’ll find natural treasures to improve you physically, at least to the point where you won’t suffer from the imbalance.”

Darren’s ears had begun to woosh with the rush of blood in his excitement as Lesh signaled his agreement—he was about to take his first Class! “I can take it?”

Lesh chuckled and took another swig of liquor. When he belched, the mist that wafted away from his snout was green, and Darren took a step back as a hint of chlorine tickled his nose. “Yes. I’m glad you sought my advice, but this decision is yours.”

Darren didn’t need to hear more than that. He opened his status page, selected the Class selection menu, and touched the option for Chaos Sorcerer.

*****Congratulations! You have gained your first Class: Chaos Sorcerer.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a Class skill: Sense Chaos – Basic.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a Class spell: Chaos Storm – Basic.*****

*****Sense Chaos – Basic: This ability allows you to discern the latent chaos Energy in a given area, thing, or being. Finding chaos is the first key to understanding it and allows for its cultivation.*****

*****Chaos Storm – Basic: Calling on the nature of Chaos and the power of elemental lightning, you create an area of tumultuous, chaotic Energy. The area's size depends on the Energy provided to the spell. Inside the Chaos Storm, any living being will be subject to random electrical discharges that can have the following effects: 1. Direct lightning-based damage, 2. Short, random teleportation, 3. Medium-duration stun, or 4. Temporary madness. This spell will not discern between friend and foe at the basic level. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 – scalable. Cooldown: Medium.*****