

“Darren, you may stop concentrating on your Core space. We’ve finished the affinity assessment.” Y-seven’s voice cut through Darren’s concentration, snapping him out of his semi-meditative state. He wasn’t sure how long they’d been at it, but it felt like hours. He’d stared at his nascent Core that entire time. Mostly, it had sat there, unmoving, but quite a few times, it had reacted, changing colors, shapes, movement patterns. Sometimes, the changes were singular, and sometimes, they were manifold. He wondered if the more significant reactions meant a higher affinity or if there was some other way to interpret them.

Blinking his eyes blearily in the soft, white light of his crystal, cell-like “genesis pod,” he looked up at Y-seven, still floating before him, seemingly in the exact same spot he’d occupied prior to the assessment. “Will it take long to learn the results?”

“Not at all. I’ve already compiled a list of your affinities, minor and major.”

“Oh? It’s that easy?”

“For me, yes. Bear in mind that I’ve been at this for a long time. Would you like to take a break before we go over your lists? Do you require sustenance? Have you any biological needs requiring attention?”

Darren shifted slightly, realizing his knees and back had grown quite stiff. “I wouldn’t mind a stretch and some water. Heck, I could eat.”

“I don’t have much data on your species, Darren. What sort of sustenance would suit you best? Do you consume the meat of prey animals? Can you eat the fruit of trees?”

“Yes to both. Um, I’d prefer it if the meat wasn’t raw . . .”

“Very good. You’ll find a newly-opened passageway behind you. It will lead you to a private area where you might see to your biological needs. When you return, I’ll have some food and drink for you.”

Darren looked over his shoulder; sure enough, there was a round passageway in the crystal leading downward. He stood and, after stretching for a moment, bending his waist and flexing his knees, he started down the passage. It meandered downward in a winding pattern for what felt like quite a distance without passing any other openings until he stepped into a round room, much like the one where he’d been with Y-seven. This room had some fixtures, though—a device clearly meant to function as a toilet and a free-standing sink beside it. The toilet had an appropriately sized seat over a bowl containing a stream of continuously flowing water, and the sink, too, didn’t have valves but functioned more like a small fountain, water dribbling into a half-full basin. Both fixtures were seemingly grown from the surrounding crystal, smooth, opaque, and faintly luminescent.

He looked around, a little uncomfortable with the open doorway, but figured the only other person with access to the corridor he’d traversed was Y-seven, who was waiting back in the genesis pod. Shrugging, Darren stood over the toilet and relieved his very full bladder, sighing with relief. He rinsed his hands in the sink, looking around for a towel, only to hear a *woosh* as warm air blew from a spout he hadn’t noticed in the crystal wall near the sink. He held his hands in the air, enjoying the warmth while he rubbed his palms together, and then walked back the way he’d come.

When he returned to his “genesis pod,” he found a low table dressed in a white tablecloth and occupied by a tall glass of water, a bowl of cut fruit, and a tray of sliced, cured meats. Y-seven floated nearby, his lights softly pulsing as his pleasant, rich voice greeted Darren, “Welcome back. I hope these refreshments will be satisfactory.”

“That looks perfect, thank you.” Darren sat before the little table and began to sample the fruits and meat. They tasted much like something he’d get back on Earth—melons, berries, and salty meats that reminded him of various types of pork. The water was cool and refreshing, and Y-seven waited several minutes, allowing Darren to eat in silence before he spoke again.

“Shall I list your affinities? We will start with the minor ones.”

Darren swallowed his current bite, then asked, “Why spend time with minor affinities? Wouldn’t it be wise to focus on the, um, major ones?”

“Not exactly. We have yet to form your Core, and certain affinities complement certain Core types. You might find that one of your major affinities will go hand-in-hand with one of your minor ones, both taking shape within your newly formed Core. It’s important to note that while I can see if you are strongly attracted to certain affinities or only mildly so, I don’t know the exact levels. Some of your minor affinities may be nearly as strong as your major ones.”

“Ah.” Darren nodded. “Thank you for explaining.”

“My pleasure. Now, for minor affinities, allow me to list them, and then we can discuss the implications.”

“All right.” Darren sat back from his meal, giving Y-seven his full attention.

“Mind, fire, pride, dream, glass, magnetism, and bone.”

Darren sat there, dumbfounded, for several moments while Y-seven allowed him to process the information. He could figure out what most of those meant, but he’d never heard of them in the context of Energy affinities. That wasn’t entirely true—there were quite a few people with fire affinities back in First Landing. The others seemed so esoteric, though, and he wondered if it was simply because Y-seven was better at rooting out affinities than the tutorial the System had put the humans through when they’d arrived on Fanwath. “I think I understand the fire, but can you explain the others?”

“Certainly. While, in your case, it’s only minor, a mind affinity can be quite powerful and also quite dangerous. In many civilizations, such an affinity is frowned upon. Simply put, a strong Mind Caster can influence the thoughts and actions of others.” Y-seven paused, perhaps waiting for questions, then continued, “Pride is a spirit affinity, and, should you choose to formulate a Core to take advantage of it, you’d find yourself limited when utilizing other types of Energies. After we discuss your stronger affinities, we can decide if that’s a wise path for you. A dream affinity can be potent in its broad range of applications—divination, prophecy, dreamwalking, and illusion.”

“But I only have a minor affinity?” Darren liked the sound of a dream affinity. The mind affinity sounded great, too, but something about it made him uneasy. He could feel the politician in him getting excited by it, and that frightened him. He’d worked hard the last few days to turn a new leaf and the way his heartbeat had begun to race when Y-seven explained that mind affinity

made his palms sweat with stress and excitement. He felt like a kid who'd opened a shoebox in his dad's closet and found a loaded gun.

"That's correct, Darren. We'll discuss your major affinities momentarily. Shall I continue elaborating about your minor ones?"

Darren nodded. "Yes, please."

"Magnetism is an interesting affinity in that it is a blend of earth and air and allows the cultivator to interact with certain types of metal quite profoundly." Darren nodded; magnetism wasn't so hard for him to understand. It brought to mind certain old comics and superhero stories he'd enjoyed as a kid. He doubted it was the same, but Y-seven's description made it seem similar. "Glass is a particular type of earth affinity, again, blended with the electrical aspect of an air affinity. Finally, there's your bone affinity—a specialized form of blood affinity. Many things are possible with bone-attuned Energy, from healing to mutation to golemancy."

"Golemancy?"

"The art of crafting and animating golems. I'm sure you can guess what material a bone caster would use to craft their golems."

Darren frowned. He had an idea what Y-seven meant by golems, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure. Still, he didn't like the idea of spending his days manipulating bones, so he decided to let it go. "I get it, I think. Did I have as many major affinities?"

"Not quite. Allow me to list them: fear, chaos, lightning, and paranoia."

"What? Holy shit . . ." Darren trailed off, disturbed by the sound of his major affinities. What did it say about him that his strongest affinities included things like fear and paranoia? Was chaos any better? The only one that didn't give him an uneasy feeling was lightning. "I don't like the sound of those, Y-seven," he sighed.

"I can understand that those affinities convey certain negative connotations, especially to one whose knowledge of such things is limited. It's good that you are cautious, and I will strongly counsel you against pursuing some of these affinities, but at least one here bears serious consideration. May I expound on the subject?"

"Um, sure."

"Firstly, fear and paranoia are both spirit affinities. If you chose to create a spirit Core, you could probably split it into three component parts, cultivating Energy attuned to fear, paranoia, and also pride. Having three differently-attuned Energies to work with would open a wide array of skills and spells. However, we must consider that building a spirit Core and focusing on cultivating those Energies will affect you on a fundamental level. It's called a spirit Core for a reason—these affinities are tied to your most true, inner self. Your three spirit affinities are all known to impact a cultivator's personality in a less-than-ideal manner, especially without other, more positive, affinities to counterbalance them. Think of your Core like a power source—can you see how having a potent Core of fear and pride at the center of your being might negatively impact you?"

“Yeah. It doesn’t sound ideal.” Darren frowned, then asked, “Can you explain the difference between an affinity and an attunement?”

“Of course. An affinity is like a proclivity, a talent, with a certain type of attunement. You have an affinity for fear-attuned Energy. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.” Darren frowned, unhappy to hear that his spirit affinities were so negative. Since seeing Victor in action, he’d liked the idea of building a spirit Core. He’d wondered how the larger-than-life man would react if Darren showed up with a spirit Core. Would he respect him more? Would he be more willing to help him, more patient with his lack of power? “I must say, I’m not too excited about those affinities.”

“In that case, let us talk about chaos and lightning, two rather rare affinities.”

“Rare?”

“Indeed. People associate negative connotations with chaos, and usually for good reason, but that’s generally because we think of chaos in terms of conscious beings and the madness we are capable of. Chaos itself is a fundamental pillar of the universe. Some argue that without chaos, there would be no order. Just as there could be no light without darkness. An affinity for chaos means that you can grasp hold of that illusive yet dreadfully powerful Energy and use your influence to alter reality itself. This is a dangerous but extremely potent affinity, Darren Whitehorse, and if you choose to pursue it, I’ll need to insist on further education here at the Genesis Center.”

“I . . . see.” Darren nodded, his mind suddenly awash with imagined possibilities, his disappointment in his spirit affinities forgotten.

“As for lightning, it’s quite rare, a specialized air affinity. As you may know, air affinities have some broad utility with lightning, though far less potent than what a true lightning affinity can accomplish. For example, while a Wind Caster might call down a bolt of lightning or even conjure a lightning-filled storm, a true Lightning Caster might travel upon a bolt of electrical Energy. The difference may not seem profound, but it’s akin to the disparate nature of a handful of sand and a vase of blown glass.”

“Truly? So, almost like teleportation?”

“Yes! That is but one application of such an affinity, but not one you will learn quickly; such powers are reserved for those well into their iron ranks.”

Darren sat quietly for a moment, contemplating the ideas of chaos and lightning. He kept thinking about the mind affinity, though, wondering how it might have changed things if he’d had it while pursuing a political career. He thought about his other “minor” affinities, wondering about dream—what if he could combine mind with dream? What if he could master more than one?

Y-seven spoke again, interrupting his meandering fantasy. Almost as though he were reading Darren’s thoughts, he said, “There are Cores capable of harnessing more than one affinity. My reference manual indicates that lightning is technically an elemental affinity, and chaos has been known to function well when combined with elemental Energies.”

“You . . .” Darren squinted up at the being of misty light. “You’re reading a manual?”

“Yes. I have an extensive database in a special dimensional space, one that I can mentally access. It’s an ability related to my specialized Class.”

“I see.” Darren didn’t see but didn’t want to belabor the subject. He licked his lips and shook his head, banishing thoughts of trying to learn to influence people’s minds and dreams. Hadn’t he learned his lesson already? If he could do something like that, if he’d managed to gain control of First Landing through such desperate, nefarious means, all he’d have done was make them too weak to fend for themselves. If Victor could demolish their war machines, what damage could be wrought by one of the more powerful beings he’d glimpsed in Sojourn? “Do you think that would be a wise decision? To try to capitalize on my two strong, rare affinities?”

“I do, Darren Whitehorse. For me to guide you in the formation of such a potent Core, however, you’ll have to be evaluated by others in my order. Such knowledge is guarded, you see. You’ll have to prove your character.”

“My character? What if I refused?”

“Then you may leave and seek knowledge elsewhere. This is not a prison, Darren.”

Darren nodded. Something about that statement felt right. He was trying to change, was he not? Turning a new leaf was an understatement; he was rebuilding himself. It only made sense that something worth having wouldn’t come easily. “I will take your tests.”

#

“He’s where?” Victor frowned at Lesh, trying to make sense of what he’d said.

“He’s in the nursery of this city, a place for novices to learn about Energy and Cores.”

“Until tomorrow?” Valla, too, was trying to wrap her head around the idea.

“Yes.” Lesh nodded, and his tone indicated he considered the matter settled. “I will retrieve him tomorrow at noon.”

Victor shook his head. “Lam might have to do that for you. Is it far?”

“Not at all. A short walk. I am Darren’s master, however, and feel it is my duty to . . .”

“We have a job, Lesh. To help Edeya,” Victor nodded to Lam and Edeya sitting on the nearby couch.

“Ah! I see. If I’m being called to duty, my fosterling will have to survive without me for the time being.” Lesh turned to Lam and raised his voice. “Lam, will you please take responsibility for my fosterling until our return?” When she nodded, smiling, Lesh turned back to Victor. “What is our task?”

Victor grinned, trying to think of the best way to summarize what Erd Van had asked of them. He took a deep breath, then rattled it off, “We have to take a portal to another world, infiltrate some kind of monstrous insect hive, reach the deepest part where the queen lives, collect a magical egg, and get it back here.”

“Blech! Insects? I deplore the things.”

“Yeah.” Victor shrugged, nodding. “Yeah, me too. Apparently, they’re big, too, like, the size of a person, but, you know, with six legs, exoskeletons, magical abilities, and, yeah, I guess some of them are venomous.”

Lesh growled deep in his belly, but the sound faded quickly, and he shrugged. “Belagog will enjoy crushing their hard shells. What of the portal fees? My Energy-rich treasures grow thin.”

Victor clapped him on the shoulder. “Our travel is paid for, *hombre*.”

“If you have shopping to do, now’s the time,” Valla said, moving toward the door. “I’m going to buy healing and curative draughts. Victor is going to have that malevolent crown examined. Do you want to come with me?”

Lesh let his eyes drift to the dark stone crown hanging from Victor’s belt. “It will be good to know what spirit that artifact contains.” He nodded and stepped toward Valla. “I will accompany you, Lady Valla.”

Victor watched them go, returning Valla’s wave as she paused by the door. When they were gone, he walked closer to Lam and squatted to better look at Edeya. “She seems the same to me. I wish I knew what to do with her spirit. I wish I had more to go on than that guy’s word. What if it’s not as hard as he said? What if we don’t need someone as powerful as his master?”

Lam frowned, creasing her brow, gently rubbing her thumb on the back of Edeya’s hand as she held it. “If we weren’t worried, if we weren’t hurrying to save Edeya, we could spend more time asking around. I think you should do this job, get that egg, and while you’re gone, I’ll do more research and talk to more spirit specialists. If you return with the egg and we find we don’t need Erd Van’s master, we’ll make him pay for it.”

“All right, then.” Victor nodded and stood up, but Lam wasn’t done. She reached out and grabbed his wrist.

“Just don’t get killed. If the hive seems impossible, then just leave. Edeya would hate for you or the others to get hurt trying to help her. I’d hate to lose you all and have to try to help her on my own.” Her voice sounded strained, and Victor could tell she was feeling the stress of the situation, pulled thin to the point of breaking.

“I know. I know you’re going to be worried while we’re gone; you’ll hate being alone in this strange city.”

“I won’t be alone . . .” Lam smirked, and Victor knew what was coming, so he finished her thought for her.

“Oh yeah! You have Darren! Nothing to worry about.” He and Lam laughed for a minute, and then he started for the door. “I’ll be back soon, I hope. Just gonna find out what this creepy crown’s all about.” With that, he left, making his way out of the hotel and into the strange, wondrous city of Sojourn.