

Darren was disturbed to find his mouth hanging ajar again. He closed it with an audible *clack* of his teeth, his head swiveling left and right, his mind unable to choose something to focus on. Victor grunted, jerking his big thumb left and right as he spoke to the giant dragon-man. "Are we good to just wander into the city? There's no check-in or something?"

The giant, black-scaled fellow rumbled in reply, "I don't think so. I've never been to Sojourn, but the other hub worlds I passed through didn't require such."

The tall, blonde Ghelli leading the other one, the frail, mentally vacant one, spoke up, "We should secure lodging and try to find our bearings from there. I'd feel better if we could speak and . . . think away from this crowd."

Darren saw his chance to demonstrate his worldliness. "Yes, it's not unlike Times Square or Heathrow Station back home. This hubbub is quite a shock after the quiet of Fanwath!" He found himself raising his voice to be heard over the constant background noise of the crowd. Victor scowled at him for his efforts, but Valla smiled, humoring his comment with a slight nod, though she clearly had no idea what he meant.

Suddenly, a great insect-man, something like a bipedal cricket, boomed at them in a basso voice, "Clear the arrival pad, please. Information services are there," he pointed to a tremendous arched opening on the distant side of the building, easily a kilometer distant, "at the north exit." Victor took up the catatonic young woman's left hand while Lam took her right, and they hurried off the metallic disc. Everyone, including Darren, followed closely. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from the group, not in this place. The cricket man spoke again, "Use the lanes and avoid walking on the bronze pads—the System won't allow arrivals or departures if non-travelers are standing on them."

"Thank you, soldier," Lesh said, for some reason assuming the cricket was such. The label didn't seem to offend him, though; he nodded his thick, chitinous neck, then turned and marched away.

"Darren," Victor said, turning to face him. "Can you make yourself useful and hold Edeya's hand? I don't want anyone to jostle her, and it's hard for Lam to manage alone." He held the girl's limp arm toward him, and Darren hurried to comply. It might not be much, but Victor's simple acknowledgment that he could be of use was enough to put some spring in his step. He took the young woman's hand in his, noting that it was paper-dry and barely warm. How long could she exist in such a state? "Thanks," Victor grunted, then, in an uncanny show of power, he grew in size, easily matching Lesh's towering height. "I want to be able to see a little better."

"Ancestors! Do you feel the auras around us?" Valla asked, her wings ruffling in a shiver, or was it excitement?

"Only a little, and that says a lot considering their strength." Victor glared around at the party, even at Lesh. "Don't insult anyone. Some of these people remind me of the volcano." With that ominous warning, he turned and began leading the way to the distant archway. Darren waited for Lam to follow, pulling Edeya along behind Victor, Lesh, and Valla while Darren followed, doing his best to keep close to the frail, sickly girl's side, ensuring, as Victor had requested, that no one jostled her. As he stumbled after the party, he tried to understand what they'd meant by the "auras" around them.

Ever since arriving on Sojourn, stepping into this massive, busy hall, he'd felt a weight on his mind, a kind of invisible pressure. Was that what they meant? Were the auras the overbearing sense of heaviness in the air? He'd assumed the sensation had something to do with the atmosphere or climate of the new world. They couldn't all be perfect for humanity, right? Some worlds must have too much gravity or air difficult to breathe. Still, maybe that wasn't it. Perhaps that constant shifting pressure was due to the power of the individuals walking about. He supposed it was similar to the weight he'd felt when Victor had destroyed his future with First Landing.

"No," Darren said softly, shaking his head. He'd made an agreement with himself—he wouldn't blame Victor, and he wouldn't count himself out yet. He'd asked the giant man to do what he did. He'd even goaded him with haughty pride. Darren snorted in derision, glad that the hall was so noisy lest the expression be taken the wrong way by one of his companions. He was derisive, yes, but it was aimed at himself. He'd been so sure the tanks could crush any person. He'd honestly been feeling guilty about forcing people to watch what had been, in his mind, tantamount to an ancient gladiatorial display—the barbarian versus the lions. How wrong he'd been!

Still, that aside, he supposed the shifting psychic pressure could be the auras the others spoke of. How did they know they were powerful? They felt the same to him. Perhaps that was it; everyone felt powerful to Darren with this pathetic status, which made it impossible for him to appreciate the difference. What had Victor said? He barely felt them, and that somehow indicated their power. Was it a matter of control? Darren lost his train of thought and almost dropped Edeya's hand when a creature that looked very much like a mauve elephant lifted off the ground ahead of them, buoyed by a bladder of sparkling, rainbow gas that expanded from its back. It warbled a strange tune from its tusked mouth as it floated away toward a distant corner of the hall.

With his eyes following the floating creature—person?—Darren was made aware of the many other flight-gifted people traversing the heights of the hall. People with wings, people who simply seemed to float, and people on magical conveyances from rugs to chairs to wing-like capes. It was chaotic and dizzying, and Darren had to look down, focusing on Victor's back to ground himself. For the first time, he was thankful for Victor and Lesh and their bulk; they cleared a path through the crowd that was easy to follow, keeping him, Edeya, and Lam from being overwhelmed. Even Valla hung back a bit, though, with her height and stunning appearance, Darren had little doubt she could traverse the scene.

Ever since Victor had humiliated him, Darren had been taking hard looks inward to where he'd learned the seed of his Core dwelled. Back on Earth, he'd been a decently fit man, a good-looking fellow with an Apache grandfather, a Norwegian mother, and a penchant for organization. He'd been hired because of his contacts in the upper management of the Ark Program and, ostensibly, for his experience in project management, but when they'd arrived on Fanwath, things had rapidly fallen out of his control. The System and that damned colony stone had erased many of his presumed duties. He'd found himself listless and had taken up politics to fill that void.

"Oof," he said, realizing he'd fallen behind and Lam was pulling Edeya away from him. He hurried his step to catch up and tried to refocus his musing. Where had he been? Oh, the Core! He'd never bothered forming one and was still, as his detractors mockingly pointed out, without any levels. Still, with some tutelage from Dr. Kerns in the early days, he'd learned to look "inward" and see the nascent swirl of Energy where he was supposed to form one. He'd grown

busy, though, focusing on more mundane, Earth-based defenses, and as the months slipped by, he'd eventually grown too prideful—embarrassed, honestly—to ask for further help.

However, that pride was a thing of the past thanks to the titanic man in front of him. No, Darren would ask for help. He'd figure something out on this trip that would help him regain some standing back home. Either that, or he'd find a reason to stop caring what they thought of him. So far, he wasn't regretful; this space alone was enough to grant him a new perspective. He was surrounded by beings resembling demigods, mythical heroes, and creatures. What was more, as they drew near the massive archway leading out of the north end of the structure, he began to see what waited outside, and, again, his steps faltered, and he almost lost hold of Edeya's hand.

"Darren, keep up!" Lam snapped, looking over her right wing, scowling down at him. Why was everyone so damn tall? Even the frail, sick one was nearing six feet.

He hurried his steps and nodded toward the archway. "Sorry, I just saw those crystal buildings and almost fainted." What was the point of pride among people such as these?

"Almost fainted?" Lam followed his gaze, and her scowl melted. "Ancestors!" Darren grinned at her outburst. At least he wasn't the only one amazed to see iridescent, shimmering, crystalline skyscrapers outside. He and Lam weren't alone in their stupefaction; Victor and the others, too, were staring at the view beyond the archway. More than the crystal towers, the very sky was a marvel—shimmering stars, seemingly too close to be real, rainbow archways upon which fantastical beings and vehicles traversed the heights, and glass-paved roads that wended in sweeping curves between the structures.

"Look at the train!" Victor said, and they all followed his pointing finger toward a sleek, silver passenger train that traversed an elevated rail held aloft by glowing, floating platforms. It moved quickly and silently past the busy square outside and had to be five kilometers long from the first car to the last.

"Train?" Valla asked.

Darren quickly stepped in, "That's an antiquated term for a conveyance like that from our home world. It consists of many cars pulled or pushed by an engine car along a set track or railway." He stepped forward and pointed. "Do you see the gaps between the segments? Those segments are individually called 'train cars,' and they're usually joined to each other via some sort of coupling."

"Thank you, Darren," Valla said, smiling at him. Darren almost melted on the spot, but he looked down quickly, nodding, his voice fading to a mutter as her attention stole his ability to think clearly.

"There!" Lesh said, pointing to a booth set into the wall of the grand arrival hall, as Darren had come to think of the place, near the exit. The party moved toward it, and Darren began to breathe again. He watched Victor drape a massive arm over Valla's shoulders, and his heart began to bleed with envy. It wasn't so much that he was envious of Victor's relationship with Valla, but more of him in general. What must it be like to wield such power, to have such ease around people who would have been heralded as deities back home?

As they approached the window and Victor stepped forward to speak with the humanoid, porcelain-skinned woman behind the glass, Darren had to give her a double-take; she didn't simply have pale skin; her flesh was, literally, porcelain. "Welcome. May I aid you with information, traveler?" Her voice was high-pitched, musical, and carried a weird edge like a tuning fork being pulled over smooth glass.

"Um, yes, thanks," Victor said, and if Darren hadn't been in awe of the man, he might have slapped his forehead at the giant's poor diction. "We're new here from a much, um, smaller . . ."

"Lower-affinity," Valla interjected.

"Yeah, lower-affinity world. We've never been to Sojourn. Are there rules or something we should know about?"

"Again, my heartfelt welcome, travelers." The woman's strange, sky-blue eyes peered around Victor to take in the rest of them, and her glass-like red lips tilted up in a smile. How could it look like pottery and yet move like flesh? Darren fought to keep his mouth closed. "You should know that Sojourn is a world for all. We value every individual, and there will be no tolerance of violence or crime in our streets." She gestured to the massive archway leading out of the building. "We are a city-world, much smaller than normal worlds, but very populous and with doorways to many realms. Here, you can find a million billion items for sale, a million different species, and tens of millions of Classers. If you seek knowledge or merchandise, you've come to the right place. If you seek travel elsewhere, you are similarly well positioned. If you seek entertainment or to provide it, this is the world for you. If your power be minuscule or great, you'll find ways to advance."

She paused, and Victor cleared his throat, perhaps thinking she had finished, but the porcelain woman began to speak again. "I see you are all within the iron ranks, and thus, you should avoid attempting to traverse the high roads. "There are those who will not tolerate the presence of others so low and, though we have laws against violent behavior, their might is beyond our ability to reproach."

"Iron ranks?" Valla asked.

Victor spoke simultaneously, "High roads?"

"Ah, I see you are, indeed, untraveled. Allow me to expound: The levels one through one hundred are often referred to as the 'iron ranks' because they're seen as the forging process in which the raw ore of your bodies, spirits, and Cores are refined into something more precious. The high roads are the crystalline pathways in the sky where those in their bronze epoch and beyond traverse Sojourn. While you may mingle with such folks in private domains and some public facilities, we find it's best for the iron rankers to avoid them in the streets."

Valla stepped a little closer, inserting herself into the woman's attention. "Are those terms common in the universe, or are they specific to Sojourn?"

"They are common in our region of the universe. The classifications originated from Sojourn, but as millennia passed and we spread our influence to other worlds, many hundreds have taken up the classifications."

"Are you familiar with Fanwath?" Victor asked, surprising Darren yet again with his quick wit.

“Fanwath?” The porcelain woman closed her pale blue eyes with a *snick*, then opened them and nodded. “Yes, Fanwath connected with Sojourn three hundred and twelve years ago.”

“Those fucking Ridonne,” Victor growled, and Darren felt enough heat from his simmering rage to necessitate taking a step back.

“Please remain calm, sir. As I alluded to earlier, there are few laws in Sojourn, but we have a simple mandate to keep violence out of the streets and to respect each individual.”

“He won’t be violent, ma’am,” Valla said, grasping Victor’s arm at the elbow. Almost like a switch being thrown, the hot waves of palpable anger faded away.

“No, I won’t, but that doesn’t mean I can’t think violent thoughts, right?” Victor chuckled to lighten his words, and the porcelain lady simply nodded, her weird, shiny red lips curving up in a demure smile. Victor cleared his throat, shook his head, and then asked, “Can you direct us to lodging fit for those of our level?” Victor glanced over his shoulder, and his dark brows narrowed when his golden-brown eyes settled on Darren. “Someplace where people respect individual rights; we have some . . . delicate members in our party.”

“Of course.” She pointed to a sigil of inlaid bronze beside her window. It seemed to shift as Darren stared at it until he realized it was a stylized SJ. Had it been so before, or had it shifted until his mind could understand it? What a wonder! “This is the official seal of Sojourn, and if you find an establishment bearing such a mark, you can rest assured that they’ve passed monthly audits to ensure that they uphold the high standards of Sojourn’s business practices. I would highly recommend you avoid establishments without our sigil.”

“Should we just go out and wander, or is there a map?” Lam asked, perhaps tired of waiting for Victor or Valla to get to the point. Speaking of silent people . . . Darren looked at Lesh to find the big man looking outside through the massive archway, his eyes glazed as he stared into space. He wondered what the dragon man was thinking about. Darren turned back to the window to see the woman handing a sigil-covered document to Victor.

“. . . for only one hundred System beads.” Victor plopped a heavy sack of beads onto the counter, and the woman touched it with a black rod. Darren had seen similar; it would take the correct amount from the sack without having to count them out. Victor stowed the pouch away, then nodded, muttering his thanks as he stepped back from the window. He started to move off with Valla and everyone else in tow.

Darren took a step, following, still grasping the now-warm hand of the catatonic girl, but the porcelain woman spoke, nearly stopping his heart with her words, “Darren Whitehorse. It’s not often that people without a formed Core find their way to Sojourn. Please take great care, for there are forces in this city that could snuff out your life with careless ease. I advise you to ask your master to escort you to one of the Genesis Centers so that you may develop some small level of resilience.”

Darren, startled beyond words for a moment, turned to formulate a reply, only to find the woman looking down, reading a document. He was tugged along by Edeya, who was, in turn, pulled by Lam. He looked around the party, wondering what they thought of the woman’s words, but none seemed to have heard her. Had he imagined it? Had she somehow mentally spoken to him? As Victor guided them on the glass-like sidewalk along the similarly crystalline cobbles, through

thick crowds, and under the fantastic expanse of stars and crystal structures, Darren struggled to wrap his head around everything he'd heard.

Victor was an iron ranker. The idea that this man, this titan of unimaginable strength and destructive power, was too weak to travel upon the high roads in this city was almost more than he could grasp. The woman had hinted at the upper power structure. What had she said? Bronze epoch and beyond? If bronze was above iron, what was next? Silver? Gold? Were there even greater heights? How could such power even be measured? "God, I was a fool," he said, and in a quirk of luck—whether good or bad, he didn't know—they happened to be standing on a relatively quiet corner while Victor studied the map, and everyone heard him.

Victor looked at him and raised an eyebrow, "Humbling, isn't it? I felt this way in Coloss, too, but, shit, that place is a backwater compared to this."

Darren nodded, irrationally pleased by Victor's attempt to relate with him. "Um, Victor, is there any place on that map called a, uh, Genesis Center?"