

The door to the suite clicked open, and Lesh's voice boomed out, "Fosterling!"

Darren jumped, startled more by the volume than the sudden return of the giant, reptilian man. Was that right? Were dragonkin reptiles? Were dragons? Darren decided it would be best to guard his words and thoughts about the subject on the off chance that labeling them such would be considered an insult. He clambered to his feet and cleared his throat, "Here, Elder." He'd been lounging in front of the windows, lying on the carpet—the hospitality staff had come in with dimensional containers and removed all the furnishings. Lesh had been pleased by the wide-open feeling of the room, but Darren found it strange; it felt hollow, and sounds seemed to echo and bounce off the naked walls.

"I have regained the information device. No, better; I have acquired a new one. We no longer have to worry about returning this to Lord Victor."

"Oh? That's excellent news! May I see . . ."

"You will take this and find the location of the Genesys Building. Is that not the name of the place the steward of the portals whispered in your ear?"

"Um, right, Elder. Genesys Center, actually." Darren hurried over to Lesh, as always daunted by the fact that his head only reached the enormous warrior's waist. Holding the device between a clawed thumb and finger, Lesh handed it down to him. "I cannot make myself small as Victor does to use this comfortably. I may require you to navigate here and there, depending on how long we stay in this city."

Darren took the tablet, nodding, as he tapped the screen. When it didn't light up like the first one, he said, "Elder, I think you need to activate it." Lesh grumbled a sound, half sigh and half *tsk*, as he reached one of his three-clawed "fingers," each as wide around as Darren's wrist, and pressed it into the glass. A half second later, it flared with amber light, and the map of the city appeared. "Thank you, sir, um, Elder."

"Good. As your education advances, I will teach you a proper honorific in the tongue of the dragons. For now, Elder will continue to suffice. Will it take you long to find the center? I've half a mind to bask in the afternoon sun." Lesh eyed the bright, sunny section of blue carpeting in front of the windows.

"Only a moment, but we can wait to go if . . ."

"No. We will go now. I cannot condone your Coreless existence for a moment longer than necessary. If this grove or nursery cannot help you, I will guide you through the process, painful as it may be. First, however, we will give the teachers of children a try."

"I'm not so sure it's a place for children . . ." While he muttered his half-hearted objection, Darren scanned through the listing of businesses and public buildings. Somehow, it was organized alphabetically in words that looked just like English to him, and for the millionth time since waking up on Fanwath, he wondered how the System could do that. It had to be a complex spell or something that existed in their minds. Is that what "skills" granted by the System were? Could it take them away as easily as grant them? He tapped the name of the business and selected the "map" option, and then he saw, just like his GPS back on earth, a faint golden line leading away from the hotel on the map toward the destination. It didn't look far. "I have it, Elder."

“Good! You see, fosterling? Your mind is quick; there may be a useful Class for you.”

As Lesh turned toward the door, Darren fell into his shadow, following behind. “Um, thank you.” When they reached the sidewalk outside the hotel, Lesh paused and turned to look down his short, tooth-filled snout at him, narrowing his mossy green eyes in the dark hollow beneath his prominent, scaled brow.

“You will lead us. Fear not—I will be close behind.”

Darren nodded and continued down the cobbled walkway past the park. Just as before, he was nearly dumbstruck by the sights, sounds, and smells of the magical city. The smell was a big one; it was clear from what they could see through their hotel window that the city was massive. It sprawled to the horizon, and its downtown, with the giant crystal towers, was easily the size of skyscraper zones in the big cities of Earth. That said, it didn’t smell like New York. Darren had been there a few times for seminars, and the thing he always noticed, provided the weather was warm enough, was the ever-present underlying stench of urine. “The air is fresh, Elder,” he said over his shoulder.

“Should it not be?”

“Well, I don’t know why, but I’d often find cities smelled of garbage and waste on my homeworld.” Darren shrugged; he really didn’t know why. He supposed that when lots of people gathered, you got all kinds, and some of those would rather pee on the side of a building than find a restroom.

“Shameful. One who cannot dispose of their own waste should be banished.” Lesh rumbled his proclamation offhandedly, and when Darren looked back at him, he saw that his big mentor was busily staring at a procession of veiled, feminine figures. They were larger than humans, had four arms with blue and purple skin, and beneath their veils, bright lights shone from where their eyes should be. Darren tried not to stare as the twelve figures sauntered by, studiously staring at his map while he hurried.

“What interesting ladies,” Lesh said after they’d rounded the corner. “Something about a hidden face makes me want to see it more. Do you feel the same, fosterling?”

“I suppose. The allure of the unknown or the mystery of what we cannot see . . .” Darren trailed off as he rounded the last corner and saw his destination ahead. It was a domed, crystalline building occupying something like four city blocks. The afternoon sun shimmered on the structure, making it appear bright white, painful to the eyes, near the top, and gradually darkening to a glimmering orange-red near the street level. “Beautiful,” he breathed, beginning to walk again.

“Indeed. That’s an edifice worthy of a visit, even if the services within are meant for the youth of this world.” Lesh’s cocksure certainty that the place was for children was almost amusing to Darren. He couldn’t argue, though; he figured most adults who’d been born in a System world would have developed their Core and whatever other services the Genesis Center provided. It didn’t help matters when, as they approached, a group of children—pointy-eared, colorful folk who reminded Darren of fairy stories—surged out of the central doors, corralled by a floating, cloud-like being as they laughed and jumped, running with the exuberance of youth, toward the sidewalk.

Darren didn't wait around for Lesh to comment, hurrying up the steps to the enormous glass, or maybe crystal, doors. When he approached, they swung open quickly and noiselessly, and Darren stepped into an oval reception area constructed of the same crystal substance as the building's exterior. It was domed and almost cave-like, with a dozen oval passages leading away in every direction. The lighting came from the crystal walls, ceiling, and floor—a soft blue-white glow that permeated everything. The air was remarkably crisp and fresh, and Darren folded his arms, gripping his shoulders as he registered the temperature, bordering on cold.

He was about to turn to Lesh to ask him for advice on where to begin when a cloud of misty light coalesced in front of him. It pulsed with a soft glow as a pleasant, masculine voice asked, "Darren Whitehorse, welcome to the Genesis Center. Are you here to begin your journey toward Energy cultivation?" Before he could answer, the misty ball of light floated over to Lesh and said, "Lesh'ro'zellan, welcome to the Genesis Center. Is Darren Whitehorse your charge?"

"He is my fosterling."

The misty light bobbed up and down, then moved back to Darren. In his peripheral vision, Darren could see other such lights, speaking to other people in the hall. "Darren? Will you learn with us today?"

"Am," Darren licked his lips, unsure what he wanted to ask. "Am I allowed?"

"Of course! The Genesis Center is funded and maintained by the generosity of charitable citizens of Sojourn. All of our instruction and counseling services are free to the public."

"You will learn here today, fosterling," Lesh rumbled, making his decision for him.

"If you're sure." Darren glanced up at the giant man. "Elder."

"Your elder is wise to give you time to study here, Darren. There's much that we can teach you. Lesh'ro'zellan, please retrieve your charge here tomorrow at noon; he'll be ready for rest and recovery by then."

"Good." When Lesh turned, Darren thought he would leave, but he stopped halfway, facing him. He took Darren's shoulder in one of his enormous clawed hands, turning him so they were face to face. "Look in my eyes, fosterling." Darren looked up. He hadn't even realized he was looking down. What was it about people like Victor and Lesh that made them hard to lock eyes with? No, it was more than those two; Darren felt the same about Valla. He'd thought it was her beauty, but could it be more? Could it be their raw power? Darren forced himself to keep his eyes open, staring into the mossy green, yellow-banded eyes, feeling the weight of the consciousness behind them. "Here, in this public place, I have declared that you are my fosterling. You are a member of my household. You will bring pride to my name." He didn't say it like he was asking or telling Darren to "make him proud," but rather as a statement of fact. Darren felt his chest swelling as he stood up straighter. Had he ever had a boss or mentor put such faith in him?

"Thank you, Elder."

Lesh nodded and turned to leave without a backward glance. The floating ball of mist and light moved between Darren's eyes and Lesh's diminishing form as he stalked down the steps

outside the glass doors. "Darren, please follow me to your genesis pod." It moved slowly, as though to ensure Darren was following, then it gradually increased its speed until he had to step with brisk, long strides to keep up. It led him into one of the round crystal-lined passages, which meandered in a winding, unpredictable pattern as it slowly climbed into the enormous edifice. When they stepped into a small, perfectly circular room, Darren had no idea how far they'd come or in what part of the building he might be.

"This is your genesis pod, Darren. You will learn and practice here for your first day at the center. If your elder brings you again, you may return to a room like this or work with other students, depending on the progress you make today."

"Will, um, will I have a teacher?"

"I will be your instructor and guide today. You may call me Y-seven."

"Y-seven?" Darren had turned to address the light and was faintly disturbed to see the doorway was gone; he was in a round ball of faintly cloudy, luminous crystal. "Forgive my ignorance, Y-seven, but are you a lifeform or a construct of some kind?"

"There is no need to forgive a lack of knowledge so long as the desire exists to learn. I am a member of the Orushra species, and yes, I am alive, though my body functions differently than yours. Speaking of body functions, Darren, will you require nourishment or a place to void biological waste?"

"I, um, not right now, thank you."

"Very good. Please move your body into its most comfortable position while still remaining alert. Many bipedal beings prefer to sit on the floor, for example. You'll find the crystal will accommodate your form."

Part of Darren wanted to ask for a chair, but when he'd fled First Landing and thrown himself on Victor's mercy, he'd made the conscious decision to be open-minded and agreeable. "I will sit," he said, kneeling and then sitting on his butt, trying to fold his legs before himself. His knees were a bit stiff, so he kept them up, wrapping his arms around them for comfort. The being hadn't lied; the crystal seemed to shift under his weight, and rather than a hard, unyielding glass-like crystal, he felt as though he was sitting on a warm, soft cushion.

"Are you comfortable?" Darren nodded. "Good. I can see much about you thanks to the divination wards woven into this structure. Still, it would be good if we had a conversation. Will that be all right?" Again, Darren nodded. "As I ask you questions and you answer them, feel free to ask me questions of your own."

"Thank you, I will."

"Darren, are you a child of your species?"

"No, I'm considered an adult man. Most people consider humans to be adults around the age of twenty years. I'm thirty-four."

"And yet, you've not formed a Core. Are you a member of a cast that isn't allowed the use of Energy on your homeworld?"

“Not exactly. You see, my people come from a world where Energy doesn’t exist. I’ve heard stories from, well, from two sources, now, that say Energy used to be rich on my homeworld but that, for some reason, it stopped flowing there.”

“And, with no Energy, the System is not present, either?”

“That’s right.”

Y-seven pulsed and throbbed with light for several seconds, and then it said, “I will guide you, Darren. You are lucky to have been brought here. Truly, considering your lack of Energy, it’s quite fortunate that you were taken in by such a formidable and kind master. There are many worse places you might have ended up than here on Sojourn. Now, tell me, what do you know of Energy Cores?”

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The strange-looking man hurried out from behind his counter and ushered their party over to his couches. Lam and Edeya sat in one, while Victor and Valla took the other. The couches were accommodating but still a bit small for comfort. Victor wanted to reduce his size further but knew it would probably irritate Valla, so he sat there, knees as high as his chest, and watched as the long-eared, cat-eyed man alternated staring at him and Edeya. “Quite a surprising visit! Sir, have you embarked upon your test of steel?”

“My, uh?” Victor frowned, looking at his companions, wondering if he’d missed something.

“Your test of steel. Are you yet in the iron ranks?”

“He is.” Valla smiled at Victor, sighing almost wistfully as though longing for a day when someone wouldn’t be impressed by him.

“Very good!” The man smiled, exposing too-large teeth and wiped at his brow. “I was afraid I’d have to mind my manners to an absurd degree, but we iron-rankers can speak frankly, no? My name is Erd Van.”

“That we can,” Lam said, leaning forward. “I am Lam, there are Valla and Victor, and this is Edeya. She’s in a bad way, Erd Van. Can you help her?”

“This poor soul?” He stepped close to Edeya, peering into her listless eyes. “A moment!” he bustled around the counter, the tails of his patchwork coat flapping with his rapid movement. Victor heard bottles clinking and drawers opening and slamming shut, and then the man reappeared, hurrying forward with a disc-shaped, blue lens. He stood before Edeya, peering at her through the lens. Victor felt a small surge of Energy, and then the lens began to sparkle with silvery light, throwing off rainbow sparks as he moved it around, peering at Edeya from every angle. After a while, he put the lens into his breast pocket and stood there, scratching the very short, very pink hairs on his chin.

“Well?” Lam prodded.

“Well, I’m sure you’re aware that she’s being made to appear far better than the reality of the situation. That circlet around her brow is giving her body some appearance of vibrancy, but were it taken away, I fear she’d wither and die.”

“That’s right.” Victor leaned forward and gestured to Edeya. “Can you tell us anything we don’t know? Can you help her?” He didn’t mean to sound short with the guy, but something about his smug assessment rubbed him the wrong way.

“Only a fragment of her spirit is there! What happened? Was she attacked on the Spirit Plane? Was she attempting a breakthrough with a Khal’nav infusion? Did she do battle with . . .”

“A Death Caster,” Lam said, frustration and hopelessness creeping into her voice. “She was attacked by a traitorous Death Caster who fled our world when confronted.”

“Ah! That makes much more sense. Someone was trying to take her spirit, then, and was interrupted?”

“Yes.” Lam’s eyes filled with tears, and Victor knew she was reliving her encounter with Catalina. He wanted to sit beside her and offer her some comfort, but there wasn’t room on the little couch.

“Do not despair!” Erd Van said, moving close to Lam and resting one of his small, wiry hands on her shoulder. “The thing about spirits is that they yearn to be whole. The greater part will constantly tug at the lesser fragments. This one would have fled this vessel if not for your stalwart vigil! You being here,” he gestured to them all, “your spirits, along with the pull of her body, a familiar vessel, are providing a counterbalance. With a strong enough influence, you might be able to use the innate tether all soul fragments have with each other to snatch the rest of her from the clutches of that Death Caster!”

“Really?” Lam’s eyes sprang tears at his words, but they seemed to be tears of relief or joy. Victor felt his eyes watering up in sympathy. “Can you do that?”

“Me?” Erd Van held a hand to his chest and chuckled. “Oh, no, dear. I’m afraid not. Even your friend here with the mighty furnace of rage and fear in his Core wouldn’t be able to, even if he had the know-how. No, I fear you’ll need to find a patron who’s completed their Test of Steel and moved into their Lustrous Veil. Someone of that level of power could probably overcome the enormous imbalance between your friend’s larger spirit and this fragment. They may be able to exert the force required to help her spirit break free and find its way home to her. Of course, there are risks, but there is hope. Sojourn is just the place to find the right patron!”

While Lam and the others absorbed his words, he turned to Victor and narrowed his eyes, staring at him for a long minute. “Do you not have a powerful patron already, sir?”

“Not exactly.” Victor shrugged, not sure what the guy was getting at. Could he sense Khul Bach? Was there something about his Core? It rankled Victor that the guy could apparently see his Core. How was he doing that? Was it just that he was very sensitive to spirit Energies? Maybe it was a skill or ability with his Class . . .

“I only ask because I can see wispy remnants—tendrils of left-behind power—of spirits that have touched yours. Their connections to you seem tenuous, but it seems they are still there, as though great beings are connected to you through the Spirit Plane. I wonder if . . .”

Something came over Victor at that moment, and he felt his rage begin to seep into his pathways. He surged to his feet and glowered down at the man. When he spoke, it was him, his voice, his mind, but he felt the firm comforting influence of his ancestors guiding his tongue. “You may cease your ogling of my spirit! I am Quinametzin, and my ancestors walk with me. Be wary of insulting them with your prying eyes.” Instinctively, he reached out with his will, grabbed ahold of his aura that he’d been dutifully squeezing into submission, and pulled it close around himself, drawing a curtain of the furious, potent stuff around his Core.

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Aura Veil – Basic.*****

*****Aura Veil - Basic: Using your will, you have learned to obscure your Core and affinities from the prying eyes of others. Your veil is only as strong as your aura, and those whose will is greater than yours can pierce your concealment.*****

“My apologies, sir!” Erd Van fell to his knees, pressing his forehead to the carpet.

Victor might once have felt embarrassed at the obsequious display, but in his current mood, it felt just right. He nodded to the man, ignoring the looks Lam and Valla were giving him, and said, “Your insult was innocent. You can relax. Tell us, Erd Van, can you direct us to someone who might be able to pull Edeya’s spirit home?”