

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 11: Berserk

Victor didn't sleep well the night Vullu left. He lay in his cage, feeling like he had way too much room to himself, and listened to the sounds of all the other prisoners. They came drifting over the wooden slats, between the bars of his cage, snoring, mumbling, farting, and rustling around in the scratchy hay. Victor used the piss bucket twice, always looking back and forth in the dim room, trying to see if any of the cages had wakeful occupants. There was one thing he could praise Yund's prisoners for; they minded their own business when someone was using the bucket.

Victor, bored in the middle of the night, decided to count the other prisoners, so he quietly moved around his cage, counting the slumbering, dark shadows in the other enclosures, and came up with only nineteen. Hadn't there been more than forty when he first arrived? More than fifty percent dead in a week or so? Even someone who wasn't a math wiz could see those odds weren't great. The stark reality of that fact added to the thoughts keeping him awake, and he lay on his back, staring at the ceiling until the door crashed open, and Ponda came in, screaming at everyone to wake up.

"Big night at the Nail, vagabonds! Boss needs you to perform - make up for the dead and wounded from the last one. He's offering rewards; time to find your guts!" He stomped on the wooden planks and howled with his big furry fists pumping in the air.

"Hey, Ponda," Victor said when the furry, rotund man approached his cage. "Can you tell me what your people are called? I keep calling you an otter-man in my head cause we don't have people like you in my world."

"Hah, kid, you always surprise me with what comes outta your mouth. My people are the Vodkin, and we're the toughest damned people on Fanwath; remember that!" He unlocked Victor's cage and said, "Now go eat some breakfast, then go to Boss's office; he wants a word with you. You know the way, right? You're not a lost little huldii without your friends, are you?"

"If that's a joke, I don't get it; I don't know what the fuck a huldii is. I know the way," Victor replied, slipping out of the cage, under Ponda's big arm.

"Hurry up, runt!" He growled after him, and Victor picked up his pace, despite trying to walk out coolly. He picked up his usual plate of slop and flatbread and sat down by himself, ignoring the glares he felt from the other prisoners in the mess hall. Ponda might have been teasing, but Victor did feel the absence of his friends. He'd been missing Yrella, but even when they hadn't been talking much, he'd taken some comfort in having Vullu to hang around. He wolfed down his food, then left the mess and tapped on Yund's wooden office door.

“Come in!” the boss’s voice bellowed, vibrating the flimsy door in its frame. Victor opened it and stepped into the cramped, messy space. Noting the distinct scent of grease and spices, he looked at Yund’s desk and saw a big wooden platter covered in congealed, moldy food scraps.

“Boss, you wanted to see me?”

“That’s right, kid. You’ve got two fights under your belt now, and I didn’t forget my promise to you. Win today, and you’ll be closer to a contract with me. We’re short fighters, and I don’t have new ‘recruits’ coming for another week, so I’m scheduling more than one match for most of you. Because you’re tier zero, I think I can get you into three or four. You up for it? It’s your chance for glory and to win a contract from me.”

“Do I have a choice?” Victor, truth be told, wanted to kick some ass. He knew that he was thinking of these Pit Nights like wrestling matches, at least subconsciously, and if he slowed down and really analyzed what was coming, he’d be less enthused: death and bloodshed and maiming weren’t as appetizing as pinning an opposing school’s wrestler.

“No. I wanted to gauge your enthusiasm, though - might have some bearing on what kinda fights I get you into.”

“I just want to earn a contract; I don’t give a fuck anymore. Put me in with the asshole that killed Yrella.” fr eewebn ovel.com

“Hah, you’d be dead before you picked up a weapon. You’re not ready for that kind of speed; he was tier two. So was Yrella, by the way.”

“Tier two?”

“Yeah, kid, higher than level twenty. You sure don’t know shit, do you? Don’t worry; if you live, you’ll have some new cagemates soon, and you can ask them all the dumb questions you want. Now get outta here, so I can figure out this lineup.” He picked up his clipboard and waved it around. Victor turned and walked out, going over to the corner of the gym where he and Vullu had been practicing the last few days. The big Ardeni guy, Zan, was already there, punching the wooden beam that Vullu used to like to use. Victor ignored him and started doing a little circuit of pushups, crunches, and pullups on the nearby bar.

“Your daddy’s not here anymore, huh?” Zan said after a while, watching Victor finish a set of pullups.

“Fuck you, man.” Victor dropped and went into his next circuit, sweat already pouring out of him, soaking the filthy, stinking shirt he’d worn now for over a week. Zan snorted and turned to punch his post, apparently not wanting to push the matter further. Victor hadn’t been bullied in a long time - not since middle school when he’d hit a growth spurt

and joined the eighth-grade wrestling team. He knew there were people in the Wagon Wheel that could beat his ass without any struggle. Vullu had made that clear to him, trying to help him learn to keep his mouth shut, so he didn't offend any of the "monsters" in the place. He figured the best way to deal with guys like Zan was to act like he wasn't scared but not to do anything to piss them off. Zan seemed content to ignore him after the jab about Vullu, so he kept working out, moving to weapon practice, starting with knives.

It wasn't nearly as much fun stabbing and thrusting into the air without Vullu or Yrella to encourage him or even mockingly correct his form. He'd decided to go turn in the knife and get a spear when Ponda screamed at everyone to get all the gear put away and line up. Victor was one of the first in line, and he watched the others filter in from the cage room or the mess hall; he'd never seen the fighters looking more bedraggled, tired, and low energy. "Time to chain up!" Ponda yelled, "Fights are starting earlier today." He and Urt moved among them, handing out belts and connecting the chain, then they were off, just a single column of eighteen fighters. Yund wasn't to be seen, but Victor supposed he'd probably gone ahead to finalize the matchups.

It was bright out while they took their circuitous route through the city and down to the docks. Victor kept his head up, meeting the glares of the people that scurried out of their way or openly judged; the average citizens took pride in looking down on the prisoner-fighters. At least that's the way it seemed to Victor. He saw a lot of beautiful women, the Ardeni had especially bright eyes with exotic colors, and he was caught staring a few times. Looks of disgust chased his eyes away, and he almost blushed, but a cold sliver of anger kept the blood out of his cheeks. Who the fuck were these pretty people to judge him? He wasn't a criminal and hadn't done anything to deserve his treatment. Or had he? His friend Tracy liked to talk a lot about "karma" - had he done something to deserve getting summoned to this place?

He tried to pay more attention to the kinds of buildings they went by this time. He saw a lot of houses, some places that looked like restaurants, lots of shops, a few big government buildings, and, of course, all the warehouses down by the docks. The Rusty Nail wasn't as crowded as last time when they arrived. The sun was still quite a ways above the eastern horizon, so Victor figured more people would be coming as the night progressed. Ponda led around the walkways bordering the various pits and then put them into their roped-off area near the back wall. Victor leaned back against the wall, trying to avoid looking at or talking to any other prisoners. He wasn't in a mood to mess with those guys on a good day, and he was feeling particularly moody.

He leaned there with his eyes closed, arms folded on his chest, until the buzz in the air grew in volume and a different kind of energy permeated the atmosphere. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the crowd had filled out, and people were starting to lead fighters to pits. Victor looked around the periphery of their holding area, trying to spot Yund, and finally saw him striding toward the Wagon Wheel fighters.

“Listen for your names, lads!” He hollered, ignoring the fact that a third of his fighters were women. Ponda and Urt started calling names, but Yund pointed at Victor and beckoned him forward. “You’ve got four fights. If you win, kid, I’ll set you up a sweet contract when we get back. I know you might be worried about the terms, and I want you to feel motivated, so you can count on a gold level reward in addition to your contract. Sound good?”

“Uh,” Victor started. No, it didn’t fucking sound good. Four pinche fights in one day? Was he trying to get rid of him? Still, Victor knew he couldn’t argue or change the man’s mind, and he’d always been game for a challenge. He couldn’t help feeling the parallels between Yund’s little speech and what his coach often did before a big meet. Did he ever act like he couldn’t win when his coach spoke to him? Hell no. “Yeah, it sounds fucking good.”

“That’s the spirit! Follow me.” Yund turned and started wending his way toward one of the bigger pits near the center of the warehouse. When they came up to the edge of ring number two, Victor stopped in his tracks.

“What the fuck are those?” Pacing around and hissing up at the spectators in the center of the sandy pit were five gray-skinned little men with long black nails and stringy, patchy white hair. They were wearing rags and waving clubs and knives around, trying to intimidate the crowd. Their thin lips pulled back when they hissed, revealing mouths filled with pointy, jagged rows of teeth.

“Those are Yeksa, kid. Your first match.”

“Uh, who else is going in there with me?” Victor looked around, guessing some other low-level fighters would be going in against the Yeksa with him.

“Hah, you’re on your own! Just go crazy - they’re weak. Don’t let them swarm ya! Now get up to the pit’s edge and wait for the word.”

“You signed me up for four fights, and the first one is against five fucking dudes?” Victor scowled at Yund, but he stepped up to the edge, staring down at the gray little savages. They didn’t seem to speak, just hissing and growling, brandishing their weapons.

“Choose a weapon,” said a smooth-shaven Ardeni. In each of his blue hands, he held a different weapon - a club and an axe. Victor reached for the axe out of reflex; he’d spent a lot more time with it than other weapons because Vullu favored it over other weapons. The Ardeni looked at Yund. “Ready?” Yund nodded, and the man shouted, “Begin!” Victor stepped forward and thought about his Berserk ability, using the knowledge the System had put in his head to activate it, sending a surge of rage-attuned Energy flooding out of his Core and into his body. His vision turned a deep crimson, fury filled his mind, and, as he fell to the sand, his back arched, his muscles visibly convulsed, and he roared like a caveman.

He landed in the sand on all fours, his mouth hanging open in a maniacal grin, a crazed look in his eyes. The axe was still nestled in his grip, and he lifted it in front of his face, where he studied the blade for a moment, his brow furrowing in fury. The Yeksa, for their part, hissed and, as one, started charging over the sand toward Victor. He was still transfixed by something, staring at the axe, when the Yeksa fell upon him, clubs and knives pummeling and perforating his flesh.

The image of Yrella falling and twitching when the axe hit her head faded, and Victor confronted his reality as little wooden clubs smacked down onto his skull, shoulders, and back. At least two knives bit into his back. Boiling heat had filled his flesh, and Victor roared with the terrible fury that suffused his being, lashing out with the axe and surging to his feet. The steel blade of the axe caught one Yeksa on the shoulder and severed its arm. Victor roared and began to lay about himself with the axe, ignoring the clubs and knives coming toward him. As the little knives sank into him, and the Yeksa pulled them back for another strike, his flesh pulled together, and almost no blood seeped out. The clubs' contusions healed even as the Yeksa lifted them for another strike. Victor screamed and willed more rage Energy out of his Core and into his muscles, and he smashed his axe back and forth, wading through the little savage men like a reaper at harvest.

As quickly as the fight began, it was over, and only pieces of the Yeksa remained. When Victor saw no more immediate enemies, he looked around outside the pit, and when a particular face triggered his rage, he hurled his axe at him. Luckily for Victor, far more powerful people watched the fights than he, and his axe was easily intercepted. He paced and growled, visible steam rising from his blood-soaked clothing, and then it was over, and he fell to his knees, limply staring at the sand. He remembered the fight, but it was hazy like snatches of a dream. He looked around the pit, saw the broken, dismembered bodies, and almost vomited, but then thin streams of yellow Energy motes began to flow into him from the five different corpses, and his nausea retreated, his exhaustion faded. As he climbed from the pit, he waved away his notification:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 6 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.

Chapter 12: Crowd Favorite

Yund clapped Victor on the back, put his big, meaty arm over his shoulders, and led him back to their staging area. On the way, he said, "I told you those things are weak. You made minced cutlets of 'em. Listen, your next fight isn't in this bracket; we gotta wait for the first bracket fights to wrap up, so you might have twenty minutes or an hour. Go shake out the cobwebs, get some water, and be ready!" Then he propelled him toward the rope, and Victor slipped under, looking for their big water barrel.

Sarl was standing near the barrel, and he handed Victor a cup. Victor drank deeply, sighed, then scooped the cup into the barrel to refill it. While he poured water over his head, shirt, and arms, trying to get some of the blood off, Sarl said, "Hey, Victor, I

wanted to say I was sorry to see what happened to Yrella.” Victor looked up sharply, squinting at Sarl’s face, and he saw only sincerity.

“Thanks, man.” He felt guilty inside like he should have a nice thing to say about Yrella whenever she came up, but he just didn’t have those kinds of words. Not right now, in the middle of a Fight Night and covered in blood.

“I take it you won your fight, eh?”

“Yeah, one of ‘em.”

“You have more than one? As far as I know, I only have one today.”

“Yeah, you heard him. They’re short or some bullshit. I have four fights. Well, three now.” Victor shook his arms off, then downed a third cup of water, loudly sighing as he hung the cup back on the peg.

“Four? That seems extreme; I’d be tempted to wonder if Boss was trying to get rid of you.”

“Nah, man. I think he knows about my Core. He saw me fuck that guy up the other night, and I think the guy who helped me make my Core told him about it.” Victor had been thinking about Yund’s change of attitude toward him, and it only made sense that the guy who Yund paid would tell him whether he’d had any success. It seemed like a rage-attuned core was perfect for Victor’s situation. All Yund had to do was drop him in a pit with only enemies and tell him to go nuts. Victor didn’t know how effective something like Berserk would be among high-tier fighters, but it seemed to be borderline overpowered at his current level.

“Your Core?”

“Yeah, he paid some guy to help me figure out what kind of Core to form, then help me with it. Didn’t you get a reward for winning that fight with me?”

“Oh, he offered me a race fruit or extra time off my sentence. I took the time-off.”

“Does that motherfucker ever let us take a shower or something?” Victor asked, looking down at his shirt and jeans.

“Aye, if you win enough fights, he’ll reward you with things like baths, extra meals, prostitutes, even, as you’ve seen, special things like racial upgrades. He’s more generous with fighters with long contracts.” Sarl clapped Victor’s shoulder. “It’s good that you have won your first three fights. It means you’ve got a fighting spirit, and that’s half of what you need to survive the pits, or so Kurl says. He’s been fighting the longest among those in my pen - there are seven of us.”

“What’s the other half?” Victor almost didn’t want to ask.

“Luck! You need to be lucky with who you get matched against, with injuries, with sickness, with your manager; is he poisoning you so he can make you throw a fight? Did he do any of a hundred other things to ruin your chances?”

“Fuck man, I just want to get outta this mess. I wanna win my freedom, then find a wizard or something to figure out how I can get home.”

“Good, keep your goals manageable!” Sarl laughed, and Victor kinda saw the humor in his words, so he chuckled along. Then Ponda’s huge paw was on his shoulder, and the big Vodkin pulled him toward the ropes.

“Hurry up; we’re almost late,” Ponda said, shoving people out of his way as he dragged Victor between the pits toward the center again. What was with him getting the big pits tonight? Victor hustled after him, and when they came to the edge of pit one, he stood on the little fighter’s platform and was relieved to see no swarming monsters waiting for him within.

“Just another fighter, then,” he said softly to himself. Trying to get pumped up, he hopped in place and closed his eyes, thinking of things that got his blood boiling, trying to avoid the most harrowing memories. He remembered how Zan had referred to Vullu as “his daddy.” He was mocking Victor’s relationship with Yrella and Vullu, totally making a mockery of his memories with them! Victor felt red heat start to pour out of his Core, and a cruel smile twisted his lips.

“Fighters are ready!” A booming voice sounded from the left, and Victor opened his eyes, noting the Vodkin judge looming in his red-tinted vision. He looked down into the sandy pit and saw spiked clubs here and there in the sand, three of them. He looked around the perimeter and realized he was one of three fighters standing on the edge, ready to jump in. He stood with his legs partially flexed, listening for the signal, his thighs trembling with anticipation. “Begin!” The judge roared, and Victor launched himself forward and to the left toward a club handle sticking out of the sand.

As he flew through the air, Victor saw that the other two also had jumped toward weapons. When he landed, he grabbed the club's handle in one hand, spinning to face his opponents and preparing to activate Berserk. The other two fighters were both Shadeni - their red faces, snarling in menacing grimaces as they stalked one another and Victor. Both men wore tattered leather clothing, and neither looked particularly graceful in the sand, but Victor didn’t let his guard down, choosing the one on his right to start to circle. The other Shadeni saw what he was doing and flanked Victor’s target, forcing him to split his attention. None of them charged the others, though, and Victor slowly inched closer, keeping his club ready, moving on the balls of his feet, his center low and primed to react. Victor could feel the tension, feel the knife’s edge their inaction was balanced on, and said, “Let’s go, assholes!” as he triggered his Berserk.

Burning rage surged out of his Core into his body, and as before, Victor's vision went crimson. His body convulsed as his muscles thrashed and swelled, then he was roaring and charging into the Shadeni, swinging his spiked club in an arcing blur. The Shadeni, remarkably, managed to lift his club to block, but Victor smashed into him so hard that their clubs' spikes married the two wooden weapons. The momentum of Victor's swing continued forward, ripping the club from the Shadeni's hand and burying the long nails of both clubs into his chest. He was thrown backward, stumbling into the other Shadeni, and they both scrambled for balance, falling away from Victor.

"Come on!" Victor roared and leaped at the uninjured Shadeni, smoothly stepping inside the arc of his club and scooping him up in a double leg takedown. Victor pressed his chest into the Shadeni, using his mass to hold him down, while he scrambled up his legs to kneel on his arms, then he began to punch his face. He hit him once, twice, three thunderous blows to his face, then Victor's vision darkened, and stars exploded in front of his eyes. He toppled to the left, his face planting in the sand and grinding for several inches. The other Shadeni had extracted the clubs from his chest and smashed Victor in the back of the head.

Victor didn't quite understand how, but his vision started to clear, and through the red haze of his vision, he saw the sandy floor and one wooden wall of the pit. Dimly, he was aware of the screaming and shouting and cheering coming from around him, but he just grunted and scooted his knees up under himself and pushed up onto his hands. He glanced to the right, and there were the two Shadeni. Both looked winded and bloodied, circling each other, having dismissed Victor as a goner. Victor didn't pause to consider his rationality when he got pissed that they'd written him off. Instead, he pushed on that rage, pulling more Energy from his Core. He began to pant heavily, and drool was pouring out of his snarling mouth when he jumped to his feet and slammed into the nearest Shadeni - the one he'd hit in the chest earlier.

He completely body-checked the Shadeni into the wooden wall, and Victor heard ribs crack. He grabbed the guy's wrist and twisted it with all his strength until the man screamed and dropped the club. As he reached for the fallen weapon, the other Shadeni charged at him and brought his club down for Victor's skull. Victor grabbed the club's handle and rolled over his shoulder, away from his enemy's swing. He smoothly rolled onto his feet, then screamed and charged at the two Shadeni, smashing his club from left to right and right to left, the ferocity of his blows overpowering their attempts at defense. He completely ignored their punches and half-formed club swings. And as his brutal smashes broke through, their defense crumbled, and he hit them again and again until they were still, and golden motes of Energy were streaming into him.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 7 base human. You have 10 attribute points to allocate.

Victor waited for his vision to clear, but he realized it already had. Sometime while he'd been smashing those two guys, his Berserk had worn off, and he hadn't even noticed. What did that say about him? What was he becoming? He shook his head and looked

at his notification. "Fuck me; I forgot to spend my last five points." He reached his hand back and felt his skull. It was tender, and his hair was soaked with blood, but he couldn't find any big lumps or broken bits. Whatever cut had bled was also closed up. Slowly he became aware of the crowd standing up around the pit, screaming and cheering. Several of them held paper slips in the air howling with glee. They were all fixated on him, waiting for him to do something, maybe? He let go of his head and raised his gory, bloody spiked club into the air, over his head. The screaming and cheering began anew, with increased fervor. "Fucking chill out, you psychos," he said under his breath, but he still grinned and shook his club in the air while he walked over to the little platform where Ponda was waiting.

"Kid, I thought you died when he smashed your head!" Ponda said as he hauled him up to the edge.

"No such luck, big guy." Victor realized he still held his club, and a lot of people had eyes on him, so he dropped it down into the pit. "Fuck, I'm thirsty."

"Let's go; you'll have a little time before you have to fight again. Can you go crazy like that as much as you want?" Ponda started walking back to their section, clearing a path for Victor as long as he stayed near the big man's back.

"What do you mean 'go crazy?'"

"You know," Ponda looked back over his shoulder, "When your eyes get all full of blood, steam rises off you, and you scream and smash people around."

"Hah, well, today's the first time I've had a skill for it, so I'm still learning its limits. It says it has a long cooldown, but I've used it in both fights, so it can't be that long."

"'Long' can mean anything from a few minutes to a few days. It sounds like your skill is usable after a few minutes. I think the System calls it 'long' because, in a fight, twenty minutes is the same as forever."

"That's the fucking truth." Victor had never known how long six minutes could be until he'd started wrestling. They were back at their section, and Victor made a beeline for the water. Ponda clapped him on the shoulder as he went by, and Victor actually felt like the big guy was being friendly. Sarl wasn't there this time, and Victor figured he probably was off fighting. For a minute, Victor wondered if he'd be back. Would he die in this fight? At that moment, Victor decided he didn't want to get close to any more fighters. He already felt like he'd be gutted if Sarl died, and he hardly knew the guy. He couldn't handle any more Yrella's, that was for sure. He grabbed a cup and began the process of hydrating.

After drinking his fill and washing some of the blood from his hands and arms, he sat back against the wall and contemplated his attributes. It was evident to him that his Berserk ability was the only reason he was alive right now. It allowed him to go all-out

offensively while holding his body together against the stabs and pummeling he'd inevitably take. He decided to stick with his strengths for now and spread the points around his physical attributes. When he was done, his strength was up to twenty-five, his vitality was a solid fifteen, and his dexterity and agility were both at twelve. When he applied the ten attribute points he'd banked, the surge of Energy that flooded through him, presumably making the improvements, was intoxicating, and he closed his eyes, just absorbing the good vibes.

Victor's third fight for the night took a little longer to come around. According to Ponda, a few fights had turned into real brawls, dragging on for a while. He said that some of the tier two and three fighters had abilities that made them very hard to kill. In any case, the time finally came, and Ponda led him back toward pit number two again, right near the center of the warehouse. However, something new happened this time when Victor stepped onto the platform: people started cheering and clapping. A few of the spectators even shouted his name. "Don't get too excited," Ponda said, standing next to him. "They cheer for you because they've already seen you bleed tonight, and they're happy you didn't slink away to the infirmary."

"Is that an option?" Victor couldn't stop himself from smiling along when Ponda laughed and shook his head.

"Not unless you can't walk."

"Fighters ready?" Victor looked at the familiar judge and nodded along with Ponda. He glanced around the pit and saw he only had to fight one opponent; a tall, striking woman with blue skin and pale green hair and eyes. She wore leather pants and a tight cloth shirt, and she looked like she'd just come out of a beauty salon - she was so clean, her hair so lustrous. She frowned and nodded in Victor's general direction.

"What the fuck?" was all he had time to ask before the judge shouted for them to fight. Ponda gave him a little shove, and he fell toward the sand and mortal combat with the most beautiful person he'd ever seen.

"Victor, hmm? I heard the crowd - they like you." Her green hair bobbed in a high ponytail as she circled him. He licked his lips nervously, not liking the idea of beating up a beautiful girl. So far, there weren't any weapons in the pit, so he moved in close to grapple; he wanted to test the waters a little. She met his attempts to grab her neck or wrists with easy deflections, and when he tried to slip in for a single-leg takedown, she hopped back and gave him a shove, so he stumbled to one knee. He smiled, kind of enjoying the competition, and when he started to stand, turning to face her, her snap kick caught him on the forehead, and he stumbled back onto his ass, bright stars blooming in his vision.

The kick caught him by surprise, and Victor knew he was being dumb, taking her more lightly as a threat just because she was hot, so when she flashed in with a straight punch aimed at his throat, he pivoted and swept her legs, sending her crashing into the

sand. Victor had always had a strong ground game, and he was on her before she'd gotten her hands under her. He slid around behind her, grabbing her head in a chokehold. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was recoiling at the idea of choking this girl to death, but more immediately, he just wanted to immobilize her. That's when an ear-shattering sound ripped out of her throat, sending a visceral shockwave of piercing needles into Victor. He felt like someone was peeling his skin off as he rolled away from the girl in the sand, thrashing like a man on fire.

This time when his vision went red, it wasn't from rage but from blood. Blood was sheeting down into his eyes, coating his face, arms, and chest. Had she actually shot him with a thousand needles? Where the fuck did they come from? He groaned, rolling in the sand, and then he felt a thunderous concussion as her foot slammed into his kidney. He gagged, rolling again, trying to get some distance. The deep throbbing pain from his lower back told him he'd taken an injury, unlike anything he'd experienced before. Something inside him was broken. He pulled his knees up to his chest, turtling up while struggling for breath. That's when he heard her giggles. She was fucking giggling while she stalked around him in the sand. He caught a glimpse of her as she darted in front of him, then she was behind him, and he tried to spin to keep his legs between them, but she didn't come in for a kick or punch; she screamed again, and thousands of tiny, fiery points of pain ignited along his shins and knees. Blood darkened the denim of his jeans, soaking them through, and Victor inhaled sharply, wanting to let out a scream, but the fiery pain was too intense; his scream choked in his throat.

"Does it hurt, boy? I've heard from reliable sources that it does." Her voice had a lilting quality, light-hearted and teasing. She giggled, and Victor closed his eyes and activated his Berserk ability. Instantly the fiery pain all over his body went silent, and he thrashed onto his back as his body surged with burning rage-attuned Energy. "Dying already, boy? I haven't finished entertaining the crowd yet." She screamed again, and Victor felt the tiny needles hitting him all along his stomach, arms, chest, and neck. They didn't hurt, though; he just knew they'd hit him like you'd notice water running over your hand at the same temperature as your body; it didn't burn or feel cold; it was just there. He hopped to his feet, his face a terrible visage of steaming blood, baleful red eyes, and snarling blood-flecked teeth.

The beautiful Ardeni woman's smile fell away, and she took a step back. She raised her hands and screamed again, and once more, Victor felt the pressure of something hitting him, though it didn't bother him anymore. He roared in a fury and was on her in a heartbeat. She tried to drive him aside with a spinning round kick, but Victor punched her shin as it came at him, cracking the bone. She wailed in pain, but before she could fall, Victor was on her, sliding behind her, one powerful arm around her neck, squeezing her larynx into the crook of his elbow. He roared up at the sky while he crushed the life from her, and the crowd roared back. Her body went limp, and Victor paced around in the sand, still holding her tight in his arm, looking for something more to fight.

When he came back to himself, he noticed the notification in his vision:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 8 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.

When he reached up to dismiss it, the girl's corpse fell away, and he realized he'd been holding her this whole time. The crowd was going wild, chanting his name, cheering the blood-soaked monster in the middle of the pit. Victor took two steps away from the body and vomited.

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Chapter 13: Underdog

Victor didn't remember a lot between climbing out of the ring and slumping down against the wall in the roped-off area. There were only a handful of fighters standing around or laying on the wooden floor, everyone else presumably dead, injured, or off fighting in a pit. He remembered Ponda's big meaty hand on the back of his neck, guiding him along the walkways above the pits, then his gruff, "You got maybe an hour 'til your last fight." Then Victor had stumbled, still soaked in sticky blood, to the wall and collapsed.

His mind was blissfully blank; he'd started with some self-loathing about killing that girl, but it didn't stick. He hardly remembered doing it for one thing, and for the other, he very clearly remembered her mocking, nasty tone as she tried to bleed him to death with whatever magic she'd been using. No, even when he looked at his brown-red stained blue jeans, he couldn't get too disgusted. His mind was just too tired. Had he been using Berserk too much? Did it have some sort of effect on his mental state? What if it didn't work in the next fight? He couldn't find the energy to give a shit. He just sat there, eyes closed, staring into the black void behind his eyelids.

"You look wrung out, Victor." Sarl had come to stand near him, leaning against the wall while he sipped a cup of water.

"I am, bro. Hey, you won your fight?" Sarl didn't look bad - his usual wan self, with maybe a new bruise or two.

"Aye, I did. Thank Nature."

"Nature? Do Ghelli worship nature?"

"Hmm, I don't think worship is the right word. Maybe revere would be more fitting. We recognize nature's power and potential, and we pay respect to it. What troubles you, though, Victor? You've won three fights now, correct?"

"Yeah, man, but I don't feel great about it. I have an ability that sends me into kind of an enraged frenzy for a while, and, fuck; there's no getting around the fact that I've fucking slaughtered quite a few people now. What am I becoming? Jesus, can I ever go back

home? How many freshmen at community college have killed a bunch of people? I guess it happens, but my old life just seems so distant and small now. I feel like I'm losing myself. Does that make sense?" Victor was pissed at himself for spilling his guts to Sarl. Hadn't he just resolved not to get closer to anybody? Here he was asking this guy for advice like he was some kind of counselor or something.

"It makes sense, Victor, more than you know. I walked that road long before I was put into these pit fights. I took a leap for vengeance that forever separated me from my old life. I chose that road, but you didn't - you're just trying to survive. You can't blame yourself for that."

"What do you mean, you took a leap?"

"I mean just that. I stepped out of my comfortable life of submission and purposefully crossed a line. I killed people outside the law to make them pay for what they'd done to my loved ones. There was no going back from that. Even when I was done and I submitted, my old life was dead. Now I live for the unknown. Will I live through enough fights to be free again? What will I make of myself then? I stopped caring the moment my wife died, though. I suppose that's rather liberating."

"Heavy shit, bro." Victor had a hard time feeling sorry for himself when he heard Sarl's story, as vague as it was. He looked around at the eight or so fighters hanging around behind the ropes and studied their faces. Everyone was fighting demons, he supposed. He wasn't the only one suffering this shitty existence. Sure, he'd been kidnapped, but judging from what he'd seen of this world's legal system, he doubted he was the only one unjustly thrown to the pits.

"Here comes Boss," Sarl said, nodding to the big Shadeni purposefully stomping toward their section.

"Kid, your fight's coming up. Come on." He waved for Victor and held up the rope so he could easily duck under it. "Lady's tits, boy - you're completely soaked in blood. You win this one, and I'll throw a trip to the baths into the pot." Victor didn't reply, just followed in Yund's wake as he pushed through the crowds toward the central pits again.

"Damn, why are all my fights in the center tonight?"

"Because I secured some interesting fights for you. You're welcome! This next one is a bit out of your league, but he's a straight brawler - nothing flashy as far as I can tell."

"What do you mean out of my league?" Victor had to shout at Yund's back to be heard over the cheering, stomping crowds they were walking through.

"Well, the last fight you won was against a tier one. I think she was level twelve. This guy is closer to tier two."

“What the fuck, dude? I’m level eight?” As he said it, Victor remembered his five attribute points, and he hurriedly put them into vitality.

“This guy is strong and tough but not particularly fast, and his Energy ability is almost non-existent. You can do it!” Yund had slowed to turn toward Victor while he spoke, and Victor could see in his eyes that he wished he hadn’t told him anything about his opponent. Was he really hoping Victor could win, or did he build him up with those other three fights just so he could bet against him in this one?

“Yo, are you fucking me over, Boss?”

“Just get your ass in there, and beat this guy to hell. If you win, things will look up for you around here, get me?” Yund leaned down, his big black eyes squinted in a scowl, brooking no argument. Victor just nodded. As they approached pit “one” in the warehouse center, the crowd started to clap, and Victor realized that many of them were chanting his name again. Had Yund told them his name? Did they get some sort of fighter list? He’d be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy the adulation. He always liked it when he won a match, and the audience cheered, but this was on another level. These people were hyped to hell, stomping, cheering, pumping their fists. They also had a rabid, almost insane look in their eyes, but who can be picky when it comes to adoring fans, right?

He stood on his little platform, waiting for the judge’s word, while staring across the pit, trying to get a glimpse of his opponent. He saw Ponda walking around over there, or he thought he did, but then the huge Vodkin stepped onto the platform, and Victor saw the white stripe running down the center of his fur from his forehead to his chin. “Definitely not Ponda.”

“Fighters ready?” Victor didn’t get a chance to respond because Yund did it for him.

“Ready!” he hollered. The Vodkin lifted a ham-sized fist and roared.

“Begin!” the Judge shouted, and Victor jumped in before someone got the satisfaction of pushing him. The ground shook slightly as the Vodkin dropped down, with a grunt, catching himself on a fist as he fell forward. Victor glanced around, making sure he hadn’t missed any weapons, and then he backed away, wanting some distance between him and his opponent so he could try to gauge what he was dealing with in terms of speed and surprises. The big white-striped, otter-looking asshole stomped directly at Victor, his fists raised and nothing but business on his face. The guy had to weigh more than three hundred pounds, and Victor didn’t think he was strong enough to take him down; certainly, he couldn’t throw him.

“Quit running, rat,” the big man growled as he stomped after Victor. Victor didn’t know what to do; he was hesitant to pull the trigger on his Berserk skill right away. What if this guy lived through the punishment he could dish out? Would Victor have any fight left in him after it wore off? He wanted to try to wear this guy down a little first, but he was out

of ideas. The Vodkin charged him suddenly, his huge thighs bunching and rippling with the effort of driving such a big body forward. Victor dove to his left, rolling over his shoulder and back up onto his feet, altogether avoiding the charge.

“You have rats in this world?” Victor asked, laughing at the absurdity of that thought being at the forefront of his mind.

“Fight me! Fight Durn!” the Vodkin had nearly smashed into the wall in his charge, and when he turned and screamed this challenge, saliva fluttered out of his gaping mouth with the force of his lungs. The crowd cheered and began to chant, “Durn, Durn, Durn!” Victor was losing them, it seemed.

“Spears!” the Judge cried, and someone was quick to comply, tossing spears down, both of them landing near Durn.

“That’s bullshit!” Victor yelled. Then, as Durn stooped to scoop up a spear, he sprinted for the other one. Something in the back of his mind tickled, and, as he bent to pick up the spear, Victor dropped flat. Durn’s spear ripped through the air where he’d been standing, struck the pit wall, and smashed through one of the sturdy boards, vibrating in place for a moment. “That woulda fucked me up,” Victor hissed, rolling to his knees and diving away, spear in hand, as Durn stomped toward where he’d lain.

Victor began, then, to really test Durn. He used his spear to keep him at bay, trying little feints and jabs with it, seeing what he could get through the big man’s guard. Durn might not be the fastest guy Victor had ever met, but he was tough as hell and not exactly bad at fighting. He slapped the spear aside most of the time, but when Victor got a jab through, here and there, it only seemed to enrage the big man. Soon he was bleeding from four or five minor puncture wounds and one long gash along his forearm, but he wasn’t any slower or less aggressive. Victor, on the other hand, was starting to run out of steam, and he began to wonder if this fight was hopeless. If this guy really had ten or so levels on him, that seemed like a pretty huge attribute advantage. What if he had something like fifty vitality? Could Victor keep this dance up long enough to wear the big guy down?

Victor, always on his back foot, moving away in a constant retreating circle, tried to figure out a pattern to open Durn’s guard. He found that, if he feinted low, stepped left, then feinted high, he could almost be sure to have a clean shot at Durn’s belly. He repeated the process three times, never taking the shot, just to be sure, then Victor began to channel Energy out of his Core, into his pathways, leading to his arms. He instantly noticed the red tint to the light, his heart beating faster, and his breath roughly tickling his vocal cords into a growl as he exhaled. Then he used his feint combo to open Durn’s guard and pushed with all his will at the Energy in his pathways, driving the spear forward. It moved like a bolt of red lightning, catching Durn on the left side of his belly and exploding through his layers of fat, muscle, and organs to punch out through his back.

Durn screamed, but it wasn't a death knell; no, he screamed in fury and disbelief, and his black eyes blazed with sudden red light. He charged forward into the spear that Victor still held, dumbstruck by the reaction, and swiped one massive fist with such terrible force that it dislocated Victor's shoulder, lifted him from the ground, and sent him tumbling through the air to smash into the pit wall. Durn roared, raising his arms in the air, careless of the fluids gushing out around the terrible spear wound in his gut. The crowd roared back, stomping their feet and chanting Durn's name.

Victor was stunned but not out. He'd fallen along the wall to lay slumped against it. His forehead was bleeding into his eyes again, and his arm was pure agony. He thought something else might have broken in the crash with the wall, but he couldn't be sure. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and activated Berserk. His searing pain faded to just a feeling that was there but not important. He stood up, careless of how his left leg bowed inward, and the only thing he could see was Durn. In the center of Victor's vision, he stood there, a red-soaked obstacle that needed to be knocked down. Something was funny with Victor's left arm; it didn't want to move like he intended, flopping with a strange grinding sensation in his shoulder. He didn't care; the other arm worked fine. He stomped toward Durn, who was just refocusing on Victor after his open-mouthed roar of dominance toward the spectators. Durn growled when he saw Victor striding toward him with a terrible expression on his face. A little of the heat faded from Durn's eyes as though he could read the intentions playing across Victor's mind, and rather than charge forward, he took a half-step back.

Victor didn't wait to see what Durn was doing; he reached with his right arm and grabbed the spear shaft protruding from Durn's stomach. Durn swiped at him with an oversized fist, but Victor ducked under it, stepping forward to Durn's left and shoving the spear to the right, forcing him to twist away barking and coughing blood; then, he stomped into the side of Durn's knee. It was like kicking a small tree, but Victor's rage-fueled blow elicited a loud pop from the joint, and he knew he'd torn at least one tendon. Durn howled in fury and pain, but the noise only made Victor's wicked grin widen. He let go of the spear shaft and continued past Durn, grabbing it where it protruded from his back, just below the spearhead, and as Durn stumbled forward, Victor strode in the opposite direction, yanking the full length of the spear through Durn's body.

The crowd was going apoplectic, screaming and cheering, stomping, fighting, and trying to change bets. Victor didn't hear them, though; to him, it was a distant buzzing. He only had ears and eyes for Durn, who was coughing blood and pressing his hands to the large hole in his stomach, trying to keep his insides on the inside. Victor tossed the spear up, caught it in his right hand, and, in one smooth motion, fired it like a javelin into Durn's back. Durn roared anew, stumbling forward on his bad knee and falling into the sand like an old, rotting tree. Victor, blood-flaked teeth exposed in a wide, crazed grin, strode forward, planted a foot on Durn's back, and yanked the spear out, a spray of blood arcing along with it. Then, Victor stabbed Durn again and again until he was standing on the large man's back, his tennies soaked in blood, panting and looking around for his next opponent.

After a few moments, while the crowd roared and stomped, Victor's vision returned to normal, and he was swallowed by pain. He barely had time to register the message in his view before he slipped from Durn's blood-soaked back, painfully twisting his injured knee and falling into the sand, unable to catch himself with his unresponsive arm.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 10 base human. You have 10 attribute points to allocate. Your first Class selection is available to you.

Chapter 14: Cleaning up

Ponda ended up having to jump down into the pit and help Victor out. He lifted him by his good arm, and swung him over his shoulder, then clambered up the side, with Yund giving him a hand. "Take him to the infirmary; we'll pick you guys up after Zan's fight." Yund reached out to clap Victor on the shoulder but thought better of it, pulling his hand back. "We'll get you to a bath tonight, kid. You did good." Victor just closed his eyes, hanging over Ponda's shoulder; he didn't feel like he'd be able to look around and still keep his stomach contents to himself. He tried to lose himself in the bumps and sways of the big Vodken's stride. After a while, he heard a door swing open, slam against a wall, and then swing closed behind him.

"Put him on that cot," A smooth, all-business voice said, and Victor opened his eyes to see an Ardeni woman pulling a needle and thread through the forehead skin of a short, stocky man. He watched her for a moment, admiring how she quickly jabbed the needle in and out without eliciting any curses from the patient. Then, Ponda swung him around and helped him scoot onto a low wooden cot with no mattress or blanket. It was stiff, but at least it looked clean, so Victor laid back and tried to zone out, closing his eyes and trying to remember the words to the songs that had been popular back in another world, in a different lifetime.

"...wouldn't you say?" Victor's eyes opened, and he looked around, feeling panicked, but then he saw the infirmary and the Ardeni woman, and he remembered where he was.

"Uh, what?" he mumbled through dry lips.

"You've made a mess of your shoulder."

"Yeah, I can't move it."

"It's dislocated, and there are ligament remnants in the joint. Did you level after you got this injury?"

"Uh, yeah. How can you tell?"

"Because your ligament was shredded, but the Energy that leveled you healed it up. The old bits are still in there, though. Don't worry; I have a spell for it." Something was

off about this woman, and Victor was trying to figure it out when he realized what it was - she had kind, undamaged, unhaunted eyes.

“I think you’re the first person in this world I’ve met that wasn’t mentally fucked up or just plain mean.”

“Hmm? You have some interesting slang. I’m sorry you’ve seen a lot of trauma; let’s see if I can make you more comfortable at least, okay?” Victor closed his mouth and nodded. “My name’s Lita, and I’m going to heal you, don’t resist my Energy, okay?” Again, Victor nodded, and Lita reached one hand into the filthy collar of his t-shirt and rested it, tenderly, above the swollen upper portion of his shoulder. Then, she took the other and grabbed ahold of Victor’s tricep. When she closed her eyes, he felt some warmth under her hands, then some tingling spread into his shoulder. It didn’t hurt at all, but he knew what she meant - he could feel her invading Energy, and he had a subconscious urge to push it out with his own Energy. He held himself back, clamping his will down on his Core. Soon, his shoulder was vibrating, and warm, buzzing waves pulsed through it. Then with a “pop,” his shoulder reset, and a wave of relief ran through his body as muscles he didn’t know he’d been tensing up relaxed. “There we go! Anything else really bothering you?” Her eyes were the craziest shade of bluish pink that Victor had ever seen, and she had matching hair cut short and pulled back out of her eyes with silvery clips.

“Uh, do all Ardeni have matching hair and eyes?” She smiled and leaned back, caught by surprise by the question.

“Oh, not all. Most of us, though. Our original world was very vibrant. Some of our plants died off with the merge, and the other worlds weren’t so bright and colorful. Oh, I’m babbling.”

“No! I don’t know anything about this place! Thank you for talking to me.” Victor reached out and almost took her hand, but he pulled back, not wanting to alarm her.

“Just where are you from, pit fighter?” She said “pit fighter” teasingly, not judging, and Victor found a smile creeping onto his lips.

“Uh, another world; I got summoned by some assholes.”

“I figured you were from another world, but I thought perhaps you came through a City Stone.”

“Nah, summoned. I don’t know where this world is, even. I’m from a place called Earth, and I bet your eyes are prettier than any girl’s in my whole world.” Victor didn’t know why he was flirting with this woman, but something felt good in his head like he’d lost a heavy weight. He hoped it was him really feeling good and not some temporary side effect of her healing. He grinned when she smiled and looked down, embarrassed.

“Hey, don’t hide ‘em from me.”

“Well,” she looked at him again, “Your eyes are nice, too. They’re like warm honey and seem deeper than the bright eyes of my kin.”

“Maybe we’re both enjoying seeing something different,” he said, widening his smile. She opened her mouth to reply, but then the door slammed open again, and Ponda strode in.

“Got him patched up?” Lita scooted back from Victor, clearing her throat.

“Ahem, yes. Just finished.”

“Good! Put it on Yund’s tab. C’mon kid. Time to hit the baths.” Ponda gestured for Victor to get up, then turned to open the door. Victor sat up from the cot, then swung his arms around from back to front.

“Nice job, Doc. Thanks for fixing me up,” he held out a hand, saw it was caked with dried blood, pulled it back, and just sheepishly waved.

“You’re welcome. What’s your name?” Ponda looked back sharply, an eyebrow raised, but Victor didn’t care.

“Victor. Hope I see you again, Lita.” Then Ponda’s meaty hand was on his shoulder, and they were walking briskly out through a wooden hallway, past some concession carts, and then through the vast, open doors of the Rusty Nail. They found Yund and the other fourteen surviving fighters waiting near a beer cart where Yund was, unbelievably, buying every fighter a mug. He saw Ponda and Victor striding up and ordered two more.

“What a night, boys! What a night!” The four surviving female fighters exchanged glances but didn’t correct Yund. “You all deserve this! We came with the fewest fighters but won the most fights. Now four of those wins were on young Victor’s back, but that doesn’t discount the wins the rest of you racked up. Good work! Drink that ale, and we’ll head back at a leisurely pace.” Victor savored the Ale, marveling at the icy temperature. Apparently, this world had refrigeration tech or at least magic, but Yund didn’t often spring for it. **freewebnovel.com**

Victor was eager to get back to the peace and quiet of his cage to look over his menu for selecting a class. He hadn’t told anyone about leveling to ten, though he figured Yund would figure it out sooner rather than later. He seemed to have a way of gauging a person’s strength. Maybe it was a skill or spell or some kind of magical item. While they walked, drank their big mugs of cool ale, and joked about fighting to the death, Victor almost felt normal. What did it say about him that this sort of thing seemed normal to him now?

“Take him in there, Ponda. Treat yourself too. See you in the morning,” Yund said, waving at a white stone building with several chimneys pumping out steam in the bright moonlight. Ponda grabbed Victor’s shoulder and steered him toward the building, and

as they got close, Victor saw the unmistakable image of a bathtub silver-embossed on a big copper door.

“Bath time,” Ponda announced superfluously. Victor followed him through the door, noting how it swung noiselessly open and closed behind them. They walked into a clean, tiled foyer, and an Ardeni woman with orange hair, wearing a white robe, handed them both towels and bars of soap. Ponda slapped some little colored beads on the counter and said, “Two private baths.” The woman nodded and moved to the side of the room, pulling aside a curtain, revealing a hallway.

“Rooms one and two. Shall I arrange for some attendants?” She looked from Ponda to Victor and raised an eyebrow.

“Nah, just the baths. Just a minute, kid.” Ponda reached a hand to his belt and produced a metal collar. “Sorry, but you’re gonna have to clean around this thing. I don’t wanna be worried about you bolting while I’m relaxing in the bath.” He opened the collar and snapped it shut around Victor’s neck.

“Don’t trust me, huh?”

“Of course not. You don’t get to where I am by trusting people, kid.” Victor was going to crack a joke, but he could see that Ponda was taking himself seriously, so he decided to keep his mouth shut. He was still in a good mood from the ale and his time with the pretty healer, so it wasn’t hard to fake a smile. He followed Ponda into the short hallway, and the doors to “Bath 1” and “Bath 2” were immediately to their left. Ponda gestured to the second door, and Victor nodded, opening it and stepping in.

The room wasn’t large, maybe ten feet by ten, and the back five square feet were all taken up by a sunken bath. Victor stepped up to the edge of the first step leading down to the water and marveled to see it flowing like a river. The water came in through a grate on one side of the tub, falling down the wall like a little waterfall, then pooling in the tub to flow out through a grate on the other side. He touched the water and found it hot, but not unpleasantly so. Green plants with long flat-leafed vines lined the far wall, and steam hung cloyingly in the air.

Victor took a look at himself and his blood-soaked clothes and shuddered to imagine putting them back on after he bathed. He stepped into the hot water, fully clothed, and then started to strip his articles of clothing off, one by one. As he took off his shirt, he held it under the hot steamy water for a moment, softening up the crusted blood, then he used the bar of soap to wash it, squeezed it as dry as possible, and laid it out on the tile to dry. Then he repeated the process with his jeans, underwear, socks, and even his shoes. Sure his clothes were soaked and still stained, but they were “clean.” Then Victor spent a few minutes washing himself, scrubbing till his skin was more pink than tan. freewebno(v)el

The soap smelled like some kind of flower and maybe vanilla or something. Whatever it was, it was better than old blood. After he'd worn the bar of soap down to just a fraction of its former glory, he set it on the edge of the bath and fell back into the warm, gently flowing water, letting it caress and murmur to him as it passed along his ears. Victor had no idea how long Ponda would let him relax like this, so he intended to make the most of it.

It turned out that Ponda really enjoyed bathtime. Victor drifted into sleep floating in that tub, and when Ponda finally came for him, he felt like he'd had almost a whole night's sleep. He couldn't be sure, but some time had definitely passed because his clothes were nearly dry. Ponda barked at him to get out, so he did, drying himself with the towel, then pulling on his slightly damp clothes. He followed Ponda out of the bathhouse, his tennies squeaking and squelching on the tile floors.

"Feeling better, kid? You smell better."

"Yeah, Ponda. I needed that, thanks."

"Don't thank me. Yund told me to take you."

"Yeah, but I don't think we had to spend that much time in there. So, thanks." Ponda looked at him but didn't argue; he just nodded and kept walking. They got back to the Wagon Wheel before the sun started to rise, and Ponda locked Victor into his cage with a finger over his fur-lined lips.

"Boss is gonna be busy today. Sleep in if you can."

"Alright," Victor replied, moving to his usual corner of the cage and laying down on his back, arms behind his head. It was time for him to take a look at his class selection.

Chapter 15: Contract

Victor looked at his status page and the flashing green button labeled "Class Selection." He touched the button, and a message overlaid his current view:

Level 10 Class selection. Class selection is permanent. Human Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 20. To view your options and make your selection, use the arrows to page through this interface.

Victor had talked to Vullu and Yrella about classes quite a lot during his first few days with them. They'd explained that the System put together packages of skills and attribute allocations to help people to focus and apply the growth they experienced through Energy cultivation. He didn't quite understand it, but he knew about classes or archetypes from playing VR games. It seemed like the same kind of concept. Clicking the first arrow, he saw:

Class selection option 1: Bruiser - Basic. You use might and brutal tactics to overwhelm your enemies. Class attributes: Strength and Vitality.

Victor almost swore aloud, but he remembered all the fighters still snoozing around him and kept his outburst down to a quiet scoff. The idea of being a bruiser didn't exactly excite Victor, but he couldn't lie - he'd been fighting the way it described. Sighing heavily, he pushed the arrow to see what was next:

Class selection option 2: Fighter - Basic. You use physical prowess to best your foes with remarkable feats of combat skill. Master weapons and your body to become a force that can change the tide of a battle. Class attributes: Strength, Agility, and Vitality.

It was another basic class, but it appealed more to Victor. It seemed like it had more potential for growth than the Bruiser option. He touched the "next" arrow:

Class selection option 3: Berserker - Improved. Fury and overwhelming force guide you on the battlefield. With little concern for your safety, you put the domination of your foes first. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Agility, Will.

"What the fuck?" he said in a hushed voice. Wasn't he already a berserker because of his Berserk ability? Maybe taking the class would help him improve his ability to control his rage or give him different types of skills to go with it? It was an improved class, also, whatever that meant. He was trying to imagine what other talents he might get with the class when he saw the "next" arrow was still blinking. Another choice then; he touched it:

Class selection option 4: Spirit Champion - Advanced. Prerequisite: Spirit Core. You hone your will to control the surging tide of your spirit affinity, learning to use it without succumbing to the force of its pull. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Unbound.

"Fucking hell..." Victor hissed. Wasn't this exactly what he needed? He was sorely tempted to push the "select" button, but doubt held him transfixed. It sounded too good to be true. What would he give up by not taking one of the "basic" or "improved" classes? It seemed like they had less to offer, but maybe there were other perks, like, would he get more skills? Faster levels? Maybe Berserker wasn't what he wanted as much as Spirit Champion, but what if it allowed him to survive longer in this fucking hell hole? Did he just want to survive, though? Victor thought about how he'd felt, standing in the center of the pit, coming back to himself, and finding the Ardeni girl's corpse held tightly in the crook of his arm. He vaguely remembered the fight, remembered grabbing her, but it was like snippets of a dream. What if Spirit Champion let him hold onto himself a little better and kept him from becoming an absolute monster while in the pit. What if it didn't? What if it just gave him more skills that utilized his rage affinity? The description sounded promising, but it was maddeningly vague.

Victor's mind turned to Yund and what he'd want Victor to choose. Victor was pretty damn sure Yund would tell him to select the Berserker option. Then he thought of

Yrella, and a smile spread on his face. Yrella would tell him to choose Spirit Champion, no question. Feeling a wave of relief, he reached up and made the selection.

Congratulations! You've gained your first Class: Spirit Champion. Class skill gained: Sovereign Will - Basic. Class skill gained: Channel Spirit - Basic

Sovereign Will - Basic: As an act of concentration, you can apply up to 25% of your total Will to any physical attribute.

Channel Spirit - Basic: Apply your Core's Energy to your physical attacks, manifesting your attuned Energy as a destructive force. This skill will bypass the usual effect spirit affinities have on the cultivator's emotional state. Energy Cost: 25. Cooldown: Minimal

Victor lay there on the straw-covered floorboards, thinking about the notifications he'd just read. Everything sounded great to him, but he was plagued by doubt. Had he been too impulsive? Should he have picked the Berserker? His immediate future seemed to have a lot of fighting in store for him, and maybe it would have been wiser. Still, the skills sounded great - one that would allow him to improve his strength or speed and another that would make channeling Energy into his attacks a lot easier. Or so it seemed based on the descriptions.

The Sovereign Will ability got him thinking about his attributes, and he remembered he had ten points to spend. Should he bump up his strength, or should he push it into his will? It seemed that if he could use will to improve his strength, dexterity, or agility, maybe he should keep building it up. Perhaps when he got a higher-tier version of the skill, it would allow for a higher percentage. Ultimately he decided against it - according to his class description, he'd be getting more will with each level. He'd want to make sure his base fighting stats were good with or without his new ability. He decided to put five into agility and five into dexterity as they'd been lagging behind his strength and vitality.

When he got done, Victor felt incredible. He was clean for the first time in a long while, and his physical attributes were all more than double what they'd been when he came to this world. He flipped over in the dim, nearly dark light of the closed-up pen hall and cranked out more pushups than he'd ever been able to do at his peak wrestling shape. When he stopped, he wasn't even that winded, and he felt like he could do another set after just a couple of minutes. Would he keep these improvements if he somehow returned to Earth? Would the Energy in his Core sustain him? Would he slowly bleed off his Core's power and lose his gains if there wasn't Energy around Earth? He had no way of knowing, and he wondered if anyone did. "Great; one more thing to worry about," he grumbled, becoming aware that many of the prisoners were stirring, yawning, and talking quietly in the other cages.

Victor sat quietly, using his unorthodox method of concentrating on stuff that pissed him off to cultivate some more rage-attuned Energy, and the morning hours slipped away.

He'd made some good progress when the door slammed open, and Urt, Ponda's less friendly contemporary, strode into the pen hall, hawking up a great gob of phlegm and spitting it on the floor. "Alright, lazy time's over. Victor, Boss wants to see you. Everyone else, line up for mess hall and exercise rounds!" Victor stood up and waited for the crabby, clean-shaven Ardeni to open his cage. "Come on. Move quick; I have a lot of shit to do." Urt strode to the other door, and Victor kept close to his heels, not wanting to piss the guy off any more. They crossed the exercise hall, then Urt rapped lightly on Yund's door, pulled it open, and waved Victor through.

Once again, Victor sat down across from the large, red man, trying to determine if he was angry or just always had that expression on his face. "You wanted to see me, Boss? This about my contract?"

"Oh, want to make sure I remember what I promised, eh?" Yund snorted and leaned his wooden chair back precariously under his bulk. "Well, you're in luck. I've got one written up here. Now, I tried to be fair, thinking about how you got here. I also had to think about my bottom line and how I've lost a lot of good fighters. Not to mention all the help I've given you - putting you with my best fighters for some training, buying you help with your Core, and arranging good fights for you. That said, here's the contract." He opened a drawer and pulled out a sheet of thick, cream-colored paper, pushing it across the desk to Victor. Victor read it:

Contract of service between Yund's Wagon Wheel Fighting Troupe (the Wagon Wheel) and Victor of Tucson (Victor),

"How'd you know how to spell Tucson?" Victor couldn't help asking.

"I got it right? Honestly, I don't know. The System Language Integration is some strange magic." Yund shrugged, and Victor kept reading:

Contract of service between Yund's Wagon Wheel Fighting Troupe (the Wagon Wheel) and Victor of Tucson (Victor), wherein Victor agrees to fight for Yund's Wagon Wheel Fighting Troupe for no less than five years, and wherein the Wagon Wheel agrees to remove one month of Victor's term of indenture for each of his victories. Additionally, the Wagon Wheel agrees to provide opportunities for Victor to improve his combat prowess and readiness as rewards for exceptional accomplishments.

Signed:

Yund, Owner and responsible party for the Wagon Wheel _____

Victor of Tucson _____

"Five fucking years, man?"

“Well, don’t forget you can subtract a month for each of your wins! If you fight twelve times, that’s a year off your time! You’ve been here less than two weeks and already fought six times!” f reeweb novel.com

“Look, man, I’m not a genius, but I’m not a dumbass, either. I feel like this language is kinda vague. What does it mean you’ll ‘provide opportunities’ for ‘exceptional accomplishments?’”

“For instance, last night - when you fought that guy outside your tier - I’d reward you for that. Maybe a racial fruit or an attribute boost. Maybe if you had a maiming injury, I’d pay for healing.” Victor grunted at this and leaned back in his chair, thinking. Five years sounded like a hell of a long time to have to fight for his freedom. If he fought once a day, which was impossible, he’d still need two months to clear his debt. Still, it was a goal to work toward.

“Fuck, man. Five years. My friends will be finishing college, well, not most of them, but they’ll be starting their lives, having kids. My Abuela might be dead by then. This fucking sucks, dude. I already won you some fights, and you know I’m not a criminal.”

“Victor, there are a lot worse people that you could have been sold to. This isn’t a bad contract. Now, I think I need you to make a decision before I lose too much patience and just scrap the deal.”

“Hang on,” Victor knew that Yund had him over a barrel, but he also knew he had a little leverage - he was a moneymaker as long as he kept winning. “Can we clarify some language? I want my first six fights to count against my time, and I’ve heard you talking about different types of rewards: silver, gold, etc. Can we put some language in that says you’ll give me a fight that can earn me a gold reward at least once a month?”

“Kinda pushy for someone who lives in my cage.” Yund frowned, but he pulled the contract over in front of himself and produced a long quill and a pot of red ink. He struck through a couple of lines and scribbled some notes; then, he showed the changes to Victor. They were exactly the changes he’d asked for. “Fighters do better when they feel incentivized, Victor. I usually have real scum in my cages, but the ones that aren’t scum, I try to motivate. Your friends Yrella and Vullu were examples of those kinds of fighters. Ponda is another. Did you know he used to be one of my fighters? Tell me something, kid: have you picked your class yet?” The question caught Victor a little off guard, and for some reason, he felt a little guilty when he replied.

“Yeah, this morning.”

“My own fault, I guess. I should have told you to wait. I could’ve given you some advice. What did you pick?”

“Spirit Champion. It’s supposed to help me gain more control of my Spirit Core.”

“Spirit Champion? I’m not familiar with it! I thought sure you’d get Berserker or Gladiator. It sounds like it might be what you need, though. This brings me to another problem, though.”

“What’s that?” Victor felt a couple of butterflies start to flutter in his gut.

“Well, you’re getting a little too strong to run around unbound.” He drummed his thick red fingers on the desk.

“But we have a contract now,” Victor replied weakly. He didn’t want to get some kind of fucking tattoo that bound him to these assholes.

“I’ll think on it. Trust me when I say you’d regret making a run for it. Ponda’s tier three and my other managers are all tier two. Don’t get yourself into a mess by trying to run for it.”

“I won’t. You know, I don’t know a single person in this world.” Victor would have said anything at that moment to try to reassure Yund; if he were going to make a break from this place, he absolutely didn’t want a collar or one of those tattoo things. So far he hadn’t seen his moment, his chance to run for it, but he knew sooner or later they’d let their guard down at the wrong moment, and then he’d fucking be gone. No goddamn way was he going to spend five years in this place!

“Well, let’s sign this, and you can go get some practice in,” Yund said after a long, quiet moment. He scribbled his name on his line and passed the quill to Victor. Victor, heart thumping with the implications, signed his name on the contract.