

Victor BK2: Ch30

Book 2: Chapter 30: Lifedrinker

Victor sat on a wooden bench, watching the metal bars of the portcullis that would raise to give him access to the magistrate's arena. Victor had been brought to the estate two days ago and given a reasonably comfortable room. Edeya had tried to make good on her word, fighting with the magistrate's house guards to allow her entry into Victor's quarters, but they'd been unwilling to bend their employer's orders, so Victor had spent the last two days completely alone.

Early in the morning, after the usual servants brought him breakfast, some guards had come to bring him to this chamber. He'd gotten a good look at the magistrate's villa and grounds on his walk to the fighting pit, and Victor had concluded that, much like on Earth, the people in power here made too much money. The house was extensive, rivaling Lam's for square footage, and the grounds were well manicured and festively decorated.

He'd seen brightly colored, temporary pavilions set up on the lawns, fire pits loaded with wood and ready to be ignited, servants bustling to and fro, setting up tables and loading stations with hors d'oeuvre and crystal decanters filled with liquor. The magistrate was planning an impressive gala, and Victor would be the main entertainment. He didn't like it one bit.

Victor hadn't been mistreated in his days of captivity, that was for sure. They'd fed him well, and he'd even had servants come to his room offering him massages, a haircut, and laundry service. He'd chased them all away, too self-conscious and aware that many of the servants weren't working there by choice. He wasn't sure why he thought that—none of them wore collars or acted in any way other than overly polite. Still, Victor couldn't get the feeling out of his gut that he was fighting for his own freedom while people were forced to serve him.

So, Victor sat in the underground chamber attached to Magistrate Thiv-dak's impressive and quite permanent fighting pit, and he brooded. He couldn't help thinking that he'd be in a better state of mind if he'd been allowed to spend the last two days with his friends or at least training with Polo, which gave him the idea that maybe the magistrate was working with Rellia. Maybe he wanted to make sure Victor didn't have any more chances to improve his skills by working with the master warrior. Was that paranoid? "Not considering all the bullshit I've seen from these people," he growled to the empty room.

He could watch the shadows shift in the tunnel to see that the sun was slowly moving through the sky. He didn't know what time the fight would be; he'd asked the guards that led him here, but they'd all acted like they knew only about as much as he did. One of them had wished him good luck, though, which Victor took as a good sign. It wasn't like he was being held and treated like some sort of criminal scum. Many of the servants and guards he'd interacted with had given him a kind of deference, almost like he was a celebrity.

While he sat there, trying to guess the hour and thinking about how he wanted to get this fight over with, he saw a shadow approaching down the tunnel. A moment later, it resolved into two shadows. He stood and walked to the bars, a feeling in his gut telling him he wanted to see these visitors. A moment later, he heard her exclamation, and then Thayla was jogging down the tunnel toward him, towing a much smaller figure behind. "Victor!"

"Thayla! Hell yes! I was afraid I wouldn't see you before the fight!"

“Not a chance! That magistrate is treating you like a prize hen, afraid everyone will steal you or something, but Captain Lam has her ways. She insisted that someone be allowed to check on your welfare, and Deyni and I were lucky enough to get the job!”

Victor squatted down, looking at the diminutive figure hiding behind Thayla’s legs. “So, this is Deyni? I’ve heard a lot about you, chica,” he said softly. “Come on, let me get a look at you.”

“She’s been so shy,” Thayla said, turning and gently nudging the little girl forward. “She barely recognized me, Victor. Thank the Ancestors, Rhessa had been showing her pictures and telling her stories about me while I was gone. Come here, sweetie; this is the man I told you about.”

Deyni took a step forward into the light of the glow lamps behind Victor, and he saw that her skin was more purple than red and that her hair was a bright teal color that matched her eyes. He almost said something about it but didn’t know if it was considered rude. Instead, he reached through the bars and gently tousled her hair.

“Que bonita!” he laughed at her giggle, then said, “I’m Victor, and your mommy is my best friend in the world. That means you’re my friend too, got it?”

She nodded, suddenly solemn-faced, and then she spoke, her voice small but steady, “Why are you in prison, Victor?”

“I’m not in prison! I’m just resting here before I have to perform later. Those bars are to keep all my fans away!”

“Victor’s silly, sweetie, but he’s not in prison, don’t worry,” Thayla said, squatting down to be more on a level with Victor and her daughter. She rested a hand on Deyni’s shoulder and smiled at him. “You’re going to do fine tonight, Victor. We’ll all be watching, and Lam will make sure everything is above-board.”

“Thanks, Thayla. Do you know how long I have? The pendejos that brought me here didn’t have a clue.”

“About three hours. The guests are starting to arrive, but most of the important ones won’t be here for another couple of hours, and then the magistrate will want to give everyone a chance to get drunk and make wagers.”

“So, everyone’s getting a chance to get rich off my performance, huh? What do you think of that, sweetie? Pretty lame, huh?” Victor poked her cheek playfully with one of his thick fingers and made a stricken face when she pulled away.

“What? Do I smell?”

“You smell like flowers! Have they been pampering you?” Thayla answered for the little girl.

“Well, I got bored and took a few baths while I was locked up in my fancy bedroom.”

“How am I not surprised?” Thayla laughed. “Back to your other point, though—nothing’s stopping us from making a bet. You want me to put some Energy beads down on you? Think you’ll win, or should I bet on Rellia?” She smiled, but Victor thought it looked a little forced. He reached out and took Thayla’s hand, doing his best to look confident.

“I’ll be fine. Thanks for coming to visit me; it means a hell of a lot. Do me a favor, though, and go somewhere safe and relaxing tonight with Deyni. She shouldn’t see this thing, and there’s no way you should be apart from her. Here,” he reached into his storage ring and pulled out one of the large sacks of Energy beads he’d accumulated. “This is like a thousand Energy beads. Put it all on me. I hope the odds are really against me because it will help us get you set up when this is all over.”

“Nice try, but I’ve already made arrangements for Deyni. My friend Rhessa is here, too. She’ll watch her during your . . . event.” She took the sack of Energy beads, making them disappear into her ring. Then she leaned forward, pressing her head against two bars, reached through, pulled Victor close, and kissed him soundly on the forehead. “You better win,” she said softly.

“Hey, I’m planning on it . . .”

Thayla put a hand over his mouth and said, “I’m sorry, Victor. I’m sorry I left to get Deyni, but when Lam offered her coach and driver, and said I should hurry, I jumped at it. I should have spoken to you first. You know,” she squeezed Deyni against her chest, eliciting a squeal, “we’re only together because of you. I’ll never forget it.”

She stood, taking Deyni’s hand and said, “C’mon, girlie. Let’s go find something sweet to eat while we wait for this dumb party to get over.”

“Deyni!” Victor called after the girl. When she turned to look at him, he said, “Eat something sweet for me too, okay?”

“I will, Victor!”

Victor smiled as he watched them walk away up the hallway, and then he moved back to his bench. In the back of his mind, he knew there was a very real possibility that he’d die in the match tonight. On some level, he knew that’s why he’d been feeling down before Thayla came. Her visit and the sight of her back together with her daughter had filled him with a sort of peaceful, relaxed energy, and he knew it was because, in his mind, she’d been telling the truth—he was responsible for their reunion. “If I die tonight, at least I did one fucking good thing with my life.”

He whiled away the hours by moving through his axe forms. He knew a lot more of them now that his skill level had gone up to advanced. While working through them, from hooks to parries to cleaves to thrusts, he marveled again at how the System just seemed able to plant knowledge into his head.

While he had the clarity of focus that came from good clean exercise, a thought occurred to him, though. The System didn't just plant knowledge in his head—he had to earn it. He had to gain levels and practice and build up his Energy. He wondered what would happen if the System tried to plant advanced skills into the head of a level zero, normal human. Would their brain explode?

"It's your time, warrior," a rough voice said from the portcullis. Victor hadn't heard the man approach, so engrossed had he been in his exercise and musings about the System.

"All right," he said, slipping Lifedrinker into the loop on his belt. He moved over to the gate and saw that the man that had come to collect him wore a black robe and hood that completely obscured his face. "Are you, like, an executioner or something?"

"No. This is traditional garb for an arbiter at a trial by combat. I'm supposed to be the faceless embodiment of justice. Don't worry, fighter; I'm impartial because only the court knows who I am. Now follow me—I've already fetched your opponent, and she waits rather impatiently, furious, in fact, that I brought her up first." A hint of amusement might have colored the arbiter's words, but Victor couldn't be entirely sure.

"Right," he nodded and started up the long, sloping hallway, walking just a half-step behind the hooded figure. He could hear the crowd before he could see them. He knew the magistrate's fighting pit was large, and he'd seen the rows of stands around it, but his brain hadn't drawn the connection that they'd all be full of people during the fight. Some part of him had hoped the magistrate would keep the event rather exclusive and that only a few dozen people would show. Judging by the hum and murmur of the crowd, though, his hopes had been fruitless.

When he stepped out of the tunnel into the sand of the pit, the bright lights made him squint, and he held a hand up to shield his eyes. At the sight of him, the crowd went wild, cheering, screaming, jeering, and booing. As his eyes adjusted and he looked around, he saw hundreds, no thousands of faces jammed into the stands around the big circular arena, and standing thirty yards in front of him, Rellia ap'Yensha watched him like a cat watches a mouse.

She wore a glittering silvery chain shirt, a silver diadem held back her bright red hair, and sleek, black leather leggings completed her look. She was tall and lithe and paced in her black boots, one hand flicking a rapier about, making it flicker with electric pulses of Energy with each movement. Victor saw she held a short-bladed, single-edged knife in her other hand, and though it was no axe or sword, it looked heavy enough to carve a pig carcass.

The hooded arbiter motioned for Victor to stop then he walked to the center of the pit, directly between the two combatants. He turned toward the tallest stand of bleachers, where a box had been set up for the guests of honor. Victor saw a dozen people he didn't recognize in the box, along with Lam and Thayla.

The arbiter held up a hand and stood there, like a specter, unmoving until the crowd took notice and began to quiet. As silence took command of the spectacle, the arbiter called out with a loud, deep voice, “Per the standard rules of combat trials, the combatants will be allowed their armor and a choice of weapons. All other items, magical or not, will be held by me.”

The arbiter turned sharply and walked over to Rellia. He held out a hand and waited while she divested herself of rings and an amulet. He remained still while she stood there looking irritated. After several moments of waiting, he gestured quickly to the diadem on Rellia’s head. She shook her head sharply and said something in a waspish hiss. The arbiter stared at her for a moment more, then nodded and turned to walk over to Victor. He held out his hands, empty, and Victor got the hint. He took off Gorz, his rings, and the pouch at his belt, placing them all into the arbiter’s hands.

“No other dimensional containers or hidden weapons?”

“No. My belt is enchanted, but I think it’s sort of part of my armor, isn’t it?” Victor said, patting his ringed armor as if to show there wasn’t any room for deception. The links jingled with his efforts, and the arbiter nodded, stowing Victor’s items in one of his voluminous pockets, and then he turned and walked back to the center of the arena.

“I am satisfied with the equipment each combatant now holds,” he called up to the waiting booth, and the crowd erupted back into a frenzy of cheering, laughing, and talking. The arbiter moved to a ladder built into the arena pit, opposite the box where the VIPs sat. Victor saw that the ladder led to a platform that stood out from the top edge of the ring. It would give anyone standing on it a bird’s eye view of the action.

While he waited for the arbiter to make his slow way up the ladder, he turned his attention to Rellia. She was pacing back and forth, whipping that gleaming, almost liquid-looking rapier back and forth, staring at Victor with a smirk on her face. He hadn’t known what to expect when it came to Rellia’s looks, but a beautiful, youthful Ardeni hadn’t been it. The way people said she hadn’t seen any action in fifty years made him think of her as elderly, which he realized now was stupid. In a world where people advanced their race and gained enormous power through the accumulation of Energy, aging wasn’t as much of an issue as it had been on Earth. At least not for people that took the risks required to gain power.

“Ready to die, boy?” She called out in a sharp voice that carried over the sand, despite the noise from the stands. Victor had had plenty of opponents trash-talk him, but his coach had always told him to let his skill on the mat do the talking. Victor liked his coach’s advice for one reason—he’d seen someone loudly mock his friend Anthony, and then Anthony had taken that fool apart on the mat, winning by points, one takedown after another, utterly humiliating the kid. Victor had seen exactly what his coach had been trying to tell him and determined at that point never to talk shit before a match. “Or a fight,” he said, spitting into the sand and ignoring Rellia.

“Combatants! Ready yourselves, and then raise your left arm to indicate your ability to fight!” the arbiter called out, having taken his perch. Victor noticed that his voice cut through the crowd's noise like he was speaking through a megaphone. He looked around but didn't see any such device and figured the man was either using some sort of Energy ability or the stand he was on somehow amplified his voice.

Rellia immediately lifted her left arm, staring at Victor. Victor stretched, then lazily lifted Lifedrinker from the loop on his belt. She was warm and hummed eagerly in his hands. “Ready for some work, chica?”

He didn't lift his arm right away. Instead, he turned to the box where Thayla and Lam sat, and he made eye contact with Thayla. Her face was expressionless, and Victor knew she was worried about him, so he smiled and nodded. Then he turned to Rellia and lifted his left arm.

“Let the trial of combat commence!” the arbiter yelled, his voice booming over the arena.

Victor brought his hand back to Lifedrinker, boosted his agility with Sovereign Will, cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy, and then started to cast Inspiring Presence, not wanting to jump straight into a berserking rage. He'd just felt the Energy start to flow into his pathways when a terrible pain erupted in his lower back. He stumbled forward, coughing out a gout of dark, almost black blood, his mind reeling, trying to put two and two together.

He'd been staring at Rellia; the attack couldn't have come from her, half his brain was saying, and the other half said, “She's not there, you dumbass!” He spun madly, whipping Lifedrinker in a brutal cleave, the pain still arcing through him from whatever had happened to his back. He caught a glimpse of her silvery chainmail as she darted around his flank, his cut with Lifedrinker not even coming close.

He continued to spin, trying to get her into his sights, but as he stumble-turned, just from the corner of his eye, he saw another bright flash and then felt pain erupt in his thigh, and when he glanced down, he saw Rellia's rapier withdrawing from a puncture wound that completely pierced his leg.

Blood poured from his wounds like faucets had been turned on, and Victor saw that he was painting the sands red as he stumbled after Rellia. “Fuck this,” he growled, backpedaling and finally finishing the casting of Inspiring Presence. The red haze that had begun to cloud his vision faded away as his perception brightened. He saw all the lights around the arena and beyond them the bright moons, and he smiled—this was a glorious place to do battle.

He backed up quickly, putting his back to the arena wall and holding Lifedrinker sideways in front of himself. He panned his vision, locking onto Rellia while she danced back, unable to flank him as she'd been intending. “Ah, ah, pendeja,” Victor said under his breath. “Time to fight face to face,” he said more loudly.

“You've a lot of blood, boy. They'll be washing this sand for days.” Rellia angled her advance, her rapier out in front of herself, weaving it in a small circle. Did she want Victor to look at it? He focused his gaze on her hips, another trick his

old coach had taught him—if you wanted to see where an opponent was going, don't watch their hands or face.

“Is that a thing? Why would they wash the sand? This place is for fighting,” he said, unable to help himself from responding. Just then, Rellia moved into an attack, and it was only pure chance that Victor even saw it coming, she was so fast. Her feet blurred with shadowy Energy, and then she lunged, extending her rapier under his guard and piercing his gut, right through his ringed armor. The liquid, gleaming steel of her rapier rang against the ring it slid through, and then it hung up, the blade growing too broad to slide any further. In fact, she'd thrust so hard, and the metal of her rapier was so fine that it bit into the ring, but not entirely through it, which made it stick.

Despite the horrible pain in his gut, Victor grinned and brought Lifedrinker down in a tremendous hack toward Rellia's arm holding her rapier. Rellia tugged at her blade and, unable to pull it out quickly enough, let go of the hilt so that Victor's axe ripped through nothing but air. Still, he'd disarmed her main weapon, so he grinned as he backed away and gripped the skinny blade, trying to pull it free without slicing off his fingers. Rellia didn't seem perturbed to have lost her rapier. She backed off and watched his struggle with a crooked smile.

When Victor finally got the blade free of his gut and armor, he lifted it as though to throw it out of the arena, and then Rellia laughed. She had a high, trilling laugh, and Victor hated the sound of it because he knew he'd have liked it if he were friends with the woman. Arm back, ready to launch the feather-light blade, he looked at her, and she lifted her left hand to touch her diadem. A second later, Victor stood there, nothing in his hand, and Rellia whipped her rapier back and forth in front of herself.

“Silly oaf,” she said, laughing again.

Victor growled and cast Project Spirit, pushing out a wave of inspiration-Energy that had been twisted by the spell into a sickly pulse of discouragement. Rellia's grin faded, and she backed away quickly, almost turning to run, and Victor gave chase. He was fast with his agility boosted, but Rellia was faster. Whatever classes she'd had over the course of her long career must have been ones that increased her agility and dexterity because, even boosted, Victor was unable to catch her when she concentrated on dodging away from him. He kept pushing out waves of discouragement, trying to keep her on the retreat and angling to deliver a hack to her retreating form, sure that with just one well-placed blow of Lifedrinker, he could bring this fight to a close.

At one point during his chase, Victor channeled more inspiration-attuned Energy into his pathways and into Lifedrinker, hoping to give himself the edge he needed to overcome Rellia's speed. Still, she evaded him, and when he tried to renew his Inspiring Presence, he found his inspiration Core had run nearly dry. Finally, frustrated and losing blood by the second, Victor roared and released his rage Core.

As he cast Berserk, letting the spell loose like a terrible hound he'd been just barely keeping on a leash, and the rage began to flood his pathways, he had a final, fleeting thought—why hadn't he tried his new spell? Why hadn't he cast Manifest Spirit? Before he could answer, the red overtook his vision, and he felt his body surge with unbelievable power. The crowd might have cheered,

roared, or screamed, but all he heard was the thump of his massive heart, the rushing of blood in his ears, and his own deep, echoing laughter as it rolled out of his gut and into the arena.

If he'd had the presence of mind to register it, Victor might have been disturbed to see that Rellia was also smiling. She stopped her mad dash away from Victor and turned to regard his massive, laughing form. She looked like a child standing before him, and when Victor regarded her tiny form, the only thought in his mind was that this gnat had been trying to bleed him out. She needed to be smashed into the ground. He lifted Lifedrinker with one hand and leaped toward her, launching himself into the air in a miniature dust devil, his momentum pulling sand up in a showering cascade.

Victor's prodigious strength made his enormous frame quick, and when he crashed into the sand near Rellia, whipping his axe through the air, she barely managed to roll back away from the attack. Victor wasn't done, though, and he roared, charging after her, no thought in his mind other than the destruction of this annoying creature. As his lumbering form bore down on her, his wide arms making it difficult for her to try to edge around him, Rellia was forced to backpedal toward the wall.

When Rellia's back touched the wooden planks of the arena wall and Victor was bearing down on her, she didn't look dismayed or lost. In fact, her smile widened. When Victor was just inches away from cleaving her in half, she lifted her arms and screamed. It was a scream to end all screams, and it tore through the air in a cloud of black Energy, engulfing Victor's charging form.

The cone of her attack was rather small, all told, and most of the audience, though they were aware of the power of the scream and could see the strange black cloud that had obscured the area in front of Rellia, didn't suffer the terrible sound of it. On the other hand, Victor was at ground zero, and the echoing terror of it bounced around in his head, and the cloud of black Energy instantly caught him up like he'd been dropped into a vat of tar. He struggled to keep moving, but he felt his every tendon and muscle being dragged down, like the cloud was pulling him into the center of the planet.

Victor roared and struggled and pushed more and more rage-attuned Energy into his pathways, trying to break free of the evil sound and its accompanying cloud. Still, he felt the Energy bleeding out of him like the spell had a way of sapping his power as it held him tight. After what felt like an eternity, the piercing, echoing scream finally faded, and the cloud began to dissipate. Victor found he was on his knees in the arena and that his Berserking rage was gone.

Rellia stood before him, and her rapier darted out like a liquid-lightning snake's tongue, and she pierced him several times before he could even begin to lift Lifedrinker. Blood leaked from him like juice from a smashed orange, and Victor realized she'd also been stabbing him while he'd been in the cloud. His vision was already growing dim around the edges, and, though he tried to cast Berserk, boost his Vitality with Sovereign Will—anything—he couldn't find the Energy to make it happen. He slumped down, trying to look at his Core, and, as Rellia backed up a step, giving him a slight reprieve, he saw that he was nearly dry of both types of his Energy.

Rellia lifted her arms, and the crowd roared its approval. She turned back to Victor and said, "You'll never know the trouble I went through to learn that spell. It was the only counter I could get ahold of that I was sure would work on your insane rage. It cost me dearly, and casting it cost me further still, but here we are. I've won, and you're at my mercy, just as I wanted. The crowd would regale me if I cut your throat right now, but I have an offer for you. Are you listening, boy?"

“Ungh,” Victor grunted, struggling to lift Lifedrinker, but his body felt so weak, and his mind was so foggy that she flopped, buzzing back down to the sand. He thought she was vibrating more than usual, but it could have been the trembling of his hands and arms.

“Work for me, boy. Do my bidding for ten years, and I’ll let you live. I’ll hold my boot on your neck and announce my mercy, and then you’ll work for my house. Agreed?” Rellia had leaned forward and hissed her offer to him in a way that Victor doubted could be heard by the crowd, even though they’d grown hushed, wondering what she’d do to him.

Victor, foggy though his mind was, thought about her words. He thought about what it felt like to work under the boot of even a benevolent master. He thought about how he and Thayla had escaped the mines and all the things they’d talked about on their journeys. He thought about the Wagon Wheel and Yund and Ponda. He thought about Captain Lam and Edeya and all the wrongs he’d seen in this world. Then he thought of Thayla and Deyni, and he imagined them sitting together with Oynalla and learning about how to cast spirit magic, and he smiled. He smiled a big, bloody, red-toothed smile, and he looked at Rellia and said, “Fuck you, puta.”

“Idiot,” she hissed, then her wicked, lightning-fast rapier flashed out and cut Victor’s throat. Victor slapped a hand to the wound, but blood was gushing out faster than he could contain it, and blackness was closing in on his vision like an ever-lengthening tunnel. His range of vision narrowed to a small circle, then a pinprick, and with a smile still on his face, he felt his spirit start to lift free of his body. Dimly, very dimly, he knew the crowd was roaring and that Rellia was celebrating, raising her rapier in the air, basking in the crowd’s love.

Victor felt his perspective shift; for a moment, he thought he was looking at himself and had a strange, disconnected feeling. There was Victor Sandoval, and he’s dying, but you are something more, was the thought going through his mind, and he almost embraced it. He almost drifted away completely, but then he felt something in his right hand. Not the hand that had slapped the wound at his neck. No, it was the hand that still held onto Lifedrinker. She was going mad, vibrating and pulsing with Energy, and for a moment, Victor was pulled back into himself, and then he heard something.

“Take from me, Victor. Take what you need! I give it freely. Don’t worry about me; we’ll meet again.” The voice was feminine and lilting, and Victor felt his eyes burst with tears at the sound. He couldn’t see, couldn’t even open them, but he felt the water running out of them and down his cheeks. Your body is strong, Victor. Your heart still works. Don’t give up. Take what you need, make yourself great again, and ruin this heartless creature that torments you!

Victor tried to speak, and when he couldn’t, he tried to just use his mind, his heart, to tell Lifedrinker that he didn’t want to live if it hurt her, but he felt her will pushing back, and, more than that, he felt her love. She loved him. Take from me! You’ll make me strong and alive again. I trust you! With her words, Victor felt the pulse of Energy in his hand again, and he broke. He gave in to

her demands, and he took. Victor pulled Energy out of Lifedrinker into himself. He tugged it up along his pathways and toward his Core and tried to direct it into the dim, weakly pulsing orb of his rage-attuned reservoir.

The Energy Lifedrinker fed him was pure, though, not attuned for rage, and when he pulled it toward that hot, red sun, it diminished as it changed into rage-attuned Energy. Victor knew he'd need to draw more, a lot more, to do what needed doing. Lifedrinker buzzed and thumped in his hand, and Victor knew she was giving him permission, so, with tears flowing down his cheeks, he pulled a massive torrent of Energy out of her, making his rage-attuned Core blaze.

Victor pushed some of the Energy into his pathways, guiding it toward his wounded flesh, and the hot, rage-attuned Energy seared his wounds closed, and, for the first time in over a minute, he took a breath and opened his eyes. He still sat slumped, his head pointed down, and all he saw was blood-drenched sand. His left hand was still clamped around his own throat, held there by the dried blood, no doubt. Lifedrinker lay in front of him, her handle still in his other hand, and Victor was relieved to feel a weak vibration from the weapon—she'd given up a lot for him, but she wasn't dead.

Slowly, Victor lifted his head and took in the arena. The buzzing whoosh that had overwhelmed his ears faded slightly, and he realized that some of the noise was the crowd. Rellia still stood in the sand, waving her rapier around, celebrating her victory. Victor felt a growl start to rumble in his gut, but before he could let his rage overcome him and get him into more trouble, he took a deep breath and focused on his new spell. He cast Manifest Spirit, and when the pattern formed in his pathways, hungry for Energy, he fed it from the rage-attuned Core that Lifedrinker had filled.

An eerie yipping and barking sound began to echo around the arena, and the crowd grew quiet. Rellia lowered her upraised rapier and looked around in puzzlement. She wondered if one of her friends or, more likely, one of her enemies was trying to steal her moment of glory. A flicker of movement caught her attention, and she jerked her head to the right, and sure enough, a skinny red hound stood near the arena wall there, staring at her as it began to pace back and forth, still making that annoying yipping sound.

More yipping cries came from behind her, and Rellia spun to see two more of the hounds. They weren't large—just skinny hounds, but their dusky red fur and glowing red eyes gave them an unearthly, intimidating presence. She turned to the arbiter's platform and yelled, "What is this? Who interferes?"

The arbiter, ever an annoyance, simply boomed out, using his enhanced voice, "There is no interference. Look to yourself for celebrating a premature victory."

"What?" Rellia spun toward the center of the arena where she'd slain the foolish berserker, but he wasn't sitting there, slumped on his knees in a pool of blood. No, he stood now, still in a pool of blood and caked with the stuff from his eyes to the tips of his fingers, but alive.

Victor whistled shrilly, and then Rellia saw movement all around her, and she spun, putting her rapier into a guard position, and readying herself for anything. The red hounds circled her, yipping, barking, and darting forward and back, never quite closing the distance. They were keeping her distracted! Rellia spun again, and this time Victor was closer, and, as he stepped toward her again,

his mad smile grew and his eyes filled with blood-red fury, and his already tall, muscled form began to grow. “Impossible,” Rellia hissed, then she heard a snarl and felt a painful bite on her calf.

Rellia was low on Energy, and there was no way she could cast her spell again. Umbral Shadows of the Harpy had taken far too much out of her—if she tried again so soon, she’d shatter her Core. She’d have to wear the brute down again, bleed him out until this surge of Energy faded, and she could finish him. Again. Another yip and another bite broke her concentration, though, and Rellia whipped her rapier through the air at the hound, only to have it dance back as another came in, nipping at the tendons of her knee. “Ancestors, damn it!” she cried as she tried to drive her knife at the quick little creature.

Just then, Rellia felt, as she often did in combat, that it was time to dodge, and she rolled forward, barely avoiding a heavy cleave from the giant berserker’s axe. He laughed and stomped after her. Rellia put out her hand to bound to her feet, only to have one of the hounds come forward to nip at her fingers. She cried out and rolled on her shoulder, trying to drive her rapier into the hound, and she scored a hit on its rear haunch as it darted away. Before she could celebrate, though, the berserker’s axe met her outstretched leg, and with horror, Rellia saw her foot parted from her ankle.

Rellia screamed and rolled, only to have several more nipping bites mark her flesh. She pushed herself to her knees and tried to crawl away. She tried to focus enough to cast a movement spell, to fill herself with shadow Energy and streak over the sand, but the hounds were everywhere, nipping and crying, and she was so tired, her Core nearly depleted. Rellia sobbed as she crawled, blood pouring from her ankle and seeping from the dozen little bites all over her arms and legs.

Suddenly she felt a tremendous weight on her lower back, and she was pressed into the sand. The giant berserker was standing on her back, holding her down with one foot. Rellia sobbed again and turned to regard the freak, unable to fathom how this had happened. He was leaning over her, his axe held high in one hand and his big, angry face peering down at her. It looked like he was grinding his teeth with the effort of holding back the axe, and, as she watched, his face red with effort, he growled out, in a terrible, deep voice, “Do you yield?”

“Yes!” she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks.

The monstrous Human, the berserking titan, turned his head to the arbiter and growled, “All witness! She yields!”

“Rellia ap’Yensha has yielded in a trial by combat! All of her grievances are dismissed, and Victor Sandoval is an innocent man!” the petty arbiter bellowed over the crowd, but even his voice was lost after that—the crowd went absolutely insane in celebration. Rellia sobbed into the sand, unwilling to look up and face her “friends” or enemies. Her advanced body had slowed the bleeding of her ankle enough so that she wasn’t at risk of death, and she decided to just close her eyes, lie there, and wait for the humiliation to be over.

Victor stood, chest heaving, over the crumpled form of his enemy. He’d wanted to kill her, wanted to smash her into bits and fling them about the arena like dog food. He’d been intent on it, ready to cleave off her other foot, and then her legs at the knees, then the other parts of her, but when he’d advanced, when he’d watched her crawling through the sand, sobbing and bleeding, desperation in her ragged breaths, he’d seen the image of another woman. He’d seen Yrella as she died in a

smaller, dirtier pit, and his rage had cooled immensely. It wasn't gone, no, but he knew he couldn't butcher Rellia. Not now, not like this. He didn't know what it might cost him, but he didn't care.

Victor stepped off Rellia's back and turned to the box where Thayla and Lam had been sitting. They weren't there, though, and he ran his eyes over the crowd trying to find them. Everyone was cheering and screaming and clapping each other on the back like they'd accomplished something great. Seeing their rabid faces, Victor was filled with disgust, and he reached down to pick up the woman he'd just defeated. He was still enraged, still berserk, and he knew he was risking a relapse into violence, but he seemed to have a fairly good grasp on himself. It was almost like the yipping of his coyote pack helped him to focus.

As he glanced back up, he caught a glimpse of Thayla and Lam moving toward the door that would take them into the ready room. With Rellia, seemingly unconscious under one arm, he moved to the closed portcullis, glaring at the arbiter as he walked. The man's hooded head nodded, and then the portcullis was raised, and Victor walked into the tunnel. When he'd made it a dozen steps away from the crowd, he felt his rage begin to fade, and he became more aware of the weight of his defeated opponent. He struggled to shift her into a more normal carrying position, juggling Lifedrinker in one hand.

Rellia stirred then and, with a scratchy, weak voice, said, "Just leave me here. Thank you for getting me away from the crowd."

"All right," Victor said, setting the woman on the ground of the tunnel. He glanced back at his coyotes and saw they'd sat down in the shadows and were regarding him with that questioning look in their eyes that only canines could pull off. He nodded his head and felt the spell begin to fall apart, and his pack dissipated into wispy clouds of red smoke. He looked again at Rellia, but she refused to make eye contact with him, so Victor just grunted again and started down the tunnel, wanting to be away from the arena.

"How'd you do it?" Rellia asked, her voice quiet and weak, chasing after him down the dark corridor.

Victor turned and regarded her for a minute, then he lifted Lifedrinker, her edge bright and shiny, but the lightning veins of heartsilver that had been spreading through the black metal all but faded away, and he said, "Love, I guess."