

Victor BK7: Ch51

Book 7: Chapter 51: Inquest

Darren clutched the smooth hardwood quarterstaff Victor had bought for him. It was sturdy and supposedly enchanted to do extra bludgeoning damage, and he found it very comforting as he looked toward the glowing portal on the dais down in the little walled-off cave. He, Edeya, and Lam stood outside in one of Sojourn's many parks, waiting for the dungeon attendants to call them forward. Their entry slot was in just a few minutes.

Edeya stood near, also clutching her weapon—a fine ivory-colored spear with a gleaming, silvery blade. Victor had given it to her, and when Darren's eyes had betrayed his jealousy, the giant man had shrugged and said, "Edeya's been training to use weapons for years. That staff will suit you well for now." Darren had immediately put aside his jealousy; Victor had gone out of his way to ensure he had something solid to swing around and defend with, which was more than he could ask for. Besides, it wasn't his only gift.

Both he and Edeya wore armored vests made from rings of impossibly light metal. If Darren were back on Earth, he might guess it was aluminum if not for the odd blue tint. The rings were sewn to supple, pale leather, and the garments were enchanted to repair and clean themselves. Moreover, the rings were incredibly sturdy. Victor had demonstrated by tasking Edeya with trying to stab a knife through one while he held it in his palm. "Shimmersteel," he whispered, remembering the name of the material.

Edeya heard him and smiled. "Comfortable, huh?" Darren couldn't deny that she looked especially good in her vest. It hugged her narrow frame, and the blue in the metal was highlighted by the cobalt Energy motes that constantly drifted down from her dragonfly wings.

"Yeah. It's great." Darren smiled, amazed at how different she looked from the pale, deathly figure she'd been when they first met. Her cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes bright with excitement, and her red-gold hair hung in curly ringlets from the silver half-helm Victor had given her. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to look nice for their first dungeon dive, which Darren found both amusing and endearing. It was like dressing up to work in the sewers. Or was it? He had no idea, truthfully.

According to the guidebook Edeya had been reading, the "Grotto" was a cave system, but that didn't mean there would be rank or disgusting water in it. In fact, she'd pointed out that some of the deeper sections were blocked off by clear, cold water they'd have to swim through, assuming they went that far in. Darren wasn't too sure.

Lam interrupted his thoughts, "Show me again," she said, nudging his shoulder. He knew what she meant; she and Edeya had spent quite a lot of time teaching him to channel his Energy into his first spell. He'd even gained some Energy from the System when he learned it: Arclight Wisp. It was the name of his version of the very basic "light" spell that most new Energy users learned.

Darren held out his palm and built the spell pattern in his pathway, sending some of his lightning-attuned Energy into it. A tiny, buzzing, crackling mote of red light appeared above his palm,

flickering then growing steadier and brighter, almost like an old incandescent light bulb warming up. It hovered in the air, moving to and fro as it waited for him to direct it with his will.

“Nice!” Edeya laughed and snatched at the wisp, but it flickered through her fingers. “I think it’s getting brighter.”

Lam nodded and squeezed Darren’s shoulder. “I hope you gain a level quickly and learn a useful spell right away. Whatever the case, even if you don’t, you’ll gain some attribute points and more Energy, and we’ll find a way to teach you some things when you get out.” She reached out with her other hand and pulled Edeya close, grasping her neck in the crook of her arm. “Stick close to Edeya and follow her lead. She knows how to cast a lot of spells.”

“Most require more Energy than I have now,” Edeya pouted. “But not all!”

“You’ll both be fine. You’re sure you have every . . .”

“Thing. Yes, Lam! You’ve asked us ten times.” Edeya laughed and quickly stretched her neck up to kiss Lam on the cheek in a surprising show of sweetness and affection. “We’ll be fine. This dungeon is for babies.”

“Well . . .” Lam smiled, eyeing Darren meaningfully.

“All right, I get it!” Darren sighed, shaking his head. “Lesh has made it abundantly clear that I’m basically a newborn. Don’t worry, I won’t get in Edeya’s way.”

Suddenly, in a strident, clarion voice, one of the attendants called out, “Edeya! Darren! Your timeslot begins now!”

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When they were finally invited into one of the council’s conference chambers, Victor wasn’t surprised to find a table ornately carved from what looked to him like a single, enormous slab of ivory. Nor was he surprised to find chairs suitably large for himself and Ranish Dar. They sat on one side, Victor in the middle, Ranish to his right, and the advocate Ranish had hired on his left.

The advocate was a strange individual, ostensibly a male, but not exhibiting any such mammalian characteristics. His flesh and body were entirely composed of an odd, orange, gelid substance that jiggled and flowed bonelessly in a close approximation of a bipedal, humanoid figure. His eyes were like softly glowing red candies, and Victor couldn’t help thinking of him as a Jello man. Even more strange, he refused to be named, insisting that Victor and Ranish address him as Advocate. Nonetheless, Ranish said he was highly regarded, so Victor went with it.

Great stained-glass windows lined the wall behind the council members who were arrayed opposite the trio. The windows depicted scenes from nature—birds with bright plumage, colorful flowers, and other little animals like red-furred foxes bearing more than one tail alongside perfectly ordinary, white rabbits. Victor found the artistry hard to look away from, though the light in his eyes certainly put him at a disadvantage. He thought about that for a moment, how those windows would brightly light his face while the council members’ faces were dim in the glare of the midday sunlight. Surely, it was by design.

Speaking of the council members, only five were in attendance, but Victor supposed that made sense; it was a big, busy city, and he doubted they could all be bothered by a problem with a single dungeon caused by a relatively insignificant new citizen. Of course, the man with the smoke-obscured face, deep in his dark gray cowl, was in attendance, sitting in the center. Victor had learned his name was Lord Roil and that he and Dar shared a centuries-old grudge. To his right was an avian man with the features of a blackbird. He looked so much like a giant, bipedal crow that Victor struggled not to stare; the man's wide, startled-looking yellow bird eyes were almost comical as he turned his head left and right, his beak hanging slightly agape.

The advocate had earlier told Victor who to expect, so he knew who the avian was—Yon, the master of Strista Kono, whom Victor had rather summarily vanquished from the dungeon. Lord Roil looked to his left, where a grandmotherly figure sat, and a sound like hissing steam issued forth. Was it some sort of whisper? Victor ignored it and looked more closely at the woman. She could have been human; she had pale flesh, deep wrinkles, and pudgy cheeks beneath curly gray hair held in a bun by long, wooden pins. She could have been if not for her unsettling black eyes gleaming with a hidden inner light.

To her left was a person who looked very much like a bright green praying mantis wearing yellow silken robes. On the other end, to the right of the birdman, sat an elf-like fellow—tall, handsome, with a chiseled jawline, glistening golden hair, and ears that stood out from his head and pointed upward in a far more pronounced manner than the Fae girl, Sora's. Victor had forgotten the names of those last three; he'd only heard them once from the advocate and had been more preoccupied with his defense than memorizing the names of, then, faceless lords and ladies. He'd just taken in the scene and gotten a good look at the consuls when the door clicked open and Arona stepped in.

"Apologies, Lord Consuls," she said in her whispery, scratchy voice, bowing low.

"Sit," Lord Roil hissed, and the word was laced with power so absolute that Victor found himself trying to sit even though he already was. He heard Arona hurry to comply, rushing to the seat to his advocate's left. "You have no representation, Arona Moonshadow?" the hissing, smoky voice demanded.

Arona ducked her head, her forehead nearly touching the table, and said, "No, Lord Consul. I throw myself upon your mercy." Victor's eyebrows shot up at that. Was she being smart or stupid? Perhaps she and her master had realized that Victor was the one really in trouble that day, and she was trying to earn favor by appearing compliant.

Some mutters and several nodding heads on the consul's side of the table confirmed his theory; they were pleased with her submission. "Then we shall begin. If it pleases the committee, I will speak for us unless one of you has a dissenting opinion on a matter that comes up." Lord Roil turned his cowed head to the left and right, ensuring all his co-consuls nodded in affirmation. Victor got the impression that this had already been agreed upon before the meeting had begun. He glanced at Ranish Dar, wondering if he should react, but the black, stone-fleshed man sat almost like he was in a trance, his eyes half-shut and the white fire of his eyes subdued.

The advocate's plump, jelly-like lips opened, and he spoke in an odd, liquid voice that made Victor want to clear his throat. "We accept your appointment as spokesperson, Lord Roil."

“It was not brought forth for debate.” For the first time, Victor saw a spark of light in the smoky depths of that cowl, and he wondered if it was one of Lord Roil’s eyes flaring with Energy. “I will now outline the charges. Victor Sandoval, student of Ranish Dar, you are accused of causing great damage to the Vault of Valor, resulting in a loss of revenue to the City of Sojourn and an unquantifiable loss of Energy and System-generated awards to Arona Moonshadow. How do you plead?”

Hearing that Arona was not summoned as a co-defendant but as a victim, Victor almost lost control of his mouth. In fact, he inhaled sharply and would have barked an outraged laugh if Dar hadn’t bumped him in the ribs with a boulder-sized elbow as a warning.

The advocate was quick to speak, though, forestalling any protest from Victor. “Victor Sandoval is not guilty of any intent to harm the city’s property and, further, cannot be held responsible for the System’s judgment with regard to Arona Moonshadow. The System provided the award it felt she deserved, a single chest, and the System chose to withhold any Energy gains not only from Arona but from Victor, as well. One could argue that we have a case against the city for failing to provide the promised awards of the competition.”

“Outrageous!” Yon, the crow-headed man, squawked. Lord Roil held up a long, flowing sleeve and turned his cowl toward him until he closed his beak and sat back, his feathery arms folded over his chest.

“You would try to countersue the Council on the grounds that we have a say in the System’s judgment?”

“If you think Victor can influence the System or should be held liable for that very same judgment, does the logic not flow?” The advocate’s voice was even, but Victor could hear a hint of “gotcha” in his tone.

“There is a flaw with your comparison, Advocate,” Roil said, some wisps of smoke escaping his cowl. Was that because of his breath? Was there a breathing body behind all that smoke? “Victor Sandoval caused the damage. The System withheld Energy from him and Arona because it used that Energy to stabilize the damage. Further, the penalty charged to the city for the dungeon’s repair resulted from the damage he caused. Can you not see how he, logically, is the responsible party?”

“If we are going to boil the bone, then let us get the marrow out,” the advocate said, gently and silently tapping the table with one of his squishy fingers. “Arona and her allies ambushed Victor. If he had not had to defend himself in a five-versus-one contest, he would not have had to utilize his most destructive powers. Should the blame not be lain at the feet of all participants in said battle? Considering he was not the aggressor, I feel it’s generous that Victor would be willing to share one-sixth of the penalty.”

Roil nodded. "This has been considered, but the damage done to the dungeon comes down to poor judgment. Any person with good intentions would know that unleashing an earthquake-causing Energy ability in a dungeon level made entirely of stone and built like a cavern with thousand-ton stalactites dotting its ceiling was a poor choice. Such a move was not only overtly destructive of the dungeon's framework but also self-destructive. Does Lord Dar not agree that his charge should be more respectful of the council's property and of himself? Does he think it wise that his student would throw away his own well-being for the vanity of pride and the refusal to keep his destructive instincts in check?"

Victor knew what was coming next. The advocate and Dar had already prepared him for the concession they were willing to make. Still, when the advocate spoke up, Victor found himself clenching his fists in anger. "Lord Dar agrees that his student showed poor judgment, but he disagrees that the fault lies entirely at his feet. Victor was unaware that a dungeon could be permanently damaged. He comes from a world with few dungeons, and those are not managed by citizens. They are naturally occurring System-managed dives. My client agrees to pay a portion of the damages but feels the council, in its wisdom, should bear the brunt of the expense. It was the council who designed this activity, and it was the council who failed to warn the entrants of the dungeon's fragility."

To Victor's surprise, Lord Roil's cowl moved in a slow nod. He shifted his focus to Arona and asked, "What say you, Lady Moonshadow?"

Victor looked at her closely, watching her dark eyes shift up from where they stared at the table. A pink flicker of her tongue on her black-painted lips betrayed some nervousness as she quickly glanced at Victor and then turned back to the consuls. "Lords and Ladies of the Council, I seek no reparations. I cannot blame this man sitting here for fighting with everything he had. I am sorry I wasn't allowed to finish the dungeon, but I recognize no malfeasance on his behalf."

Lord Roil's cowl shifted to the left, awaiting acknowledgment from the consuls on that side. When they both nodded, he turned to the right, and when Yon and the elf nodded, he turned to face Victor. "Victor Sandoval, do you wish to speak on your own behalf before I render the committee's decision?"

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Again, Victor had been instructed on this matter; it was common practice for the accused to be given a chance to speak, regardless of advocacy. Dar had told him what to say, and Victor found the words easy enough; his pride had retreated in the face of so many powerful auras. "Lords and Ladies of the Council, I simply wish to apologize. As my advocate indicated, I had no idea that anything I did in that dungeon could damage its structure. I was pushed to the point of breaking by the challenges offered, and it didn't occur to me that I should withhold my strongest abilities. I ask for your mercy in your decision."

As he finished, something deep in his chest rebelled, and Victor had to press his lips together in a thin line to keep from frowning or growling. He hated being obsequious, and he really didn't mean the words; he wasn't truly sorry, and he hoped the lip service he gave to the consuls would be enough if they could sense his lack of remorse. He wouldn't have agreed to say those things if the advocate hadn't assured him that the council would go easy on him out of respect for Dar. It hadn't hurt to hear Arona's statement first; she'd been surprisingly cool about the whole thing. Had she known she wasn't here as a defendant? He supposed it made sense.

“Very well. Hear our judgment: Victor Sandoval, in lieu of imprisonment, fines, and reparations to Arona Moonshadow, you are charged with completing three tasks for the Council of Sojourn. A majority of the current Consuls must decide upon each task, and you must remain living in this city until you’ve accomplished this penance. Are there any objections?”

If Victor had been grasping coals in his hands, he felt like he’d have made some new diamonds as he listened to the decree. It was all he could do to clench his jaw and refuse the Quinametzin in him the chance to curse or yell. He’d been hoping to pay some Energy beads and be done with this bullshit, but now he was tied to some nebulous “tasks?” As he fumed and tried to make sense of it all, Dar pushed his chair back and stood. For the first time, the giant spoke, his voice grinding out with unchecked volume, forcing more than one of the consuls to flinch. “Very well. The council knows how to reach me. I will receive the requests for my student’s services and judge whether they are appropriate. Do you object?”

“Do not overstep, Ranish Dar,” Roil hissed. Though his voice was soft, it cut like a knife with the force of an aura that blanked Victor’s mind and made him instantly forget what he’d been angry about.

Dar pressed his palms on the ivory table, leaning forward into that aura, his eyes suddenly blazing like twin suns. “Is it overstepping to look out for the welfare of my student? I will have a say in these tasks, or there will be a need for further inquests. What say you, Roil?”

The cowed figure faced the fire of Dar’s eyes for several long seconds and then nodded. “Very well. The matter is settled.” Then, he abruptly stood and glided out of the room, slipping through a side door before the other consuls had even managed to stand.

“Come,” Dar said, clapping Victor on the shoulder. Victor started to stand, but then Yon opened his beak and squawked.

“What a farse! You were lucky this time, Dar.”

Dar turned to regard him as Victor moved to stand by his side. The other consuls had all stopped in their tracks, eyeing the seven-foot, crow-like man and the towering, seething, statuesque Dar.

“There was no luck involved, bird. Speak to me again with such an unfettered tongue, and I’ll issue a challenge.”

Yon’s beak closed with a click, and Victor wasn’t alone in his smile as he turned to make a hasty exit. Everyone else started moving again, and the advocate broke the silence by saying, “I’ll go to the admin office to get this settlement recorded on a legal decree.”

“Good. You earned your pay, Advocate.” Dar pulled the door open for him, and then Arona stepped forward.

“I’m sorry I was involved in this, Lord Dar.”

“Nonsense. It wasn’t you or your master who put you into that position. I fully blame Roil and the three or four others on the Council who hold various grudges against me. Your words here earned you a favor from me. Use it wisely.”

Arona’s pale, sharp-boned face lit up with undisguised pleasure, and she bowed very low. When she straightened, she nodded to Victor and said, “I’m sure we’ll meet again.” Then she slipped out the door, and Dar threw an arm over Victor’s shoulders, guiding him out.

“It wasn’t bad; three tasks requiring my approval—it’s nothing. I’ll be sure the demands will convey good learning opportunities for you.”

“I guess.” Victor sighed. “It was hard to sit there and take all of that. This whole thing feels like a bad joke.”

“That’s how politics work, Victor. I won some clout with your performance in the dungeon, and my enemies clawed a little back with this inquest. You’re, unfortunately, a pawn at this stage of your life. Stick with me, and I’ll teach you to be a player.” As they walked through the lobby, Dar, apparently in a good mood, continued to speak loudly, his voice almost jovial. “It’s time you visited my lake house. There’s someone there I’d like you to see; she’ll provide a learning opportunity for you.”

“Yeah?” Victor was tired of surprises, so he pressed for more details, “Who?”

“You know her—the Fae girl who switched sides on you in the dungeon. Your terror-born alter ego infected her with a creeping dread that leaves her broken. I thought you might want to learn how to remove such an affliction. Did you have other plans?”

“Nope. My friends have all gone into one dungeon or another—well, all but one, but I’ll meet her later if that’s okay. I wouldn’t mind seeing Sora, and, yeah, I wouldn’t want to think of her dealing with some mental trauma I caused. Besides,” Victor grinned and picked up the pace, heading for the black-lacquered, flying carriage Dar had picked him up in, “she has a cloak I might try to buy off her.”

“Ah, is that so? Your elusive fifth piece of the set?” Victor could hear the humor in Dar’s voice.

“That’s right. I won’t, like, refuse to help her unless she gives it to me, but I might drop some hints afterward. Maybe she’ll be generous.”

“Perhaps, but you’re a man of means. Don’t be afraid to open negotiations. Now, get into the coach. I’m weary of these robes and want to walk in the warm sands of my beach before the sunset.”

“Is it far?” Victor craned his neck, trying to spot the sun past the towering crystal buildings all around. As far as he could tell, it was still just a little past noon.

“Not too far. Not as the crow flies. I should have a teleportation platform installed, but I’ve only had the house for a few years and haven’t spent much time there.” Dar grunted as he climbed into the opulently appointed coach behind Victor, sitting with his back to the front end, facing Victor, who had taken a seat across from the door. “I rather enjoy the need to travel there by conventional means, if I’m honest. It adds to the notion that the home is meant as a retreat.”

“Yeah.” Victor smiled and leaned back, enjoying the sensation as the carriage lurched into motion. Dar’s driver apparently knew what was expected of him. Victor was looking forward to staying in one town for a while and learning from someone who was a recognized master of spirit Energy. He might have to contend with the annoying politics of Sojourn, but there was a lot in the city for him to do and experience, and it was good for Valla and the others, too. Besides, those guys could travel back and forth to Fanwath if they wanted; they weren’t tied there like he was. Was he, though? “Do you think I can travel at all, or will the council get angry?”

“Oh, I’m sure there will be some travel in store for you. Or did you mean for your own ends?”

“I wouldn’t mind visiting my lands on Fanwath now and then.”

Dar chuckled and shrugged. “We’ll arrange something.”

Victor’s smile broadened, and he let his eyes drift closed as the coach hurtled through the air. He hoped Valla and Lesh were doing well in their dungeon. They planned to take it slow, and their window was for a week, so he didn’t expect them anytime soon. He’d warned everyone about the potential of his enemies from the contest seeking to harm him by using them, so they were all on the lookout, but everyone should be fairly safe in their dungeons, other than Lam. He opened his eyes and turned to Dar, “Can we send someone to pick up my friend? She’ll be alone after our other friends enter a dungeon.”

“You want her to come to the lake house?” Dar’s weird, stony lips turned down while he contemplated it. “Why not? It’s a big place, and I’ve plenty of food. Is she one of the insect-like ones?”

“Heh.” Victor couldn’t imagine Lam would like that description. “She’s the one with the golden wings.”

“I’ll send someone for her.”

Victor nodded his thanks and closed his eyes again. With that settled, he really didn't feel stressed about anything, and he hadn't slept much the night before. He tried to keep thinking about his plans—the things he wanted to do and learn—but his mind had other ideas, and soon, he was drifting off into a deep, untroubled slumber.

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Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 1

Class:

Herald of the Mountain's Wrath - Legendary

Level:

65

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Improved 3

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 8

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9

Breath Core Energy:

2200/2200

Energy Affinity:

Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1

Energy:

25307/25307

Strength:

430

Vitality:

560 (616)

Dexterity:

190

Agility:

213

Intelligence:

172

Will:

613

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Greater Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness, Battlefield Presence, Aura of Command, Epic Quinametzin, Mountain's Resilience

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Spirit Core Cultivation Drill

Advanced

Breath Core Cultivation Drill

Advanced

Cooking

Basic

Animal Taming

Basic

Unarmed Combat

Basic

Knife Mastery

Basic

Spear Mastery

Basic

Bludgeon Mastery

Improved

Axe Mastery

Epic

Grappling

Advanced

Sovereign Will

Advanced

Titanic Leap

Improved

Aura Veil

Basic

Spells:

Iron Berserk

Epic

Inspiration of the Quinametzin

Epic

Channel Spirit

Improved

Enraging Orb

Basic

Globe of Insight

Improved

Project Spirit

Improved

Dauntless Radiance

Basic

Heroic Heart

Basic

Spirit Walk

Basic

Tether Spirit

Basic

Harsh Light of Justice

Improved

The Inevitable Huntsman

Improved

Aspect of Terror

Advanced

Imbue Spirit

Improved

Honor the Spirits

Improved

Titanic Aspect

Basic

Alter Self

Improved

Energy Charge

Basic

Banner of the Champion

Basic

Wild Totem

Advanced

Impart Nightmare

Improved

Guard Ally

Basic

Volcanic Fury

Basic

Wake the Earth

Basic

Roots of the Mountain

Basic