

Victor BK8: Ch31

Book 8: Chapter 31: Friends or Foes

Arcus locked eyes with Victor and nodded. "Agreed. Let us evaluate the rest of this treasure before settling the matter of the orb."

"Of course." Arona took a step back and gestured at the big, iron-bound chest. "This orb is part of a treasure, likely generated by the System. If touched, it may be absorbed, so let's use caution."

Victor nodded, but part of him was thinking he should just grab the orb. If Arcus wanted to fight about it, maybe it was better to get it over with. It would be an easy way to push things to a head. Of course, it would make him the aggressor, and he'd lose any moral high ground he might currently enjoy. As it was, all he had were rumors of Arcus's impending betrayal. So far, the man had been occasionally acerbic, and his personality wasn't exactly Victor's cup of tea, but he hadn't done anything to warrant outright hostility.

"Victor," Arcus said, startling him out of his musings of betrayal. "Do you object to me taking out the other items in the chest? I won't touch the orb."

Victor shrugged and glanced at Arona. Her dark eyes were focused on the chest, and her face was impassive. "Why are you asking me?"

Arcus smiled and tapped the heavy wood of the chest with his dark metal rod. "I've adventured with Arona. She knows I won't attempt any subterfuge."

"It's true," Arona rasped. "Arcus may have character flaws, but he's no thief."

Victor grunted in assent; he figured it was easy for a guy whose family was considered wealthy in a city full of rich demigods to resist the temptation of thievery. The Pyromancer leaned over the chest and lifted out a glittering, jewel-studded golden crown. It was a massive, gaudy thing, and Victor found himself hoping it wasn't anything great because he couldn't see himself wearing it.

"Mundane treasure," Arcus announced. "I'd estimate its value at two hundred thousand standard beads." He set it on the ground before the chest.

Arcus reached back into the chest and took out a broadsword. It was about a yard long with a wide, double-edged blade of shimmering, opalescent gray-black metal. It would be a short sword to Victor, and he doubted his hand would be comfortable on the human-sized, narrow hilt. Still, the metal looked amazing, and he could sense the quality of the weapon without even touching it. Arcus cleared his throat, narrowing his eyes. "A Rhovarian broadsword crafted from sableglow steel."

"Does it live?" Arona asked, leaning close.

"There is no conscious spirit within this blade." Arcus hefted it, a thoughtful expression behind his eyes, then added, "It's well made, but I'd say the materials are worth more than the sword itself. I'd wager it would garner more than a million standard beads at auction." He set the sword down beside the crown.

Victor heard a grunt of consternation and turned to see Tyn leaning forward, hesitantly lifting a hand. "What is it, Tyn?"

“What’s an auction?”

Arona answered before Victor could think of an easy explanation, “A way for large numbers of people to express interest in an item. They make offers, and the one who ‘bids’ the most wins the item.”

“Ah!” Tyn nodded eagerly.

Arcus chuckled, then took another item from the chest. It was a dark blue crystal ring. “A ring of Crystal Protection—two charges.” He set the ring beside the crown, and when he looked up, he must have seen Victor’s expression because he added, “It will create a shell around the wearer made of dense crystal. The shell lasts a few seconds and absorbs significant damage.”

Victor nodded. “Thanks.”

Arcus reached back into the chest and withdrew a black, leather-bound tome. It wasn’t very large—about five by seven inches and, Victor figured, probably contained around fifty pages. Arcus frowned, opening the top cover and peering at the first page. He leafed through the following few pages and then shrugged. “It doesn’t offer any information when I attempt a bond, and I don’t recognize these runes.” To Victor’s slight vexation, he passed it to Arona. “Any idea?”

She, too, flipped through the pages and shrugged. “My master has some tomes and scrolls with runes of this style on the binding. He’s never taught me from any of them, and I certainly don’t know what they mean. It may be precious, or it may be junk.”

“Can I see it?” Victor held out his hand, and Arona passed the book to him with a raised eyebrow. Victor knew what they were thinking; it wasn’t a secret that he was a berserking brute in combat. He didn’t often do things that exhibited much finesse, and it was probably becoming common knowledge that he was relatively uneducated compared to the other “prodigies” around Sojourn. With that in mind, he fought to keep a straight face when he thumbed through the pages and immediately recognized the runes and patterns as elder magic.

The book contained a spell or, at least, some of the building blocks of a spell written in elder magic. Why would the System award it? Was it because the dungeon was tier-nine? Was it meant to help people prepare for their test of steel? It wasn’t the first time Victor had postulated that the “test of steel” and “lustrous veil” had something to do with learning to use Energy without the System’s training wheels. He shrugged and set the book down next to the crown. “Anything else?”

Arcus reached into the chest, and Victor could hear the clink of metals rubbing against each other as he ran his hand around the bottom. “Nothing but gems, precious metal coins, and some attuned Energy beads. I’d estimate another million in total value.”

Victor sighed and stretched his neck, wringing forth some pops, trying to look impatient as he said, “Well, listen, nothing here looks all that great, and, as you said, a full level from an Energy orb is worth an awful lot for people at our level.” Inwardly, he laughed as he said, “our level.” If Arona

and Arcus knew he was twenty or thirty levels beneath them, he could only imagine the apoplectic reaction his performance in the challenge dungeon would have elicited.

“I . . .” Arona paused and looked at Victor, then shrugged. “I think it’s more valuable to Arcus and me. I don’t know your level, Victor, but my master indicated that you had a ways to go to reach tier nine.”

“Yes, I must concur with Arona, Victor. You’re aware of the exponential increase in the Energy requirement for levels, yes? As I’m sure you know, the curve becomes very steep around tier seven. Do you know, though, that going from level ninety to ninety-one is nearly thirty times that of seventy to seventy-one?”

Victor, in fact, did not know that, but it made a lot of sense; he’d gained his first few levels almost effortlessly and had gone through entire tiers in a matter of weeks. Things were definitely slower in the sixties, and hearing Arcus, it sounded like it would only get a lot worse. It also explained why Arona and Arcus had been so excited about an Energy orb they didn’t have to use immediately. What if she could save that orb until she hit level ninety-nine? It might save her years of work. Still, he didn’t want them to know how little he knew. He nodded and shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s still worth a lot to me.”

Arcus’s mouth fell open, and he looked a little flustered, like he was trying to explain to a child why he didn’t need a grownup’s dress shoes. Arona stepped in with, “What if we give you your pick of two of the other items?”

“And the loose coins and treasure,” Arcus added.

Victor rubbed his chin, trying to make it look like a hard sell. In truth, he wanted that book. “If I take all that, it doesn’t leave much for you or Arona if you don’t get that Energy orb.”

“It’s fine.” Arcus shrugged. “We’ll settle the matter by chance, and the loser will have to accept the smaller award. If you recuse yourself from the claim on the orb, it increases our chances significantly.”

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Victor looked at Arona. “You’re okay with that?”

“Yes. We’ve settled disputes like this before.”

Victor nodded, then reached down and picked up the sword. He didn’t plan to start training with swords, but he liked the idea of having a piece of metal worth a million beads. He tucked it away in a storage ring and then picked up the book, quickly storing it as well.

“Interesting,” Arona said, her rough voice only a hoarse whisper.

Arcus nodded. “Indeed.”

Victor shrugged. “What? It might be valuable, and I’m not interested in that crown or ring.”

“No matter.” Arcus pointed to the chest. “Victor, will you kindly pick a coin and show both sides to us?” Victor did as he asked and picked up a large golden coin. One side displayed a tower, and the other a blooming flower. “Now, Arona will call tower or flower when you flip it.”

Arona grinned. “I get to call?”

Arcus just clenched his jaw and focused on Victor’s hand. “Do it.”

Victor shrugged and flipped the coin. As it spun in the air, Arona said, “Flower.” Victor caught the coin and slapped it down on the palm of his gauntlet. Sure enough, the flower was showing.

“Gods damn it!” Arcus growled, stomping away from them, out of the cave, and onto the slope where he sat on a flat rock in a huff.

Arona sighed but didn’t offer to give up the prize. She reached into the chest, and as soon as her finger touched the orb, she exploded with multi-colored light, blazing like an incandescent bulb. She groaned and fell to her knees, slowly rocking back and forth as she processed the enormous Energy infusion. Victor shrugged and touched the chest, sending it and all the coins and gems into his storage container. “Watch her,” he said to Tyn, then he picked up the crown and crystal ring and walked over to Arcus.

He held them out. “Here you go.”

The man sighed bitterly and quickly touched each item, sending them into a storage device. “She’s a greedy bitch.”

Victor sat down on a nearby rock. “Eh, can you blame her? She’s tier-nine, so those two orbs she got were worth a shit load.”

“Of course! I know that! I would have done the same, but it doesn’t lessen the sting.”

Victor could hear the pain in the words, and he almost felt a little sorry for the man. Arcus seemed young, but Victor knew a person’s looks were deceptive after they’d gained twenty or thirty levels. “Things haven’t exactly gone your way lately, huh?”

Arcus snorted. “As you well know. I don’t deal with failure well, Victor. You might be amused to know I contemplated vengeance against you after that challenge dungeon.” When Victor raised an eyebrow, he waved a hand dismissively. “I soon gave up the notion. I wish I could say I’d found some honor to stiffen my backbone, but it was Roil who spoke sense to me. He made me watch recording crystals of your battles with the other entrants and reminded me that my first strike against you was better than any attack I’d get off in a formal duel, considering I caught you by surprise. No, I’m afraid I had to eat my pride and accept that my loss wasn’t due to anyone’s failing but my own.”

Victor grunted, thinking. How was he supposed to respond to that? The Pyromancer had just admitted to everything he’d suspected. Should he just accept that he’d buried the hatchet? He didn’t like that idea. No, he knew that Roil hated Dar and that Arcus found lies easy on his tongue. Victor let some rage seep into his pathways, and when he spoke, he allowed some palpable menace to

tinge his voice. "I appreciate your words, Arcus, but if you think I'm going to be put at ease by some platitudes, think again. I'm glad you watched my performance in the challenge dungeon, but know this: however harsh I seemed when I fought in there, I was holding back."

The sound of stones clattering as they slid down the hillside saved Arcus from having to reply. Both men looked up to see Arona and Tyn approaching. Arona may have been trying to avoid gloating, but her lips were curved upward, her face was full of vibrancy, and her step was vigorous. "I guess that was a lot of Energy, huh?"

"If I could quantify it . . ." Arona trailed off, staring into the dark sky. "No, I don't think I can. Yes, 'a lot' will suffice." She gestured to the north. "I have news. My ghostly scout has caught whispers of Rasso Hine. I believe he is, indeed, in that town we glimpsed to the north."

"Rumble Town?" Tyn asked, his voice rising with dismay. "But we're close to the Enclave, and I—"

"Listen, Tyn," Victor said, reaching to clasp the boy's slender shoulder. "I want you to get home. We're going to handle our business here, but I promise you, I will make sure that something's changed about this place. There's no reason for families to be trapped in here." When Tyn just stared at him with wide eyes, Victor glanced at Arona and Arcus, wondering if they'd add anything. They stared back at him, and Victor felt a growl in his chest as he said, "Yeah. I don't know how, but those old bastards are going to change things. If they're so goddamn powerful, they ought to be able to think of something better than this."

"I agree," Arcus said, standing. "I'll certainly support your report, Victor."

Victor caught Arona's narrowed eyes and the slight shake of her head as the other man spoke. Still, she cleared her throat, reached out to grasp Tyn's slight hand, and hoarsely whispered, "There's a woman on the council, a good, kind, powerful woman who doesn't abide the suffering of children. We'll speak to her."

Arcus snorted, "Rexa won't speak to the likes of you."

Arona's reply was more a hiss than a whisper, "She'll speak to Victor." A chill ran down Victor's spine as she said his name, and he felt the power behind her voice. She leaned close to Tyn's face. "Get home, boy. Stay safe. Tell your father that things will be changing for the better and to avoid trouble."

Tyn took a step back and looked up at Victor, who grinned, nodded, and held out his massive fist. "Punch it." Tyn smiled, exposing teeth with many prominent gaps as he punched his small knuckles into Victor's. "Right. Let's go." Victor turned and started up the hill, setting a brutal pace for the shorter legs of his companions. When he reached the top, he looked down the slope to see Tyn's small, wiry frame jogging up the gully, back the way they'd come.

Arcus and Arona stopped to look back with him, and Arcus cleared his throat. "I hope you're right about Rexa. Sometimes, she acts like mortal concerns are beneath her."

"She won't abide this situation."

Victor turned and started hiking again. “She can influence the others?”

Arcus nodded. “Oh yes. Especially considering many others are always on her side of things—Your master, Lord Yon, Kreshta Griss, and Lord Venryn. Never mind the hundreds of veil walkers not currently serving as consuls who consider her a friend.”

“But not my master or the other undead.” Arona practically sighed as she spoke, and Victor could hear the disappointed longing in her words.

“Why?”

“She’s a Summer Fae. Well, not full-blooded, but very close. She’s been to the Faewild and served on the Summer Court.” Arona shrugged. “The Summer Fae see undead and Death Casters in general as antithetical to all they hold dear.”

Victor looked at Arona as she spoke; the sadness in her voice was impossible to miss, but it was hard to see any emotion in her dark eyes. He didn’t want to get personal with her, not really, especially with Arcus part of the conversation, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Are you? Undead, I mean? I knew you were a Death Caster, but . . .” He trailed off, allowing her to assume his intention.

“I’m . . . in between. It’s hard to explain, Victor. Suffice it to say that in her eyes, I am. Given time, I will be, so why argue the fine point?”

“Oh, poor Arona,” Arcus scoffed. “Here we go again. Victor, you’ve no idea how many times I’ve listened to her get drunk around a campfire and lament her fate.” He shoved Arona’s shoulder and continued, “Weren’t you and Valeska scheming to escape Sojourn and your masters last Frost’s Day? Didn’t you betray her in the Vault of Valor?”

“Valeska—” Victor started, about to say he remembered that name, but Arona cut him off.

“Eat corpse bowels, Arcus!” She quickened her pace, and Victor sighed, looking down at the Elementalist.

“That wasn’t too cool, dude.”

“What? To speak the truth? She’s fickle, that one. She makes promises to that boy, but if killing the children in this place would somehow advance her or her master’s power, she’d do it.” Arcus shook his head, gathered some phlegm, and spat. “I’ll take the lead. We should avoid more monster spawns so we can be done with this damned place. Follow me or my bird if you can’t see me.” He gestured to the fiery, circling bird of prey high in the sky. Before Victor could agree, Arcus burst into flames and began to jog, quickly outpacing Arona. When he reached a steep grade in the hill, he leaped off and glided to the next slope.

When Victor caught up to Arona, she pointed to Arcus's fiery form, already climbing the next hill. "He often does that in a dungeon, especially wide-open ones like this."

"It must be hard growing up in a clique like that. I was going to say I remember Valeska; she was that tall, strong woman with the two hatchets, right?"

"Yes. Thorn and Bloom are her axes. She hasn't spoken to me since the contest, but I heard from a mutual friend that she nearly went wild with despair when she thought she'd lost Thorn; the axe was stuck in your back when the System rescued her. Then you stabbed it into Brontes, and when the System rescued him, the axe came along. She was overjoyed. I'm surprised she wasn't at your party."

"Well . . ." Victor trailed off. He could think of a few reasons the woman might not want to come, starting with the fact that she'd broken dozens of bones during their fight. He shrugged, though, and tried to keep things positive. "Maybe we'll be able to spar or something. I'm glad she got her axe back, too. I wasn't exactly thinking clearly during that fight."

"No," Arona chuckled. "My master made me watch the battle, much as Arcus's did. I'd say you were anything but analytical during that fight, though your battle instincts are incredible."

Victor ignored the veiled compliment. "So, you don't like your master much, huh?"

"Well, I told you not to trust him for a reason."

Victor frowned, thinking, and then remembered what Dar's friend, Lo'ro, had told him—how he meant to steal Arona away from Vesavo Bonewhisper. "How do you feel about Lo'ro?"

"Lo'ro the Grim?" Arona shuddered. "He's a different sort of horrible."

"Damn."

"Why do you ask?"

Victor didn't want to make enemies by running his mouth about things that might have been said in confidence, so he tried to skirt around the subject. "He's a friend of Ranish Dar's, I guess." Before she could follow up for more detail, he changed the subject: "You think your friends are really pissed? Don't you think they understand what you were trying to do?"

"Brontes doesn't hold a grudge, but Valeska and Elandor refuse to speak to me. It's of little importance. My loyalty is to my master, and I did what he expected me to do." She didn't say more, and Victor didn't want to press. She sounded depressed, and he knew it was a lot deeper than her recent betrayal in the challenge dungeon. She spoke scornfully of Death Casters and the undead. She spoke longingly of people like Rexa, the Summer Fae. She was trapped by the Energy in her Core, and Victor wished he could help her.

Of course, he had some ideas. Thayla had gained a death-attuned Core in the dungeon attached to Greatbone Mine, and he'd helped her to alter it, giving her a courage affinity. Hadn't he done something similar for Lam? Could he help Arona escape the influence of her Core's attunement? Could he do something like that without becoming public enemy number one to all the Death Casters in Sojourn? Should he? For all he knew, she was just manipulating him. Victor was aware of his blind spot when it came to pretty women in need.

He snorted, drawing a glance from her, but shook his head and looked away. The truth was that it wasn't just women. Didn't he want to help Tyn, too? He liked to think he enjoyed helping people in need—underdogs, for lack of a better term. He nodded, liking the sound of that. It fit; wasn't he planning to return to Zaafor to help the Degh? Talk about underdogs! He just had to decide: was Arona an underdog in need of help, trapped by her affinity and master, or was she just manipulating him? If so, why?

He glanced from Arona's dark-shrouded form to Arcus's distant, fiery one on the next hilltop. They were both dangerous. They both wanted something, but Victor wasn't sure what or how far they'd each go to attain it. He knew he could take Arcus in a fight, but what about Arona? What if she was just trying to lull him into complacency? What if she and Arcus were aligned against him? He hated the paranoia twisting his thoughts but couldn't help it. There were too many factions and too many different motivations to consider. He wished he had an ally he could trust in that place, but without one, he simply determined to do what Arcus suggested: finish and get the hell out.

Book 8: Chapter 32: Chaos and Lightning

"Well?" Lam asked, wiping the toad blood from her cobalt-blue hammer head with a well-soiled rag. They'd all just recovered from their Energy infusions after the "boss" toad battle, and she wanted to know if Darren had hit level ten. He grinned at her, then at Edeya, who sat, eyes glazed, staring at System messages of her own. He'd hoped to have both of their attention, but Lam wasn't going to wait. She stepped closer to him and prodded his shoulder with her boot, almost knocking him off the flat rock.

"Okay, okay!" He laughed and held up his fist triumphantly. "Level ten! And, according to the messages in front of my eyes, I'm ready to choose my Class."

"Excellent! That was faster than I feared! Spend your points before you look at your Class options. I don't know if it makes a difference, but I'm superstitious."

Again, Darren glanced at Edeya, but she was still distracted, so he nodded to Lam and put his latest five points into vitality. That done, he studied his new attributes:

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

-

Level:

10

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 1

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

140/140

Strength:

6

Vitality:

32

Dexterity:

5

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

9

Will:

28

“Not too bad.” He nodded to himself.

“Getting some big numbers, Dare?” Edeya asked, finally done staring off into space. “Sorry,” she added, throwing him a wink with one of her big, blue eyes, “I made level twelve.”

“Ugh!” Lam laughed. “Slow down! I’m still only eleven.”

“Why did I gain four levels in the time you gained two, Edeya?” Darren knew more Energy was required as levels increased, but he thought the two women would simply receive a larger share of the rewards.

Before Edeya could answer, Lam spoke, “A few factors. For one, affinity affects how much Energy impacts you as the System awards it. Also, contributions during a battle can change your share. The main thing, though, is that levels get slower and slower the higher you climb. We’ll all get to tier

three pretty fast, but then the requirements start to really get steep.” She nudged him with her boot again. “Well? Tell us about your options!”

“Shouldn’t we get out of here first?” Edeya asked, fruitlessly trying to wipe some greenish-brown sludge off her hands.

“Darren?” Lam asked, hoisting her shield and raising an eyebrow. “Can you wait until we’re out, so Miss Edeya doesn’t have to suffer this muck any longer?”

Darren nodded and stood. “Let’s get out. I’d prefer some fresh air to think.” He hopped up and, feeling fresh and invigorated after their Energy infusion, followed Lam back through the winding corridors, sunken, wet passages, and rooms filled with dead frogmen. Edeya and Lam chatted away; things were certainly different with Lam along for the dungeon crawl.

The two Ghelli had a hundred topics to talk about, and though Darren wasn’t usually involved in any of them, the two women made a point to include him—most of the time. At that moment, the women were talking about someone named Sergeant Fath, laughing about how he used to carry his shield atop his head while marching. Of course, Darren could infer why it came up; Lam was constantly stowing and pulling her shield from her storage ring.

“Lam,” he asked as they approached the dungeon’s exit. “Why didn’t your friend, Sergeant Fath, use a storage device?”

Edeya laughed and answered for the older Ghelli, “Because Fath was an indentured soldier for the Greatbone Mine. He wasn’t much higher on the pecking order than me and Victor.”

Lam shrugged her agreement, and then they all stepped through the portal, emerging in the quiet, damp cave where Sojourn City caretakers stood nearby, monitoring the portal entrance. “Out early?” asked a thin woman with pale lavender skin, massive black eyes, and half a dozen finger-length tentacles constantly wriggling under her large proboscis. “Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re fine,” Edeya announced. “Thank you. We’re done with our slot.”

“Much appreciated.” The woman bowed, pressing her slender, four-fingered hands together at chest level.

Lam sketched a quick bow, then led the way out of the cave. “Let’s get a carriage back to the lake house, and you can go over your Classes with us while we travel.”

Darren nodded, and they hurried their way back to the small outdoor market at the entrance to the park. They’d found that most of the coaches, or “carriages” as some people called them, were much slower than the ones powerful individuals like Dar owned. When they’d hired one to pick them up at the lake house and deliver them to the grotto, the flight had taken over an hour. While they might be slower, there were plenty to choose from, and it wasn’t long before they’d flagged down a strange, copper, bird-shaped coach with an open-air seating arrangement on its back.

At first, Lam had wanted to wait for a different vehicle, afraid the wind would be too distracting for Darren to concentrate on his Class offerings, but the coachman, a small, beetle-like fellow with a bright yellow shell, had insisted that his coach was enchanted to shield the passengers from the elements. So, in short order, they were soaring into the wind, comfortable on a wide, cushioned

bench, with Darren somehow in the middle. The bird's metallic wings clanked and squeaked with each Energy-fueled flap, but the ride was smooth as could be.

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“All right, Dare.” Edeya scooted closer to him on the bench. “Let’s hear ‘em!”

“Okay, um, give me a minute. I have to find the right screen . . .” Darren opened his status sheet and, just as the System had told him he would, he saw a blinking round button that said, “Level Ten Class Selection.” He “touched” the button by gesturing toward it with his finger, and then a list appeared, filling the strange, transparent, gray System screen with white text:

Class selection option 1: Elemental Attendant - Basic. Control and wield Energy compatible with your elemental affinity. Your primary focus is on harnessing elemental energy to perform attacks and defenses. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence, and Vitality.

Class selection option 2: Arcane Battler - Basic. Use arcane and physical abilities in combat to gain an edge over your opponents. Master the balance between magic and martial prowess to become a versatile combatant. Class attributes: Strength, Will, and Vitality.

Class selection option 3: Chaos Sorcerer - Advanced. Prerequisites: Chaos affinity. Any Elemental affinity. Embrace the chaotic energies of the universe to perform powerful and unpredictable spells. Your ability to manipulate chaos combined with your elemental mastery allows you to bend reality to your will and create mayhem on the battlefield. Class attributes: Intelligence, Dexterity, Will, and Vitality.

Class selection option 4: Arc Reaver - Advanced. Prerequisites: Lightning affinity. Channel your mastery of lightning into both magical and physical attacks. You become a fearsome warrior who can strike with the speed and ferocity of an electrical storm, combining martial prowess with lightning Energy. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Strength, and Agility.

Darren smiled and blew out a slow whistle. “Well, I didn’t get any epic options, but I got some really neat-sounding ones.” He only mentioned “epic” options because of Edeya’s Class. “I mean, honestly, all four of my options seem really good, even the basic ones.”

Edeya groaned and punched him in the shoulder, bringing a giggle burbling out of Lam. “So? Tell us!”

Darren chuckled and nodded, then spent about five minutes describing his options to his two companions. Lam rubbed her chin and then, demonstrating her wisdom, asked, “Do you have any questions about those or the idea of Classes, in general?”

Darren nodded, his question already primed before she’d asked. “Yeah, I’d like to know, if the System is going to offer me an advanced Class, why does it keep the basic ones in there? Who would choose basic over advanced?”

“There are several reasons. My first time around, I skipped over an advanced Class twice to keep my basic one. I did it for two reasons: I liked my basic

Class's focus, and I knew I'd level faster. Each tier adds to the Energy requirement of your levels. That's another reason I only gained two levels in the dungeon today while you gained four—I have an advanced Class, and the Energy the System requires to give me a level is higher than your 'base' levels. When I was young and first gaining levels, I was concerned with gaining power quickly. That's not quite so important to me now." Darren didn't miss the sly smile Lam shared with Edeya.

"So, if I want fast levels, I should take one of the basic Classes?"

"Come on, Dare! You want Lesh to whip your hide?" Edeya gave his shoulder another playful punch, and he nodded.

"Yeah. You're right. It wouldn't be fitting for a member of his household to take an easy solution." He thought for a minute, then asked, "Why does it list attributes at the end? Won't I get to assign them where I want?"

"Nope." Edeya shook her head. "Not with those Classes. Sometimes the System offers Classes with 'unbound' attribute points, but you didn't get one."

"Looks like the, um, Arc Reaver Class will give me more physical attributes."

"Yes, it sounds like a melee fighter Class. Does it interest you?" Lam shifted to look at him more squarely, and Darren felt a little flustered under the scrutiny of those beautiful emerald eyes. Both she and Edeya had such big, clear eyes that it was difficult for him to focus on anything else when he looked into them.

"Ye-yeah." He nodded eagerly, shifting his gaze to glance over the side of the mechanical bird's passenger compartment. He almost swooned from vertigo when the thing banked, and he got a good look at the tiny trees below them. He looked back to Lam, cleared his throat, and said, "I thought it sounded tough, like something Victor would approve of."

"Are you trying to impress Victor or trying to pick what's right for you, Dare?" Edeya asked, nudging him with her elbow until he looked her way.

"Well, I want what's best for me, of course. And, well, the other advanced Class mentions both of my affinities. Do you think it's a better fit?"

"I think—" Edeya started to say, but Lam reached across Darren to slap her knee.

"Darren, why don't you tell us what you

think."

Darren looked from one woman to the other and gathered his thoughts. Slowly at first, then with more confidence, he began to vocalize thoughts that had only been half-formed up to that point: “Edeya is fast and deadly with her spear. You, Lam, are strong and durable and also fight in melee range. I know the two of you will have spells that do a lot of damage when we gain more levels, but I think our team would benefit more from me learning to use magic as much as possible. I think the Arc Reaver Class would suit me well, but the Chaos Sorcerer Class is even more ideal, especially as it focuses on magic-using attributes. If I’m understanding things correctly, intelligence, will, and dexterity are all needed for advanced magic abilities, right?”

Lam nodded. “That’s accurate. Of course, it’s nice to have some improved physical attributes, even if you are a spell caster, but you’ll be gaining vitality, too. As for strength and agility, those may come with future Class evolutions, or you can always shore them up with enchantments.”

“I just hope that chaos affinity isn’t too . . . chaotic,” Edeya laughed.

Darren nodded. He’d yet to use the new spell Lam had acquired for him. Lesh had promised to let him test it with him in a “safe” manner, but the opportunity hadn’t presented itself so far. “I wonder . . . lightning is my strongest affinity. Maybe I should just focus on it. I mean, what if chaos spells are too unpredictable or something?”

“Is that why his lightning is red?” Edeya asked, ever quick to leap down tangents. “Does the chaos in his Core change it? I’ve only seen Elementalists casting lightning spells that looked, well, natural.”

“I’ve seen red lightning,” Lam said, and her voice grew hushed as her gaze went distant. “You wouldn’t remember, Edeya, because it was the night Catalina betrayed us. Hector . . .” She trailed off.

“Tell us!” Darren urged, eager to hear anything that might reveal more about his seemingly uncommon mix of affinities.

Lam sighed heavily and shrugged. “When Hector flew down from the mountain on his undead dragon, he threw bolts of red lightning. We know he was a Death Caster, but he could have had other affinities. In any case, he was powerful. Victor fought him more closely. Maybe he could tell you something.”

“Right, well, who knows when he’s coming out of that prison dungeon? I’ll talk to Lesh about the Class choices, but I’m pretty settled on the Chaos Sorcerer.” Darren leaned back and tried to enjoy the view. His two companions grew quiet, the mood soured by Lam’s reminiscence of Hector, Catalina, and their army’s near-pyrrhic victory over the ambushing undead. The flying mechanical bird proved faster than their earlier carriage, and they arrived back at the lake house much more quickly than Darren had anticipated.

Lam paid the coachman, and then they went their separate ways—Edeya and Lam to unwind and Darren to seek out Lesh. Darren cornered one of Dar’s house staff and asked where he might find Lesh. The young woman squinted her angular yellow eyes, smiled, and looked down submissively as she pointed toward the deck. If Darren hadn’t thought it too wild a notion, he might have thought she was being shy and that a bit of color had tinged her pale green cheeks. As the thought struck

him, he grinned and turned back to her. "I'm sorry, but what's your name? I'm embarrassed that I've waited so long to ask."

She continued to gaze toward Darren's feet as she wrung her hands. "I'm Wensa, sir."

"Well, please call me Darren. I'm nobody special. I'm only here," Darren gestured to the beautifully appointed parlor, "because of the people I know."

"Thank you, Darren." Her voice had a lilting quality that sounded almost melodic, and Darren found himself grinning stupidly as he savored the sound. After a moment, the silence became awkward, and he cleared his throat and gestured toward the deck.

"I'll go find Elder Lesh. Thanks again." She ducked her head again, and Darren quickly hurried out the door, suddenly flustered by his brazen behavior—it wasn't like him. How many pretty women had he admired in his life and never approached? Too many to count, he decided. Lesh wasn't on the deck, so he stepped to the railing and peered down at the lake. Sure enough, his mentor's giant, scaly form was stretched out on the pier, soaking in the afternoon sun.

Darren hurried down the steps, and, as his footfalls echoed hollowly on the pier, Lesh lifted his fang-lined snout to peer lazily at him. "Fosterling. Your pride swells your aura."

"I hit level ten, Elder Lesh!"

"And you've chosen a Class?"

"I have a preference, but I wanted your advice."

Lesh grunted and used one of his thick arms to push himself into a sitting position. Darren could feel the heat radiating off his black scales. How long had he been lying there? "Well, tell me, then."

Darren nodded and sat down before his mentor, crossing his legs before himself. He took a few minutes to review his four options and, as Lesh yawned and stretched, said, "I won't take a basic Class because it seems like a weakling's decision. I'm not trying to find the easiest route to level. If I had an option higher than advanced, I'd take that, too." Lesh grunted, nodding, and Darren forged ahead, "I think the Class that seems tailored to both of my affinities is the one I should take. Not only will I, hopefully, learn some chaos spells, but I'll be able to support my friends with a caster's abilities."

Lesh cleared his throat, summoned a bottle of pale green liquid, and took a long pull. Darren could smell the eye-watering alcohol vapors as Lesh exhaled a sigh of pleasure. "Good logic, but let me ensure you understand something: All sorts of folks can gain 'caster's abilities,' as you label them. Victor can do things with Energy that would make many pure 'casters' jealous. Of course, someone who specializes in intelligence and will and takes Classes focused on ranged spells and support abilities will generally be better at spell casting, but don't assume a man in heavy armor and carrying a massive weapon won't be a dangerous Energy user."

"Understood."

“Other than that small flaw in your logic, I agree with your decision. Taking a Class meant to take advantage of both of your affinities now will open better options for you at level twenty. Don’t be concerned with your strength and agility. You’re young, and your future options may well shore them up a bit. If not, we’ll find natural treasures to improve you physically, at least to the point where you won’t suffer from the imbalance.”

Darren’s ears had begun to woosh with the rush of blood in his excitement as Lesh signaled his agreement—he was about to take his first Class! “I can take it?”

Lesh chuckled and took another swig of liquor. When he belched, the mist that wafted away from his snout was green, and Darren took a step back as a hint of chlorine tickled his nose. “Yes. I’m glad you sought my advice, but this decision is yours.”

Darren didn’t need to hear more than that. He opened his status page, selected the Class selection menu, and touched the option for Chaos Sorcerer.

*****Congratulations! You have gained your first Class: Chaos Sorcerer.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a Class skill: Sense Chaos – Basic.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a Class spell: Chaos Storm – Basic.*****

*****Sense Chaos – Basic: This ability allows you to discern the latent chaos Energy in a given area, thing, or being. Finding chaos is the first key to understanding it and allows for its cultivation.*****

*****Chaos Storm – Basic: Calling on the nature of Chaos and the power of elemental lightning, you create an area of tumultuous, chaotic Energy. The area's size depends on the Energy provided to the spell. Inside the Chaos Storm, any living being will be subject to random electrical discharges that can have the following effects: 1. Direct lightning-based damage, 2. Short, random teleportation, 3. Medium-duration stun, or 4. Temporary madness. This spell will not discern between friend and foe at the basic level. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 – scalable. Cooldown: Medium.*****

Book 8: Chapter 33: Rumble Town

“They don’t seem threatening nor particularly dangerous.” Arcus was staring at the two men guarding the “gatehouse” of the town as he spoke, and Victor had to agree with him. One of the men was sitting on his butt, leaning back against the rough-stone wall while idly tossing pebbles. The other sat on one of the stone blocks haphazardly scattered near the half-built structure. She was preoccupied with some dice, repeatedly tossing them on the flat rock beside her. Neither wore much in the way of armor, nor had they touched the spears leaned against the nearby wall.

It had taken Victor and his companions the better part of a day to make the trek through the ruins and hills, but as they approached the town, Arona had solidified her certainty that Rasso Hine was within; her scouting ghost had—according to her—seen a man being addressed as such. It gave Victor some comfort knowing that the day they’d spent in the dungeon would hopefully be the only

one; he didn't want to be gone from Sojourn for weeks or months. "Already been away nearly seven days on the outside," he muttered.

"That's right, so let's get this over with." Arcus nudged Arona with his red metal rod. "They'd be fools to outright attack the three of us." He'd nudged Arona because she was the one who'd urged caution, saying they should observe the town for a while before approaching. Victor hadn't argued, but, in this instance, he was inclined to agree with Arcus. Why not get things over with?

"If you want caution, Arona, let me approach the entrance. You and Arcus can back me up if shit goes sideways."

Arona had been crouching behind a stack of broken stone blocks, but she turned and arched a sharp, black eyebrow at his words. "You trust us for such a duty?"

Victor chuckled as his earlier words came back to bite him. "Okay, don't rub it in. Just look me in the eyes and tell me if you'll have my back." He stared at her, and those black eyes widened slightly as she straightened up and stepped in front of him, never breaking eye contact.

"I will aid and support you if the denizens of yonder community seek to do you harm." She spoke gravely, her rough voice rasping the words as she carefully enunciated every syllable. Victor held her gaze for another few seconds, then nodded and turned to Arcus.

"You gonna betray me?"

He grinned, and one of his eyes blazed with inner flames. "Not today, Victor."

"Fair enough." Victor slid down the slope behind them into a small gully, then cleared his mind and summoned Guapo, using glory-attuned Energy. The mighty stallion burst from a pool of sparkling, golden Energy and lifted his hooves in the air, whinnying loudly. Victor laughed, then swung onto the massive horse's back, letting him prance forward and back for a few steps. At first, Arona scowled at his display, but a corner of her mouth twitched upward as he continued to show off. Arcus snorted a short laugh and glanced through the stacks of broken stones.

"They're looking this way."

"Good; they'll see me coming in a second." Victor mentally urged Guapo forward, and the horse bounded out of the gully, rounding the small hill where Arcus and Arona still watched. Then, he pounded down the slope toward the steep trail leading up to Rumble Town. They'd gotten a pretty good look at the place from their vantage. The town was situated in a natural cleft in the mountainside, forming a sort of canyon. Though a low, ramshackle wall had been built to block the entrance, it was easy to see the hundred or so buildings built up around the walls of the narrow box canyon.

The trail switch-backed up the mountainside and was probably half a mile long, so it only took Guapo a few minutes to thunder his way up to the clearing before the gate. By the time Victor arrived, the two guards had clambered to their feet and stood with spears held ready. Victor could feel their auras; they were weighty but nothing near as substantial as those of Arcus or Arona. Even setting aside the fact that their equipment was lackluster, Victor figured he could take them both if he had to.

“Halt!” the man bellowed, and Victor pulled Guapo up short. The stallion snorted sparks and danced, each of his hooves thudding

like bass drums on the firm, stony soil. Victor regarded the two guards from within his monstrous helm, and he could see their resolve weakening as they glanced toward each other for support.

The woman was covered with dirty orange hair, from her arms to her shoulders and even her face—the rest of her was hidden behind a dirty brown cloak and well-oiled, stained leather armor. She had a round, pink nose under big, green eyes, and her mouth spread in a decidedly feline grin as she said, “Go get Ronkerz,” to her companion. As he turned and slipped through the gate, she looked back at Victor, and he thought he caught the soft rumble of a purr in her voice as she asked, “New around here?”

“Yeah, that’s accurate. The place is certainly a lot different from the dungeon I expected.”

“Oh? Thought you’d find some tunnels and monsters and a bunch of old prisoner bones?” She lowered her spear, and Victor saw her nostrils twitch as she looked him up and down. “You’re no prisoner, are you? Nobody gets sent into hell with a bunch of pretty armor and weapons. Are you one of them? One of the bastards who sent us here?”

Victor grinned as her purr turned into a snarl. “Nah, you ever heard of an iron ranker on the Sojourn City Council? I’m just an asshole who owes them a debt.”

“Oh? That right? What kind of debt?” As she spoke, Victor couldn’t help noticing how a crowd was gathering on the dirt road behind the gate. He frowned at that thought—why call it a gate? It was just two short walls of roughly stacked stone blocks that narrowed the canyon’s entrance; no door was attached. Still, people were gathering on the other side—all sorts of people. He saw human-looking folks, Fae, avian, and beastkin. Some were the size of giants, and some were much smaller. All in all, there had to be a hundred people forming the crowd, and he could see signs of many more coming from the tumbledown structures of the town.

“I need to find someone and ask a few questions.” Victor and the others had decided that announcing they needed to get Rasso Hine out of the dungeon wouldn’t be wise, not to a bunch of inmates. If the denizens of the prison knew they could take someone out with them, things could get ugly fast. Seeing the

number of inmates gathered at “Rumble Town” only reaffirmed Victor’s conviction in that plan. Even if he and the others could win in an all-out, mad free-for-all, he didn’t relish the idea of slaughtering a bunch of starved, ill-kept inmates.

“Oh? That right? Someone like me?” The purr had re-entered her voice.

“Maybe.” Victor sent a little Energy into his armor-changing runes and smiled as his helmet and heavy armor converted to clothing. He gently patted Guapo’s neck as he directed his grin to the cat-woman. “Are you the leader around here?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but a basso voice echoed from behind the wall, “That’d be me, stranger.” As the words hit his ears, an aura fell over Victor that almost made him grimace. Guapo snorted and took a few sparking steps back, but Victor growled and pressed his knees into the Stallion’s sides, and he pranced forward, deliberately lifting each hoof in a showy act of defiance in the face of the heavy aura.

“I’m Victor,” he called to the opening, wondering why he couldn’t see the man with the deep, echoing voice.

“I’m Ronkerz,” the booming voice replied, and this time it was behind him. Guapo whirled with a whinny, lifting his front legs and snorting. Victor scowled when he laid eyes on the man who’d startled his mount. Ronkerz was a giant—a hulking, black-furred gorilla of a man. His arms were like tree trunks, and his knuckles, quite literally, dragged on the stone ground. He really did resemble a gorilla, with a few notable differences. His eyes were angular and shrewd and glowed with violet Energy. His mouth was more of a muzzle, with a long snout and big canines that made Victor think of a bull terrier more than a gorilla. Finally, he wore armor—thick steel-plated armor with gleaming, needle-sharp spikes on the shoulders.

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Victor slid off Guapo, gave his rump a slap, and then sent the mount back to the spirit plane. As the glittering golden fog of his departure faded, Victor stepped toward Ronkerz and held out a hand. “Good to meet you.” It wasn’t lost on Victor that Ronkerz didn’t hold a weapon, nor did he assume the man needed one to inflict some damage—his fists looked like wrecking balls.

Ronkerz narrowed his shrewd-looking eyes and then took a lumbering step closer. He was probably about Victor’s height but half-again as broad. When he swung one of his long arms out and grasped Victor’s hand, the power in that grip was apparent. It had been a while since Victor had trouble getting his fingers around a person’s palm, but he grinned as he squeezed what he could and felt the other man’s powerful fingers struggle to compress his flesh—even the little bones in his hands were made of the stuff of titans and wouldn’t bend easily.

“So, you come seeking an inmate?” Ronkerz asked as he released his hold and let his knuckles fall to the ground.

“That’s right. I guess he has some information that’s important to the city’s safety.”

“And we should care?”

Victor shrugged. “My understanding is that the city maintains this dungeon. Not sure what would happen if the city stone were destroyed—”

“Bah! Impossible!”

“Is it? Have you ever seen an invasion led by veil walkers? Sojourn’s a ripe target for some of the darker corners of the universe.” Again, Victor spoke from prepared talking points. It had been Arona’s idea to play up the invasion angle. Even prisoners generally wanted to continue existing, and the idea that an invasion might lead to the dungeon’s destruction was the only card they could think to play to get some cooperation from the inmates.

“Oh?” Ronkerz lifted one of his thick, powerful digits and scratched at the short, black fur atop his head. “What about your friends lurking on yonder rock pile?”

Again, Victor shrugged. “We didn’t know what to expect.”

Ronkerz huffed a breath out his nostrils, and the dust on the ground stirred at the powerful exhalation. Something in Victor stirred, and he found himself wondering what it would be like to fight the man. He remembered what Arona had said about how Ronkerz had beaten four steel seekers when he was just a tier-seven iron ranker. Something in Victor’s chest began to swell with excitement as he imagined testing his strength against the formidable man.

Ronkerz must have seen something in his expression because he took a step back, and a deep, rich chuckle welled out of him. “Hah! Who did those fools send in here? You look like a dog eyeing a bitch in heat.” He stepped closer, putting his fang-filled snout just inches from Victor’s face. “If you want to test yourself, boy, stick around; I may give you the chance.”

Once upon a time, having a man call him “boy” like that might have set Victor off. His rage surged in his Core, but it was easy enough to hold it there. With a slight twitch of his will, he expanded the fiery, white-gold center of his Core and allowed a wave of inspiration to wash into his pathways. With a fierce grin, he nodded and thumped the thick metal plate on the side of Ronkerz’s boulder-like shoulder. “I’d like that. In the meantime, would you mind if I called my companions closer? We could use a break. Been hiking through this damn dungeon for nearly a day, and that was after a bunch of scoundrels tried to ambush us at the entrance.”

Ronkerz stared at him for several tense heartbeats, but then he, too, grinned, and it was quite a fierce expression on his animalistic face. “Call them over. We can bargain for what you need.” Victor had been facing him throughout their entire conversation, but he was peripherally aware that a considerable crowd

had formed on both sides of the gate and even atop the wall. Ronkerz turned and bellowed in a voice that echoed and reverberated through the narrow box canyon. "Get back to work! If I have a fight, you'll damn well know it!"

Victor didn't have to look to know that the denizens of Rumble Town knew who their boss was. He could hear their hurried steps as they scurried to do as he commanded, scattering into the canyon and the narrow streets and ramshackle buildings it contained. As they dispersed, Victor stepped closer to the trail leading down the slope and raised his arm, waving toward the hill where he knew Arona and Arcus lurked, watching. A few moments later, he and Ronkerz watched Arcus, red as a Christmas candle, and Arona, another shadow among many, walk down to the trail and climb toward the canyon entrance.

"Tell me who it is you seek," Ronkerz demanded as the two spell casters fell out of view on the steep trail.

"Rasso Hine."

Ronkerz hummed or growled—Victor wasn't sure—in his throat but didn't say more. He was content to wait; he'd done fairly well, in his opinion, but was eager to let Arona or Arcus do some talking, bargaining, or whatever it would take to get Ronkerz to hand over Hine. While they waited, Victor glanced back at the canyon and saw only the two gate guards remained, though a few people could be seen lingering near the dirt road that led into the center of the town. Without thinking, he let his thoughts escape his mouth, "Must be hard as hell to live in a place like this. Does the sun ever come out?"

"No sun in this world," Ronkerz rumbled. "No good soil. No game animals. Some fish and slugs can be found in the deeper caves. Some clever fools over the centuries have managed to bring in some seeds. Not on purpose, mind you; no one goes into prison thinking they'll need to farm. Still, there must be some council members who take pity on fools like us and have sent prisoners in with sacks of fruit and vegetables. With the right Energy, we can get some things to grow in this damned soil." As he spoke, Ronkerz's voice became more and more pleasant, less gruff, and, if Victor closed his eyes, he couldn't make the smooth, well-enunciated words match up to the gorilla-like giant standing beside him.

Before he could respond with a comment or another question, Arcus came into view, sheathed in flames, floating along the trail. Victor snorted derisively; of course, the man had to make a showy entrance. Arona, just a short distance behind him, had no such qualms. She grunted softly as she climbed the steep slope using her ivory staff as a walking stick. "Ronkerz," Victor said, gesturing to the two arrivals. "This is Arcus, and behind him is Arona."

Arcus settled to the ground, and his flames faded to a faint flicker that limned his shoulders as he bowed. "I've heard much about you. It may please you to know that your name still strikes fear into the hearts of the Sojourn elite."

Ronkerz snorted a huff of air, and the flames on Arcus's shoulders flickered and faded. Victor raised an eyebrow as he saw Arcus flinch back. Arona stepped forward and sketched a stiff, formal bow. "Lord of Greatscarp, I greet you and offer you the regards of my master, Vesavo Bonewhisper."

"Vesavo still haunts those gaudy towers?" Ronkerz leaned close to Arona; she was tiny in his shadow—a thin, pale figure with a great, hairy, armor-clad monster looming over her. Even so, she didn't flinch as his big nostrils twitched, and he snuffed the air around her. "Yes, I remember that scent. Interesting."

The way he said "interesting" left Victor wondering at the layers that word contained. Was he simply interested in the fact that Arona was Vesavo's apprentice? Or was he concerned? Dismayed? Did it impact his plans? What were his plans? Victor could have wondered about a thousand similar questions but forced his mind to be quiet; he'd only learn by talking to the man and seeing what came. "Ronkerz has agreed to bargain with us," he said, hoping to get the ball rolling again.

"Indeed." Ronkerz turned and lifted one of his long, powerful arms, gesturing toward the town. "I'd invite you to a feast, but I doubt you'd enjoy our fare. Perhaps you have some rations you might share?"

Victor glanced at Arona and Arcus, hoping they'd answer, but they both looked preoccupied. Arcus looked like he'd seen a ghost, and Arona was pensive, her eyes distant. "I've got food to spare, Ronkerz. Let's sit down and talk."

Ronkerz shifted, and his shrewd, violet eyes regarded Victor. "I didn't expect you to be the leader." Victor opened his mouth to protest but stopped short as the bulky simian turned and lumbered toward the gate. What had he meant? Could he tell Victor wasn't as high level as the others? Did he think the "leader" would be one of the casters who hung back? Did he believe Victor didn't have leadership qualities? He almost laughed as his mind raced. He shook his head and pushed the disquiet down, reminding himself, once again, that clarity would come with time.

He followed Ronkerz past the gate guards and could hear Arona and Arcus walking behind him. They were still quiet, and he wondered if Ronkerz had dropped the full force of his aura on them. He wanted to question them, to speak softly about what they thought of the situation, but, giant as he was, that wasn't an option. He was a little annoyed at himself for revealing his actual size. If he'd reduced himself, he could have saved his full strength as a bargaining chip. Not only that, but he would have been able to walk more closely to Arona and Arcus and gauge their moods. It would surely draw too much attention if he made himself small now.

Victor contented himself by looking over his shoulder, down at the much smaller man and woman. He raised an eyebrow, and Arcus shrugged with something of a smirk on his face. Oddly, the haughty expression gave Victor some comfort; Arcus was still his pretentious self. Arona pressed her darkly-stained lips together and gave him a firm nod. The look said plenty—she was ready to deal with whatever sort of bargain or trouble Ronkerz had in store.

Those thoughts made Victor think of an ambush, so he turned his attention to the town as they walked. The buildings were largely built from stone, with mud and clay used as mortar. The little wood he could find on roofs or shoring up leaning walls looked ancient and dry, and he wondered if it was scavenged from the lairs of the dungeon's monsters. He could picture the planks as part of ancient "ruins" where undead might spawn. None of the buildings were tall, and most were built

against the canyon walls. Victor figured the citizens of Rumble Town gained a lot of square footage by carving caves out of the cliffsides.

They were about two hundred yards past the gate when he saw the first children. Dirty faces with wide eyes watched from corners and dark alleys between structures. They wore rags and looked half-starved. Victor felt his rage stirring again. The whole place was wrong. He could understand banishing a powerful, dangerous figure like Ronkerz. Victor didn't know his story, but even if he had been in the right, he was a grown man who'd reaped the consequences of his own conflicts. You couldn't say the same for all of these children. There had to be a better solution.

Ronkerz led them to the end of the road, an open square where the dirt had been cleared away from the hard stone bedrock. It was probably fifty yards across, and all around it, the canyon walls were lined with rough buildings and shoddy ladders that led up to open caves. Hundreds of people lingered around. They stood in clusters near buildings, sat in cave mouths with their legs dangling, and lined the rough stone walls separating one rough building from another. They reminded Victor of an audience, and, as he looked around the square, he understood why; they were standing in the center of an arena—a fighting pit. As the understanding struck him, a flash of insight lit up his eyes, and he glanced at Arona and Arcus and grinned. “Rumble Town.”

Book 8: Chapter 34: Big Ones

Ronkerz turned to face the three of them, and that's when the nature of their situation became clear to everyone, not just Victor—the giant simian had no intention of bargaining, at least not with words. To drive the point home, a line of hulking, armored figures filed out of the center-most cave opening and took up positions in a semi-circle behind Ronkerz. Victor felt his lips begin to stretch into a grin as he took their measure.

If he'd wondered why everyone he'd run into, save Ronkerz, had been dressed in rags and wielding low-quality weapons, the answer was becoming apparent. If Victor had to guess, he'd say that the denizens of Rumble Town paid for their relative safety by pooling their resources. They took their loot from monster spawns and their scavenged items and gave them to Ronkerz, who distributed the equipment to these men and women.

“These are my Big Ones,” Ronkerz announced, spreading his arms in an impressively wide gesture. As he said “Big Ones,” the thirteen men and women pounded their weapons in a reverberating boom-boom, smashing them on shields or onto the hard stone ground.

“Lord Ronkerz,” Arcus said, looking left to right at the line of heavily armored, mostly gigantic, warriors. “I must confess that the ambiance of this gathering has begun to evoke a rather unsettling premonition. I might go so far as to speculate that the atmosphere suggests an imminent display of hostility—”

“Hah!” Ronkerz barked a deep, rough laugh that sent spittle flecking over the short black hairs on his chin. “Hostility? We live in hell, boy!”

Arona tried another approach, “We’re your guests. You invited us in.”

“I invited you to bargain, and we’ve got only one way of doing that in Rumble Town—”

“Fighting,” Victor interrupted. He sent a stream of Energy into the runes on his armor, and suddenly, he was bedecked in his snarling draconic helm and armor. “Great. How’s this work?” His voice echoed, enlarged by the magic in the lava king’s maw. He didn’t remember reaching for Lifedrinker, but she was in his right hand, her head aglow with glowering red Energy and her haft twitching with eagerness.

“Victor.” Arona reached for his arm, but if she grabbed him, he didn’t feel it; she was too small and his gauntlet too thick. He had eyes and ears only for Ronkerz. Ever since Arona had told him about how Ronkerz had wound up in the prison, something in him had wanted to fight the warrior. He wanted to test his mettle against a man who was—

“You think you can touch me, boy?” Ronkerz interrupted his rambling thoughts, leaning toward him with a curled lip. “I was chewing up steel seekers before I got put in here, and that was four centuries ago! You think I haven’t found my own steel by now?”

“You’re a veil walker?” Arona asked, her voice hushed. Victor glanced down at her and saw her eyes were wide and that she’d taken a step back. He was just turning back to Ronkerz when the giant blurred and, with a sickening wet pop, snatched ahold of Arcus’s right arm and ripped it off at the shoulder. To Victor’s amazement, the arm shimmered with bright blue light and then disappeared. Meanwhile, Arcus had fallen backward, stumbling for two steps before succumbing to gravity and falling onto his butt. Crimson blood pumped into the torn sleeve of his robe, sluicing onto the stone ground.

The crowd cheered, and the assembled “Big Ones” smashed their weapons again. Boom-boom. “Tried to leave the party early, boy?” Ronkerz rumbled a deep, mocking chuckle. “Drink a healing draught before you’re too weak to entertain the people.”

Victor felt his eagerness to fight evaporate. Ronkerz had ripped Arcus’s arm off so fast that he hadn’t been able to track it. Moreover, Arcus hadn’t even been able to utter a spell to defend himself. In fact, Ronkerz had moved so quickly that he’d interrupted the recall spell, sending the recall charm and Arcus’s severed arm out of the dungeon. How could someone that bulky and powerful

move so damn fast? The Quinametzin pride that had been eager to test itself against the brute was suddenly nowhere to be found; it was almost enough to make Victor laugh.

“That was unkind,” Arona said, and Victor noted she’d moved her staff into a defensive position. She wasn’t planning to let Ronkerz rip her arms off. Arcus’s face was ashen, and he hadn’t moved to drink a potion. He seemed dumbstruck, utterly shocked by the horror of his ruined arm. Victor didn’t want him to bleed out, especially if they were going to be fighting for their lives for Rumble Town’s amusement, so he lifted one of the healing potions Master Yon had given him from his baldric and pulled the cork stopper. While Ronkerz watched, Victor leaned over and tilted the oily red liquid into Arcus’s mouth.

The crowd’s raucous cheer had died down, and Victor began to get the feeling that they were sort of play-acting, responding as tradition dictated. The people, the “Big Ones,” even Ronkerz—they all behaved like they were putting on a show, and he wondered how much of their lives in the bleak dungeon-world were dedicated to strange ritual entertainment.

Arcus greedily slurped the potion down, and his color immediately improved. The blood sputtering from his shoulder ceased, and he gasped, taking a deep breath. He looked at Victor and nodded. “Thank you. I...” He frowned and looked at his shoulder. “I...” Victor followed his gaze to see something wriggling under the torn fabric of his robe. “I—ah! D-did, er, was that a regeneration p-pot—” Arcus’s words broke off in a wail of surprise and disgust as a black, slippery tentacle began to probe its way out of his robe.

“What the fuck?” Victor stepped back as the tentacle continued to grow longer and thicker, stretching outward from Arcus’s shoulder. It was lined on one side with tiny, pink suckers but was otherwise jet-black. “Dude, Master Yon told me they were regenerative potions. He said they were his best work!”

“Yon? That shit-eating bird gave you those potions?” Arcus wailed, leaping to his feet. His new appendage waved about, out of control, and Arcus grimaced with a mixture of pain and disgust as he fought to get it under control. “One of his experiments, no doubt! Gods damn it!”

Halting at first, then with more and more volume and intensity, Ronkerz began to laugh. His great chest heaved with the sound as he roared, “Hah! Ha! Hah! Oh, dead gods, the beauty of it. Yes, young Pyromancer, rejoice, for now, a part of your body reflects the dark stain on your soul.”

Arcus whirled on the man, his eyes wild with frustration, pain, anger, and a dozen other emotions—Victor had no doubt. “What do you know of my soul, fiend?”

“Only what I can see, which is much.” Ronkerz stared at Arcus for a couple of heavy seconds, but the pyromancer had stopped scowling at him and was now

preoccupied, staring intently at his new tentacle as he attempted to wrap its narrow end around his fallen black metallic rod. Ronkerz directed his gaze at Victor and Arona. “Well, are you three ready to hear my offer, or will we have more theatrics? Do either of you other fools wish to attempt to flee?”

Victor shrugged. “I’d rather keep my arms.”

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Arona watched Ronkerz warily as she rasped, “You have an offer?”

“I do!” he roared, lifting his arms wide again. His Big Ones bashed their weapons and shields, and the crowd cheered. The cacophony died down immediately when Ronkerz lowered his arms. “I’m sure you came here thinking to ply us with threats or a few trinkets or piteous scraps of food and liquor, hmm? Well, your fool masters should have warned you! They know I live! They fed the dungeon my blood

, just as they took that vital force from every one of the people they sacrificed to live in this hell! The dungeon crystal would have told them I reached my test of steel more than three centuries ago. The dungeon crystal would have told them I broke through!”

Ronkerz stopped to pace back and forth before his Big Ones. Some were larger than he, physically, but his presence made them seem small. They didn’t shrink back, however. They stood straight and tall, and Victor began to realize something—the denizens of Rumble Town didn’t fear Ronkerz; they worshipped him. He was a god incarnate to them. Being a Big One, in close proximity to the great man, was an honor everyone lining the cliff walls, the rooftops, the dirt streets, and the cave openings aspired to.

Ronkerz continued his rant, “So, they sent you to your doom, or they had some sort of mad confidence in your ability to deceive someone an order of magnitude more powerful than yourselves. No, we won’t take your pitiful offerings. You’ll play our games, and, if you prove worthy, we’ll give you Rasso Hine. If you prove unworthy, we’ll take everything you own and either kill you or add you to our ranks.”

“Ronkerz, wait—” Arona started to say, but he whirled on her and growled.

“Just Ronkerz, now? No ‘Lord of Greatscarp’? What happened to your pretty tongue, death sparrow?”

“I-I just want—”

“Irrelevant!” Ronkerz clapped his hands thunderously. “Let me introduce my thirteen Big Ones! My pride! After I honed my steel and breached my veil, I stopped hunting these lands and took on my first apprentice. That was two hundred years ago.” Ronkerz stepped to the center and rested his hand on a tall, avian woman’s shoulder. She had a notched beak and dark, dirty-looking

gray feathers, but her chainmail armor gleamed with power, and her curved saber rang like a crystal chime when she whipped it from its sheath. “Lira Stormclaw is that apprentice. Like most of my Big Ones, she’s a steel seeker, but I think she’s getting closer and closer. Aren’t you, my pretty bird?”

“I am, Lord Ronkerz.” Her voice was lyrical and breathy, and Victor could see the adoration in her big golden eyes as she stared at the great simian. Victor looked up and down the row of powerful warriors and wondered if the apish man was really going to introduce them all.

“Next to Lira is Gorruk the Crusher!” The crowd cheered, and Gorruk smashed his enormous gray hammer into his heavy, spiked shield. Ronkerz continued down the line, and each name brought forth cheers and a display of power from the Big One. Victor, never great with names, sort of zoned out and tried to concentrate on which warriors seemed like they’d be a threat to him. The answer was simple: all of them.

Despite his mind’s tendency to tune out details like names, some of them stood out—Zara Bloodmoon, an eight-foot, four-hundred-pound lupine woman with stark white fur and glowing crimson eyes, Thrak Ironfist, a man with hands and arms that were, literally, made of dark, blue-black metal, and Ulgor the Brutal, a mountain of muscle that loomed half-again as tall as Ronkerz. He was hunched with piles of veiny muscles stacked on his shoulders and back. His red, bloodshot eyes peering from beneath his thick, hairy brows looked decidedly insane.

After he finished, Ronkerz turned from the last of his Big Ones and regarded Victor, Arona, and Arcus. “Well? Are you suitably impressed?”

“Are—” Arcus started to speak, but his tentacle twitched violently, and he scowled and tried to grab it with his right hand, dropping his red scepter in the process. “Dammit!”

“Are?” Ronkerz glared his angular violet eyes at Arcus, then turned to regard Victor. “Will you speak for your distracted companion?”

“Um, I think he can speak.” Victor stepped closer to Arcus and reached down to snatch his writhing tentacle arm in his fist. Thankfully, it wasn’t slimy, but it certainly felt weird—pulsing and throbbing as it flexed, trying to move. “Pay attention, man! He’s going to rip your other arm off.”

Arcus scowled at him but nodded as the misbehaving appendage settled in Victor’s firm grasp. “I say, Lord Ronkerz, am I right in my understanding that these fine warriors are all beyond the iron ranks? I don’t understand how. Aren’t only iron rankers allowed in this dungeon?”

“Allowed in, yes, fool. We all were iron-ranked when we came to this hell.” Ronkerz ambled closer to Victor and Arona, his right fist acting as a third leg as he leaned on it, pressing his massive knuckles into the stone. “By now, you must be putting things together, yes? I said we settle bargains by fighting here in

Rumble Town, and then I introduced my Big Ones. What's in store for you? Hmm?"

"You want us to fight your champions," Arona rasped.

"Big Ones

!" Ronkerz roared and, for the first time, unleashed his true aura. Arona fell to her knees, tears of blood streaming out of her obsidian eyes. Victor stumbled back, and the tiniest voice in the back of his mind, crying out from a dark corner where he kept his deepest fears, told him to run. He glanced left and right and caught sight of Arcus, lying flat on his back, eyes squeezed shut, struggling to writhe away from Ronkerz. Seeing him like that, wriggling like a worm, woke something in Victor and, almost like a palpable whisper tickling his ear with her hot breath, he swore he heard Chantico's voice again. *"Do not break, child of the Sun. You are made of sterner stuff than that one."*

He looked away from Arcus, squared his shoulders, and stepped into the pressure of Ronkerz's will. He heard the screams of countless foes, felt the anger of a dozen lifetimes lived in captivity, tasted the bitterness of defeat, the hatred of a righteous man condemned, and the killing intent built from a hundred thousand brutal massacres. He had no right to stand against that weight but did it anyway. With eyes quivering in their sockets, bloody with burst vessels, he stared into Ronkerz's violet gaze as sweat erupted from his pores and his body shook with adrenaline.

"Oh, they chose you well, didn't they, boy? Do they hate you so much?" Like a switch being flipped, the aura was gone, and Victor could hear his heaving breaths and the rushing of his blood. He could hear Arona's soft gasps and Arcus's sobs. "Well, as your Death Caster Princess has surmised, you'll need to best one of my Big Ones. You'll each need to—one by one. No team fights, and, no, you don't get to pick which ones you'll be matched against. Tonight, I'll allow you to feed my people. We'll have a feast, and come the morrow, Rumble Town will watch you do battle!" He raised his voice at the last pronouncement, and, once again, the townsfolk cheered, and the Big Ones slammed their weapons.

Ronkerz stepped closer and lifted one of his massive hands. "Agreed?"

Victor regarded the hand, then looked at Arcus, still flat on his back, and Arona, slowly, shakily, struggling to stand. "To the death?"

"Death, unless you yield, yes. Understand this, however: should you yield, you will remain in this world with us. Don't get any ideas about using your recall charms—I'm watching."

Victor knew he couldn't argue. Ronkerz had already proved that he could kill them all easily. Just because he'd managed to remain on his feet while his aura was on display didn't mean Victor could fight under that strain. He had trouble

following the man's movements without that pressure; he had no delusions of being able to stand against him in combat. Something about breaking through to the "lustrous veil" seemed to lift powerful Energy users into legitimate demigod status. Was that what Ronkerz had going for him here? Was he a god among mortals in the prison dungeon? As he began to judge the man, Victor reminded himself that Ronkerz wasn't there by choice.

He reached out and clasped the rough-fleshed hand, and Ronkerz squeezed firmly but didn't try to dominate him. When he released the grip, the veil walker grinned, exposing his lupine fangs, and then he moved. One second, he stood before them, and the next, he was standing in the mouth of a cave a hundred yards up the cliff face. He bellowed, his basso voice booming and echoing in the canyon, "Rumble Town! Tonight, you FEAST! Tomorrow, there will be FIGHTS!"

The cheering was thunderous, and, despite everything, Victor found himself basking in it. He raised his arms and slowly turned in a circle, and the cheers intensified, bringing a fierce grin to his face. If he had to fight, then he'd give the Big Ones something to think about. He continued grinning as he tried to make eye contact with as many of them as he could. "Okay, pendejos," he said into the cacophony. "Which one of you suckers has to fight me? Don't everyone jump at once." His desire to intimidate them fell flat as most of the Big Ones roared and cheered, flailing their weapons in the air.

"Don't taunt them, fool!" Arcus hissed, and Victor looked to see he'd managed to get to his feet. Even so, Arcus looked terrible despite the healing elixir, or maybe because of it. Apparently, The tentacle was still struggling to move on its own, and Arcus was fighting to hold it still with his other hand, having stowed away both of his magical scepters. "Man, I'm sorry about that pinché tentacle. That asshole didn't tell me it would do that."

"I don't hold you to blame. I saw the bastard hand them to you before you stepped in. Besides, I was stupefied. I might have died had you not stepped in."

Arona moved beside Victor and coughed, clearing her throat before asking, "What are we supposed to do now?"

Victor looked around, noting how the Big Ones had all gone off to wherever people of their status spent their days. The townsfolk were moving again, no longer lining the "arena," as he'd come to think of the space. They were walking about, talking, carrying things—going about their usual business, he supposed. "I dunno. I have a lot of food, but I'm not sure I can feed hundreds of people. What about you two?"

Arcus ignored the question. "How, by the fate of all the elder gods, did that man enter his lustrous veil while trapped in this damned dungeon?"

“Hundreds of years of killing tier-nine monsters, I suppose.” Arona shrugged. “He was a prodigy before he was sent in here. I’m sure he made breakthroughs that some of our masters would kill to learn.”

“They’ll never let him out to ask. Think of the damage he could do!”

“Something tells me,” Victor said, rubbing his chin, turning slowly to look around the strange scenery of Rumble Town, “that Ronkerz is kind of biding his time. I’m not so sure a dungeon meant for iron-rankers can really hold a guy like him.”

Arona and Arcus grew quiet at that, and then they, too, began to look around, evaluating the place in the light of Victor’s words. It was Arona who spoke first. “He’s building an army.”

Book 8: Chapter 35: A Toast Before We Die

“The hell are we supposed to do?” Victor asked after he and his two companions stood in the arena for several minutes, staring around, watching the people of Rumble Town go about their business.

Arcus, still restraining his new appendage with his remaining hand, shrugged. “I imagine they’ll set something up for the feast and give us some instructions. I would hope...” He looked around with a sour expression, his once-fiery eyes mere embers, glowing faintly in their dark hollows. “I’d almost rather they just made us fight now—nothing worse than stretching out your neck, waiting for the ponderous drop of the headsman’s axe.”

Arona leaned against her tall, ivory staff and sighed. “I have foodstuffs, though they aren’t exactly gourmet—barrels of spring water, some wheels of cheese, a few crates of flatbread, and crocks of honey. They’re remnants from a campaign I led on Brun-Jun, just some rations I’d held as an emergency reserve.”

Arcus nodded. “I, too, have a plethora of rations from various training expeditions. That’s not accounting for my own meals, stowed away from restaurants I enjoyed over the years. It’s probably about time I cleaned out my containers.”

“Yeah,” Victor grunted. “Same. I’m sure that’s what Ronkerz had in mind when he volunteered us to provide the feast.” As though their words had summoned them, a trio of comically mismatched inmates emerged from a cave carrying a long, surprisingly well-made wooden table. Looking at the delicate, polished wood, Victor supposed that if a powerful Energy user was a craftsman outside the prison, they might still be able to work some magic with the materials in the dungeon.

As they set the table in place near the center-rear of the open “arena,” one of the inmates, a short, fuzzy ball of white fur, motioned at it and loudly squeaked, “Feast go here!”

“Thanks.” Victor waved a hand, acknowledging the strange creature’s words. In a much quieter voice, he asked, “The hell is that guy?”

“Shratling,” Arcus hissed, “Native to a world one jump from Sojourn.”

“Usually mischievous, but not outright criminal. I’m surprised to see one here,” Arona added.

“Come on. Let’s load this table up and get things moving. I’m ready to get this business done.” Victor followed his own directive and began pulling casks of his cheaper wine, bushels of fruit, platters of snacks, meats, sandwiches, soups, deserts, and several other dozen dishes from his storage rings. The truth was, he was a food hoarder. Whenever he tasted something he enjoyed, he tended to buy a surplus of it and store it away. He wondered what that said about him. Conversely, he wondered what it meant that he felt a weird sense of relief cleaning all those random bits of food out of his rings.

Arona and Arcus were, likewise, piling supplies and food on and under and to the sides of the table. Victor, of course, had started with things he didn’t value much, but once he’d pared it down to a few dozen platters of his favorites, he slowed, stepping back to watch his companions as they unloaded. When the entire twelve-foot table was laden with food, with baskets and crates stacked beneath it and kegs and barrels lined up to the sides, the puffball stepped out of the cave again and squealed, “Enough! You come with me! Rest before fights!”

“Hah,” Victor chuckled, “looks like we’re not invited to the feast.”

“Not!” the weird, four-foot-tall ball of dirty white hair confirmed.

“Seems inhospitable,” Arona rasped, taking the lead, following the creature as it glided into the cave opening. Victor decided it must have arms and legs obscured by all that fur because it didn’t exactly bounce or roll. The cave wasn’t very impressive—a long, low-ceilinged gallery that stretched about a hundred feet into the cliffside. Glowing amber and white lamps on the sides revealed passages and hanging ropes, but their guide didn’t take them beyond that first space. Instead, he or she or it—Victor had no idea what was appropriate—pointed to a rickety table and benches in the far corner beneath a dim, amber glow lamp.

“Wait.” After the pronouncement, the “Shratling” glided away, bobbing slightly as it moved.

Arcus, grimacing as he wrestled his tentacle, huffed and stomped over to the table to sit. Arona and Victor exchanged a glance and then followed him. Victor didn’t want to reduce his size to make the bench comfortable, so he pulled one of his large-sized camp chairs out of storage and sat down to the side, facing both his companions. “Not a great situation.”

His words brought a snort of amusement out of Arcus, and the man shook his head ruefully. “No, not great. If I didn’t think Ronkerz would rip all our limbs off for trying, I might suggest we use the remaining recall tokens now.”

Arona snorted. “Victor and I have recall tokens that take time to activate. It’s interesting that Roil gave you one that fired almost instantly.”

Arcus shrugged, flopping his tentacle around. “Not instantly enough.”

Victor changed the subject; he already took it as a given that Roil wouldn’t play fair. “Could Ronkerz really do that? Get here fast enough to interrupt the recall?”

Arona regarded him with an arched eyebrow. “Ronkerz is a veil walker. He could be standing beside you, and if he didn’t want you to know, you wouldn’t.”

“That big a difference, huh?” Victor spat to the side and shrugged. “Go ahead and judge me; before I met Ranish Dar, I’d never spent time with a veil walker.” As he said the words, he began to doubt their veracity; the more he learned about the stages beyond the “iron ranks,” the more he suspected Tes had passed her test of steel and would be labeled a veil walker by the people of Sojourn. It wasn’t hard for him to imagine that she could stand and observe them undetected if she so wished it.

“They call passing the test of steel a ‘breakthrough’ for a reason. Cultivators at that stage are on another plane, power-wise.” Arcus’s tone was pleasant as he explained, though punctuated with frequent grunts as he fought his tentacle.

“I know this sounds rough, Arcus, but maybe I should cut that damn thing off. If you can’t control it, it might do more harm than good.”

Arcus’s eyes widened in horror as he sharply disagreed, “No! I can already get it to move a bit—my mind is just learning to deal with a new type of limb.”

Victor raised his hands placatingly. “All right, all right. It was just a thought.”

Arona watched the pyromancer with slightly narrowed eyes, staring at the tentacle as it throbbed and pulled against the grip of Arcus’s hand. “What will your father think of that new appendage?”

“Gods damn my father,” Arcus snarled. “He and Roil both!” Arcus looked up toward the ceiling of the cave and cried, “I hope you can hear me, you shit-bred, demented, scheming lickspittles!”

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His outburst brought a chuckle out of Victor and a wide-eyed stare from Arona. She leaned forward, hissing, “Don’t tempt fate, fool! If Roil heard that—”

“Roil can lick my balls! I’ll be dead or trapped here after tonight, and that scheming old bastard knew. Don’t you dare tell me you disagree! Perhaps your masters, not being on the council, were unaware of Ronkerz’s status, but I assure you, Roil knew, and I’m quite sure my father put him up to this. Money! It all comes down to money!”

“Money?” Victor was enjoying this new side of Arcus. He almost felt bad that it took having his arm ripped off and being threatened with the prospect of a new life inside a dungeon to bring it out.

Arona looked at Victor and offered a half-shrug with one shoulder. “His father isn’t high-tier. He’s powerful due to the businesses and real estate he owns.”

Arcus nodded. “Power is power, regardless of its source, and my father’s well of riches runs very, very deep.”

Victor frowned, reclining in his chair and crossing his left foot over his right knee. “So, let me get this straight; you think your, uh, dad and your mentor are working together to screw you over?” He couldn’t keep a hint of amusement out of his voice.

“I don’t know!” Spittle flew as Arcus pounded his fist on the table. Victor watched his tentacle writhe for a moment, waiting for him to elaborate, but it was Arona who did so.

“Your master and mine, Victor, are at odds with the current majority on the council. It’s not surprising that we might be sent in here, against absurd odds, to retrieve Rasso Hine. If Arcus is correct, and the consuls know about Ronkerz being a veil walker, the only logical conclusion is that they hoped we’d get very lucky and find our target without running afoul of him. That, or they expected us to fail and never return from this place.”

Victor nodded. “But your master,” He gestured to Arcus, “Lord Roil—you’re sure he knows about Ronkerz?”

Again, Arcus rhythmically pounded his fist on the table as he spoke, “Roil has been in charge of this prison for millennia. I’m sure his close allies know its secrets—” His face froze momentarily as understanding seemed to flash behind his eyes. “Of course! The bastard! That’s why he added me to your team!”

“What is it?” Arona leaned in close to him.

Arcus barked a short, bitter laugh. “He’ll avoid accusations if his

apprentice also dies in this place.”

“None of this makes any fucking sense.” Victor shook his head. “Which is it? They want Rasso Hine, or they want us to die?”

“Don’t be simplistic, Victor.” Arcus saw Victor’s glare and rapidly held up his remaining hand. “No, I didn’t mean that as an insult. Think about this from my master’s perspective. He has two ends in mind. One, he wants to earn points with the other consuls by bringing Rasso out of the prison. Part of that was getting someone past the blockade—you did that. Two, he wants to weaken his adversaries, Vesavo and Ranish Dar. One way to do that is to deprive them of

their best students, two prodigies who embarrassed his own student.” Again, Arcus laughed bitterly.

“Yeah, but you guys just said there’s no way to get anything past Ronkerz...”

Arcus sighed heavily. “Again, Victor, please think of this from Lord Roil’s perspective. If we did find Rasso Hine and got out with him, all would be well; Roil could scheme for vengeance in another way. If, however, we ran afoul of Ronkerz? Well, as far as he knows, that would be the end of us all. He loses a recently disgraced student—one of many in his current class, I might add—but Vesavo loses his best apprentice, and Ranish Dar loses, if I’m not mistaken, his only one.”

Victor frowned at Arcus and his feebly twitching tentacle. “I thought you were the shit, man. You telling me you’re not Roil’s best student?”

“No. Perhaps in his top five before the Vault of Valor debacle. Now, I can barely get him to look my way. Add to that my father’s desire to be rid of me. Hah! He likely offered him a handsome sum to make it happen—”

“He wouldn’t!” Arona interrupted.

“Oh, he would! My mother is currently waging war against him on our homeworld.”

Victor’s eyebrows shot up at that. “Jesus. What about your sister?”

“Trin? Different mother. I have thirty-seven siblings, Victor.”

“And your dad’s not a veil walker?”

Arcus scoffed, “Hardly. Level fifty-three the last I heard.”

Victor let that sink in, processing everything Arcus had just dumped on him. In a way, he was beginning to understand his bitterness and almost felt a little sorry for him. He’d been an asshole, true, but he also had a lot of shit to contend with. Growing up, Victor had been lucky to have his abuela, and he might have had some problems with his cousins and even his aunties from time to time, but he couldn’t imagine having a father actively trying to get rid of him. Add to that a hard-ass master willing to toss you aside to win some points against his ancient enemies, and you had a recipe for resentment with a desperate need to rise above your peers. It explained a lot.

“You think Vesavo and Dar will fall for this shit?” he asked Arona.

“If we all fail to return...” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Victor drummed his fingers on Lifedrinker’s haft. “Well, I intend to return.”

“As do I.” Arona’s voice was raspy as usual, but there was an edge to it, a hardness. Victor saw that hardness reflected in her dark eyes.

“Gods!” Arcus said, holding his hand against his eyes in dismay. “If this had happened to me before the Vault of Valor—before I’d lost...” He trailed off and looked at Victor, then slumped his shoulders, sliding down on the bench so he nearly reclined against the table. “I used to be more confident, but I’m not so sure I’m up to the task of fighting a steel seeker.”

“They’re just at a higher level, right?” Victor was half trying to encourage Arcus and half trying to confirm what he thought he understood.

“Higher level, aye, and who knows how far along with their custom Class, their cultivation, their spell and skill mastery, their—”

“Arcus!” Arona reached over to grasp his shoulder. “You’re among the hardest-hitting casters in Sojourn, at least among the iron rankers. Take Victor’s advice and think of these ‘Big Ones’ as nothing more than iron rankers who’ve leveled past one hundred. For all we know, their training and cultivation are lacking. Vesavo has told me tales of steel seekers who were decidedly weaker than he was in his iron ranks.”

“That’s a good point.” Victor frowned, tempted to reveal his level and describe how easily he’d vanquished some of the tier-eight and nine combatants in the challenge. He decided not to, though, simply because he didn’t know what Arcus might do with that information once they were out of the dungeon. Instead, he said, “I’ve beat the shit out of some folks with dozens of levels on me. I mean, shit, these guys don’t even have good food. I know high-level cultivators don’t need much to eat, but think about it: how good could the training and cultivation they’ve been doing in this death-attuned dungeon be?”

Arona nodded. “There’s something to that; the Energy is weak in the air. Their Cores may not be up to the standards we’re used to.”

Arcus sighed. His tentacle flexed as he stared at it, and a large goblet of wine appeared in its coiled embrace. “I did it! I pulled this from my dimensional container with my new...arm.” Arona and Victor watched, holding their breath, as he stared at the goblet and ever so slowly began to raise it toward his mouth. The tentacle twitched and throbbed, but it seemed to be doing what he wanted. When he got the rim to his lip and took a shaky, slurping sip, Victor clapped his hands, and Arona laughed.

“Fuck! Nice one, man!”

“Hah!” Arcus crowed, but then the goblet tilted and poured out onto his red robes. He laughed harder as the liquid rolled onto the stone floor, leaving no hint of a stain. The sight of his pristine robes drew Victor’s eye to Arcus’s torn, bloody sleeve. It was utterly whole; his robe had cleaned and repaired itself. “I’ll master this damned thing yet!”

Arona’s black-stained lips were still curved in a broad, genuine smile, and she reached over to gently pat the Pyromancer’s back. “Well done, Arcus.”

“Making me thirsty.” Victor summoned a bottle of honeyed mead. He’d noticed the crate of bottles from Zaafor while putting out their “feast” and marked its location in his storage ring; it was one of his favorite alcohols. As he took a long pull, he heard the faint thump of a drum and, close behind it, the twang of stringed instruments. “Guess they’re getting their party started.”

“What a miserable existence,” Arona said, staring toward the distant glowing opening of the cave.

Arcus followed her gaze and, somewhat wistfully, said, “At least they have Ronkerz to support them. At least they have cause to celebrate.”

“Were you serious about your dad?” Victor asked. “I mean, if he wanted you dead, why...” He’d been about to ask why the man didn’t just kill him but let the words die on his tongue.

“As with anything political, it’s complicated—doubly so when you consider I’m his child. A death in the line of duty, serving the greater interest of the city, however? That will aid him politically.” Arcus stared at his tentacle, and, while Arona and Victor looked on, he forced it to pick up his goblet and tilt the dregs of his wine into his mouth. He managed it much more quickly and steadily than the first time.

“What does it feel like?” Victor gestured to the long, black appendage with its row of tiny, throbbing suckers.

Arcus reached over to squeeze the tentacle with his fingers, frowning slightly. “It feels like flesh. The, um, soft, pink part is very tender and sensitive, like a hundred fingertips. At first, I thought for sure I’d seek out Yon and demand some sort of restoration, but this new arm has some potential. It’s quite long if I stretch.” To illustrate, Arcus grimaced in concentration, and then his tentacle extended away from him, wriggling through the air toward Arona. Victor’s eyes bugged out as the narrow point began to probe toward her breasts, but she wasn’t having it. She swatted it away with a pale blue flash of Energy, and Arcus winced in pain. “Bitch!”

“Please,” she flatly sighed. “You’re lucky you still have your new limb attached.”

“I mean,” Victor chuckled, “you gotta have better judgment than that, man.”

“I wasn’t aiming for your chest, woman!” Arcus growled as he rubbed the tip of his tentacle. He sucked in his breath through his teeth, grimacing. “I just got through saying they’re sensitive!”

Arona ignored him, summoning a small wooden tray filled with candied fruits. “I suggest we have our own feast. It may be the last any of us will enjoy; if we lose our duels tomorrow, we’ll either be dead or stripped of our gear and enslaved to Ronkerz.”

Victor nodded. “I’ll drink to that.” He made good on his words, chugging the rest of his bottle of mead. He laughed and tossed his empty bottle to shatter against a nearby stone wall. Arona lifted one of her dark eyebrows, and Arcus chuckled. As the music grew louder and the noise of Rumble Town’s celebration echoed into their stony holding cell, they all began to pull out their favorite foods—things they’d held back from the feast.

Knowing he was probably watching them in one way or another, Victor held up a fresh bottle of mead. He didn’t like their situation, and he couldn’t say if he liked Ronkerz or not, but he had to admit, the giant simian demanded respect. “You know, Arona, considering your words—that this might be our last meal—how about a toast before we die? To Ronkerz!”

“Hah!” Arcus spat onto the stone floor but didn’t shrink away from the toast. He held up a fresh goblet of wine. “To Ronkerz!”

Arona, grinning with half of her mouth, seemed to recognize the irony of their actions. She narrowed her eyes briefly as she concentrated, and then a delicate flute of sparkling alcohol appeared in her slender fingers. Still smiling crookedly, she clinked it against Victor’s bottle and Arcus’s jeweled goblet. “To Ronkerz!”

Book 8: Chapter 36: Alpha Strike

Victor lay awake for most of the night after he and the others decided to get some rest. He wasn’t worried about being on top of his game or feeling groggy; he hardly needed sleep since his body had evolved to the “epic” stage, and if he got a few hours now and then, he always felt fine. So, while he listened to the sounds of Arcus muttering and sometimes whimpering and the soft, quiet breaths coming from Arona, he lay on his back and thought about everything he’d seen in the dungeon. What he kept coming back to was the children.

It bothered him to no end, knowing that everyone on the council could kill him; when he returned to Sojourn, he desperately wanted to go on an ass-kicking spree. He’d been away from Earth long enough to understand how power scaled when Energy was involved, but learning about veil walkers and their seemingly exponential increase in potency rubbed him the wrong way. He’d liked the fact that someone being ten or twenty levels higher than another person didn’t mean they could automatically dominate them. Being forced to recognize the superiority of all the people who’d passed their “tests of steel” rankled.

Nevertheless, Victor didn’t see a way around it. He simply had to watch his step and rely on his alliances and the customs and laws that seemed to protect the iron rankers from the veil walkers. Even the System seemed to enforce their

separation—Ronkerz should not be in this dungeon with all the iron rankers. In a way, Victor was comforted to see that the System wasn't without flaws. He liked that it could make mistakes; having some omnipotent, all-knowing force ruling over their lives was stifling. It felt good to know it wasn't perfect.

Aside from his fruitless pursuit of a solution for the children in the dungeon, he couldn't sleep because he was excited. In his mind, the whole situation was like being moved to a new, bigger school as a freshman and being expected to face off with the state champ just because he showed some talent. He chuckled at the idea; why did he still fall back on wrestling analogies? He'd fought a hell of a lot more with his axe in the last couple of years than he'd ever wrestled. He supposed it came down to formative years—memories integral to his personality.

He wondered which Big One Ronkerz would pit him against. Victor hadn't displayed many of his abilities since entering the dungeon, so he hoped Ronkerz was judging him by his appearance. He hoped he thought he was a brutish axe fighter without any finesse. Victor had quite a few tricks up his sleeve that even Arona and Arcus knew nothing about, even after watching his performance in the Vault of Valor. Thinking about that brought his mind around to how he felt his two companions would fare in their matches.

Arcus was suffering from a bruised ego, but Victor knew the mage could pack a punch. He hoped he'd pull something off and get away with a win. However, he was more interested in Arona's fight. He'd felt the depths of her power in her aura and was curious what a Death Caster like her could do in a one-on-one contest. He pictured their fights, his imagination running wild, then he drifted back to himself and began envisioning his own battle, running his moves through his mind, visualizing counters and counter-counters. The hours of the night slipped away, and though the sun never rose in the dungeon, he began to hear the sounds of people stirring outside the cave.

He was straining to hear a distant conversation when he felt a shift in Arona's soft, steady breaths, and then she whispered, "Did you sleep?"

"Nah," he whispered back, turning to look at her dim form atop a low cot between himself and Arcus. They were all lying on camping beds with blankets and sleeping bags—none of them had been willing to pull out their entire camp setups. Victor had a big tent and lots of furniture, and he was sure his setup paled compared to what the others had. Still, something had kept them modest—probably the knowledge that Ronkerz was watching them.

"You wondered if I was undead the other day. Now you know the truth of it; if I were, I wouldn't need to sleep."

"Ah. Never? I thought vampires slept while the sun was out."

"Vampires? Well, there are many types of undead. If I become one, I'll be more like my master—a lich." Her raspy voice took on a smoother, softer quality when she whispered, and Victor could almost imagine what she might have sounded like as a younger woman before she'd gotten involved with her death magic. She was obviously trying not to disturb Arcus because Victor had heard her whisper far more harshly near the lich-wyrm's lair.

Her mention of their earlier conversation brought a thought to Victor's mind. "Do you really hate your magic? Your master?"

"Shh!" she hissed. Arcus still breathed deeply, each exhalation steady and even, but Victor realized she feared the Pyromancer would hear him. "What I told you before is true, but please don't bring it up."

"All right. Sorry." Victor tried to shrug, but lying on his back, the movement didn't translate.

Arona shifted, and then her arm stretched out toward him. "Will you take this for me?" She held something dark that glinted with silver in the faint glow-lamp light. Victor reached out to grasp the object; it was about the size and shape of a socket wrench, and when his hand closed around it, he felt the deep, powerful well of cold Energy inside it. Arona let go, and he realized he was holding a dense, heavy bone. He pulled it closer, out of the shadows, to see it was dark, almost like it had been charred, and was inscribed with silvery runes. It seemed familiar.

"That's one of my best summons, the one I used against the lich-wyrm. He's not yet recovered, so I can't use him in the duel and..." She trailed off for a moment, then started again, her voice so quiet, Victor had to lean toward her to hear, "And if I die or have to surrender, I don't want to lose him to Ronkerz. You know he'll strip us if we surrender."

"What if I lose?" Victor clutched the heavy, cold bone, wondering what creature had once walked with it as part of its skeleton.

"I have a feeling Ronkerz will make you fight last. If I win, I'll take it back from you. If I lose and you lose, the end result would be the same."

Victor sighed and put the bone into the same container he'd gotten from Dar for his cultivation items. "Well, what do I do with it? You want me to give it to your master?"

"No!" Arona's raspy whisper became a hiss. "Do not tell him you have it! If you leave this place without me, then please, just take it to Dar's estate and bury it near those lovely orchards. I'll rest easier knowing my oldest, most loyal companion made it out of this place and that he's resting peacefully in such a beautiful setting."

Victor narrowed his eyes at her. It was strange hearing words like "lovely" and "beautiful" in conjunction with burying a bone and hiding the fact from her undead master. He leaned close and whispered in a voice so low there wasn't a chance Arcus could hear him, "You really do hate him, don't you?"

Arona's dark eyes seemed to grow luminescent in the dim light as moisture pooled in them. "I do, Victor. I hate him with every fiber of my being."

Victor drew a breath, ready to ask her a follow-up question, wanting to know more about Vesavo and what made Arona hate him, but then thudding footsteps sounded on the stony cave ground, and Victor knew their time was just about up; Ronkerz was approaching. He heard Arona shifting, sitting up, climbing out of her blankets. Victor did the same, stowing away his blanket and comfortable sleeping platform. He'd just stood and was nudging Arcus's bed with his boot, jostling him awake, when Ronkerz's hulking form loomed into view, backlit by the glow lamps.

"Your feast was a success," the giant announced, his angular violet eyes shifting from Victor to Arona to Arcus as he stopped to assess them. "It's good that you rested rather than schemed to escape. I've set wards, and any use of those recall tokens would have ended painfully."

"We assumed you were watching," Arcus replied, stifling a yawn with his new, writhing appendage.

"Excellent. I was watching and listening, and it seems to me that you three are, while spoiled and foolishly compliant, not exactly willing participants in your venture here. Well, perhaps that's giving some of you too much credit. Perhaps it's better to say you're somewhat unwilling pawns, hmm?"

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"That's accurate." Arona shifted her staff as she spoke, placing it between herself and Ronkerz. "Does that mean you won't make us fight for our lives?"

"Hah!" Faster than Victor's eyes could track, Ronkerz lashed out and snatched Arona's staff. A flash of cold blue Energy rolled out of it, washing over the huge simian, and, for a moment, Victor thought Arona had tricked the giant, that she'd somehow set a trap for him. That may have been true; it seemed the Energy was harsh and focused on the hulking figure, but he stood stoically as it poured over him. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the Energy was gone, leaving behind a faint odor of decay, a rimed-over stone floor, and Ronkerz—utterly untouched.

"Clever but fruitless, girl." His massive forearm twitched, and, with a resounding crack, her staff broke into splinters in his grip. Arona cried out and fell to her knees as the giant dropped the pieces of her once beautiful, polished ivory staff to the frosty ground. Victor could see the tears of frustrated anger and despair in her eyes, and he wondered if her staff had been alive. How would he react if Ronkerz did something like that to Lifedrinker? Before he could envision the scene, Ronkerz grunted, "Pyromancer, you will fight first. The three of you have fifteen minutes to enter the arena."

As they all watched his lumbering form recede into the tunnel's darkness, Arona hissed, "Bastard!"

"I'm sorry for your loss," Arcus mumbled, awkwardly stepping close to the still-kneeling Death Caster. "I know you had him for decades and were very close."

"Him?" Victor didn't want to rub salt in the wound, but he was curious; it seemed that her staff had, indeed, been conscious.

"Ghivalt," Arona sniffed. "He was a sturdy soul and a boon companion. Many were the nights I whispered my frustrations into his ever-heedful ear." With shaking hands, she gathered up the splinters of her staff, sending them into one of her dimensional containers. Watching her, comparing her staff to Lifedrinker in his mind, Victor's reluctant respect for Ronkerz began to wane.

"What an asshole."

"I wasn't trying to trap him; I simply had defensive spells primed in Ghivalt. It's a habit of mine to put him between myself and those I view as a threat. I didn't think Ronkerz would take offense." She accepted Arcus's hand and rose to her feet, suddenly holding a different staff, this one made of black-streaked gnarled wood. "Let us face today's trial."

"Right." Victor nodded and turned to Arcus. "You ready, man?"

"Not especially, but I'm resolved. Whatever champion they pit against me had best be ready." With that, Arcus's red metal rod appeared in his right hand, and the black one appeared in his tentacle's firm grasp.

"You're getting the hang of that thing."

"My sleep, though troubled with strange dreams, seems to have helped my mind come to grips with the change in my body."

"Come," Arona rasped, already walking toward the cave opening. Victor and Arcus followed, and soon, they came into view of the broad, low-ceilinged opening. The sky was still dark, and Victor had to remind himself that the sun never rose in the dungeon world. When they stood in the opening, facing the stone-walled box canyon that served as Rumble Town's arena, none of them were surprised by the gathered crowds or their raucous boos and hisses.

"You'd think these assholes would be a little more grateful for the meal we laid out yesterday," he grumbled. He scanned the cliffsides, the rooftops and the gaps between wooden buildings and figured there were something like three hundred people watching. It seemed like a lot to him, but when he considered that the dungeon had been around for thousands of years and that people were having kids inside it, the number wasn't all that high. It made him wonder at the average life expectancy inside the place. He also had to remember that he

hadn't seen the other "communities" in the dungeon. For all he knew, Rumble Town housed only a fraction of the populace.

"Rumble Town!" Ronkerz boomed, his basso voice rattling the wooden structures and causing pebbles to bounce on the stone ground. Victor turned to the sound and saw the giant simian high on the cliffside in a wide cave mouth, surrounded by his Big Ones. "Today, we have entertainment! Three outsiders who come to us in servitude of the vile criminals who govern this world will face off against three of our Big Ones!" The crowd went wild at the announcement, though Victor couldn't help but think it was all some kind of strange pageant; the people had to know already that they were going to fight.

"Arcus! Pyromancer of the family Volpuré, step into the arena!" Ronkerz's voice was loud and shook the ground, but it was also clear, and it felt like it was aimed right into Victor's ear. It made him wonder if the veil walker was using a voice amplification device or if Ronkerz simply had to flex his will to push his voice out on the waves of his ocean of Energy.

"Fortune be with you, Arcus." As she spoke, Arona reached out and caught ahold of Arcus's sleeve, causing him to turn toward her. "I hope you know that, despite our many contentious bouts of—"

"I know," he sighed. "I'm not always easy to get along with, but neither are you. In any case, should I perish, try to remember me as I was when we were young, crushing one dungeon after another, hmm?" The words made Victor evaluate Arcus and Arona in a new light. She'd warned him of Arcus's impending betrayal, so he'd thought they were likely enemies, but it seemed they had quite a history. It made sense, he supposed; the "gifted" students and apprentices in Sojourn seemed to be very familiar with each other. If they'd grown up at the same time, why wouldn't they have been friends, especially when they were younger and had less pressure from masters and society when their "tests of steel" were a distant proposition?

They stared at each other for a couple of seconds, then Arcus's eyes flared with bright, white-hot flames, and he turned and strode into the center of the "arena." Quietly, Victor muttered his own encouragement, "Good luck, you asshole. Burn the shit out of 'em."

As Arcus stepped away from the cave mouth and into the focus of everyone's attention, he burst into flames, a living, walking brand of white-hot fire that slowly lifted off the ground, hovering some five feet in the air as he spread his arm and tentacle, brandishing his two magical rods. The crowd seemed torn—some cheered, likely eager and excited for a fight, while others jeered and booed, clearly holding their praise for the hometown champion.

Ronkerz's voice boomed out over Rumble Town, "Fighting the mighty Pyromancer will be one of your favorite Big Ones—Fanatala the Gasher!" His voice rose to a heart-stopping crescendo as he howled the combatant's fighting

name. The earlier noise for Arcus paled in comparison as Rumble Town began to vibrate with cheers and stomps, screams and howls. One of the shadowy figures near Ronkerz launched into the air, falling like a comet from the heights to land on the stone surface of the arena with a ground-shaking thud. Dust and pebbles flew into the air, and, as the dust slowly cleared, Victor got his first good look at Fanatala.

She was a tall, ebon-skinned woman with a high, spiked, white mohawk. Arcus wasn't a small man—probably Valla's size, if Victor were guessing—but Fanatala was giant-sized at nearly ten feet. She wasn't bulky like many giants, but she was powerful-looking, with arms and shoulders covered in ropy, bulging muscles. She wore a strangely shimmering green and ochre breastplate and a mask of the same metal, cast in a scowling, goblinessque visage. Around her waist was a thick leather girdle, and—likely the source of her moniker—two wickedly curved swords hung from it.

Even as Ronkerz screamed, "Fight!

" The sky above the canyon darkened and erupted with angry, red, and orange flashes of fire. Thunder crashed, and then fiery meteors the size of compact cars howled through the darkness toward the center of the canyon. Arcus held his red rod high over his head as the flames limning his body surged upward, like a fire given too much oxygen.

"Holy shit," Victor grunted—he'd been on the receiving end of Arcus's meteor strike before, but this was on another level. It looked to him like the whole town was going to be wiped out when they impacted the ground.

"He's dumping everything into it! His Core and the stored Energy he has in that rod! Is he mad? Does he seek to destroy us all?" Arona looked at Victor as though he had the answer. He just shrugged and took a step back, only to be met with an invisible wall of force. Arona had followed him, and, just as the first meteor hit the ground with a cacophonous boom, she stumbled into the invisible barrier, too.

"Ronkerz!" She hissed and muttered something else, some curse in a language the System didn't translate, then turned back to the arena as the rest of Arcus's payload smashed down like a cataclysm. The sound was deafening, and the ground shook and jumped and lurched, forcing Victor to concentrate on keeping his balance, but, even as he struggled to stay on his feet, he realized something: the fire and smoke weren't touching him. The explosion rolled out from the impact point—waves of fire, clouds of black smoke, curtains of dirt, rock shards, and rubble. Everything came up against another invisible barrier, channeled away by waves of force or magical wind.

As the fire and smoke cleared, Arona sighed and gestured up the cliffside to where Ronkerz stood, his enormous arms spread wide, his violet eyes blazing like twin stars. “He’s protecting the onlookers and town.”

Victor nodded; he’d figured something like that was happening. As the smoke and dust cleared, he started scanning the arena, wondering how Arcus’s alpha strike had served him. The place looked like a bomb had gone off, which, he supposed, made sense. What Arcus had done was the Energy-user equivalent of calling in an airstrike. The stone ground was cracked and pitted; pools of fire, red-glowing stone, and black smoke still lingered. Hovering in the center of the destruction was Arcus’s fiery form.

The crowd had gotten quiet, but when Arcus slowly turned, his flaming arm and tentacle held high in triumph, a murmur broke out. Several heartbeats passed as everyone looked for Fanatala. When no one could see any sign of the champion, hushed and tentative at first, the onlookers began to cheer. The applause started near the ground, where people stood like Victor and Arona in cave mouths or between buildings, but it slowly spread until the entire canyon was roaring with it. Meanwhile, Arcus continued to rotate, basking in the praise, his body too alight for Victor to see his expression.

Ronkerz lowered his arms, but he didn’t speak, and Victor began to feel a funny twinge of doubt in his gut. If Arcus had killed Fanatala, Ronkerz would know it. He would be shouting something—praise or anger or amusement. He wouldn’t stand there on his high perch, watching Arcus intently. “He missed.”

Arona looked at him sharply, “You see her?”

“No, but Ronkerz—” Just as he was about to explain his thought process, Fanatala appeared behind Arcus and drove her twin blades, not once or twice, but three times each, into Arcus’s back. Arcus’s flames winked out, and he fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. Fanatala held up her bloody, curved swords, and the cheers, which had abruptly stopped when she’d appeared, erupted with renewed frenzy, and the crowd took up a chant.

“Gasher! Gasher! Gasher!”

“He lives,” Arona said, pointing. Sure enough, Victor saw Arcus slowly, laboriously flop onto his back, a great pool of blood blossoming out around his red-robed form. His tentacle shakily clutched a bulbous potion bottle, but Fanatala saw his movement and blinked away. Suddenly, she loomed over the downed Pyromancer, her boot on his tentacle, holding the potion at bay.

“Yield?” She growled, but she didn’t look at Arcus. Her mask was trained upward toward Ronkerz.

Victor never heard Arcus say anything, but Ronkerz’s voice boomed through the canyon, “Fanatala the Gasher has won! Her opponent yields! Welcome, Arcus the Inferno, to Rumble Town—our newest Big One in training!” While Victor and Arona absorbed those words, the town roared in a frenzy of excitement. Ronkerz

let it go on for several long seconds, then held up his hands for silence. “Arona, Death Caster, student of Vesavo Bonewhisper, the Demon of Tsuva, enter the arena!”

“Damn,” Victor muttered. “I think you were right. He’s building an army, and I feel like we’re about to be recruited.”

“Yes, I’m quite certain that warrior could have killed Arcus with her strike. Teleportation skills, even short-ranged like that, are difficult to contend with.” Arona looked up at Victor, her dark eyes depthless and full of secrets. “I won’t be so easily conscripted.” With that, she stepped into the arena as Fanatala scooped up Arcus’s fallen, bloody form and simply disappeared.

Victor had to admire Arona’s confidence, but he was starting to have doubts—how was he supposed to contend with someone who could blink around the battlefield? Could he kill someone he couldn’t touch? “Shit, chica,” he muttered, hefting Lifedrinker in both of his hands as he watched the dark-robed, straight-backed Death Caster gliding through the wreckage of Arcus’s meteor strike, “we might get a decent workout after all. This is gonna get good and bloody.”

Book 8: Chapter 37: Death's Maw

Ronkerz’s voice roared out, vibrating the stone under Victor’s feet. “Which Big One shall we choose to face this disciple of death, Rumble Town? I’ll give you a choice! Will it be Zara Bloodmoon, daughter of Rex Hangar and wielder of the Midnight Scythe, or will it be Gorruk the Crusher, Wrecker of Bones, and Ravager of the Lich King?” If the crowd made any noise while Ronkerz spoke, Victor couldn’t hear them, but as soon as he finished, the onlookers broke into two distinct chants. Some rhythmically yelled, “Zara, Zara, Zara,” while others contended with, “Gorruk, Gorruk, Gorruk!”

Victor watched Arona while the denizens of Rumble Town shouted for their favorite champions. She stood still, her twisted black staff planted in the ground before her, while cold-looking blue mist seeped out of the dirt and blasted stone, forming a hazy cloud that rose to her knees. Something moved in the cloud of vaporous air, and Victor thought he saw a faintly luminescent form lurking within it. Was she already summoning her minions? Was Ronkerz going to allow that? It seemed so, for, as Victor glanced up to him, the great simian lord of the dungeon seemed to be basking in the roars of the crowd, enjoying their contest.

Before long, it became clear that the Gorruk supporters would win. Slowly but surely, more and more people stopped chanting for Zara, and the cries for Gorruk grew louder and louder. After a handful of minutes, Ronkerz stepped to the edge of his high cave and held his arms wide, silencing the crowd. “Rumble Town, you have chosen! Gorruk the Crusher, take the field!”

One of the shadowy, hulking figures behind Ronkerz stepped forward and leaped off the ledge, falling to the ground with a tremendous impact that Victor felt through the stone, jarring the bones in his ankles and knees. When Gorruk stood tall, Victor winced—he was an imposing figure. The

Big One was a reptilian creature that towered over Arona, easily more than ten feet tall. He wore red leather straps for armor but carried a massive metal-spiked shield and a hammer that looked fit for pounding boulders into dust. He arched his back, angled his alligator maw toward the sky, and roared.

To her credit, Arona didn't flinch, and rather than quail before his display of brute power, she flung out her hand, scattering a dozen tiny bones in a semi-circle behind the Big One. Ronkerz made it clear he knew things were kicking off by shouting, "Fight!" Gorruk dashed forward, his spiked shield leading the way. Victor thought it was about to be over before it started, but Arona's spectral companion rose from the mist, placing itself in the giant's path. Victor's eyes widened at the sight of the specter.

The ghostly, semi-ethereal, semi-solid being was skeletally gaunt, clothed in ragged, luminescent chain mail. It wore a horned helm and wielded nothing but dagger-like claws on its hands. Still, it was huge, fast, and apparently quite strong. It rose from the mist looming over Arona and was more than a match for Gorruk's rushing form as it wrapped the claws of its right hand around the edge of his shield and stepped to the side, pulling the giant with it, forcing him to stumble as he windmilled his hammer for balance.

"Take him, Shol-pan!" Arona cried. Again, the specter wailed, and he leaped after Gorruk, raking his long claws in a savage, wild frenzy, tearing long, bloody grooves in the giant's flesh, ripping the straps of his armor to shreds and sending bright red blood spraying in arcs with each lightning-fast, hacking gash. Gorruk screamed his fury and pain, but Victor felt something was off. The dozens of cuts were deep and bloody, but Gorruk's scream didn't have even a hint of desperation in it. In fact, Victor recognized a kindred battle lust in that sound, and he knew Gorruk was just getting warmed up.

As the gashes mounted and Gorruk was driven further and further from Arona, the Death Caster began to surge with deep, cold Energy, preparing another spell. As she lifted her staff, Gorruk roared and whirled, lashing out with his spiked shield. Victor thought the specter, Shol-pan, would evade the blow, or perhaps ignore it, being less than solid flesh, but the shield struck true and, with a splash of blue-white ectoplasmic flesh, Arona's champion was thrown to the side, crumpled and deformed, tumbling over the charred stones of the arena.

Victor winced, but as he turned back to Arona, the air temperature dropped by a dozen degrees. She held her arms wide, a strained, rictus grin on her face, as a whirlwind of ghostly, ethereal blades exploded into existence, streaking toward Gorruk. The blades howled as they sliced the air, and the temperature continued to plummet as they seemed to suck the very life out of the arena, riming everything with a frigid layer of hoarfrost as they traversed the space. Gorruk had barely turned from his struggle with Shol-pan when the whirlwind struck.

He lifted his shield, roared, and then bright lances of Energy exploded from the spiked surface like a starburst. Where the beams of light shone, the blades disintegrated, and the frost melted. The temperature in the arena immediately began to recover as half of Arona's spectral blade storm was destroyed on impact. Still, the other half, the straggling, sputtering remnant of the whirlwind,

washed over Gorruk and added to the many bleeding gashes on his hulking, green-scaled body. Even so, as his blood pooled on the stones, he stood resolute and straight when the spell faded.

Victor looked at Arona, trying to gauge her strength, but, to his surprise, she'd faded from view in a new bank of ghostly fog. Gorruk strode toward it, but then, with an explosion of grave-scented Energy, like moist soil and fresh decay, the bones Arona had strewn out earlier sprang into the air. They rapidly multiplied and grew until a small army of skeletal minions surrounded the cloud of blue-tinted fog. Each of the skeletons' skulls, in all their variety, held bright, ghostly blue lights in their eye sockets, and they turned, in unison, to focus on Gorruk. The way they moved in perfect synchrony made Victor shudder as a chill ran down his spine.

Gorruk didn't wait for the skeletal monsters to act; he charged on a streak of light like a sunbeam toward the one furthest to the left and smashed it to bits with a cacophonous impact of his shield. The skeletal warrior's bones flew with a clatter, but the other skeletons leaped into action, jumping, charging, and sliding over the ground to engage Gorruk from every side. Some wielded claws, but others held gleaming weapons—hammers, axes, spears, and swords. Considering how quickly Gorruk had killed the first one, Victor thought they must not be very tough, but he was surprised to see them pushing the giant, reptilian man back.

Gorruk fought with an impressive fury; he smashed his hammer in wide arcs, and it wrought destruction on any bones it touched—shattering ribs, smashing skulls, crushing shoulders, hips, and spines. The skeletons didn't die passively; they stabbed and hacked at Gorruk, carving more and more bloody rents in his scaly hide. Meanwhile, Arona didn't stand idly by. Victor didn't know what she was doing, but she floated around the melee, planting white, coldly pulsating rods into the stone as though it were clay.

Several times, Gorruk saw what she was doing and tried to intervene, charging toward her, but each time, one of her skeletal minions interceded on her behalf, taking the charge and sacrificing its life. Victor swore he saw Gorruk destroy dozens of the skeletons, yet they kept coming, and that's when he realized they weren't staying dead. No matter how badly Gorruk shattered them, the constructs slowly reformed, their bones pulling together on threads of pale-blue Energy.

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He could see the Big One growing frustrated. His grunts grew more ragged and hoarse, his swings wilder and more reckless, and his blazing sunlight blasts more frequent. However, even the skeletons destroyed by that bright power didn't stay dead, and Victor felt a grin growing on his lips—Arona was going to wear him down. That's when he saw Arona's spectral champion, Shol-pan, rise from where he'd been thrown and dive into the fray, knocking aside some of his smaller allies in his eagerness to lay into Gorruk with his ten-inch spectral claws.

Arona stabbed a seventh white rod into the stone, and then she rose up, carried by her spectral mist, to look down upon the melee at the center of her formation. She clapped her hands, shouted a word that felt strange to Victor's ears, and fired a beam of strangely pulsating Energy into the nearest rod. The device absorbed the torrent of Energy and then flared with white, sickly light that made Victor's eyes water and his stomach feel queasy. The light shot forth from one rod to the next, creating a sort of luminescent netting over Gorruk and the undead minions fighting within the formation.

“Holy shit! Yes, chica!” Victor growled, pounding his fist into his palm as the net of sickly, ethereal Energy began to contract, passing harmlessly through the undead monsters in the ring but pressing down against Gorruk’s scales with sizzling, hissing burns that brought wild, enraged screams from the reptilian’s throat. As the bands of deathly Energy tightened, burning into the Big One and driving him to his knees, Arona’s mist began to fade, and she slowly lowered to the stone ground.

Victor could tell she was exhausted, and it seemed she was trying to conserve some of her waning Energy because she waved her hand, and her skeletal minions collapsed in heaps of bone that crumbled to dust, leaving behind only the tiny, singular enchanted bones from which they’d sprung. During the battle, Victor had thought the minions were simply exceptionally resilient, reforming and rejoining the fight over and over, but he now realized that Arona had used her own Energy to rebuild or heal them each time. She sagged against her staff, watching as Shol-pan, too, faded away into wisps of blue smoke.

Gorruk thrashed and writhed, and Victor could see the bands of Energy cutting into him deeper and deeper, driving him down, apparently helpless to resist. Arona held up her left hand and slowly, with great effort, began to clench it into a fist. Gorruk screamed in rage and pain, and just when Victor thought the fight was over, that he was done for, the scream shifted in tenor from pain and frustration to bone-deep rage.

Suddenly, Victor felt a pull on his Core, like he stood in the presence of something massive, something profoundly powerful. Then, just as he steadied himself and focused on Gorruk—the source of that enormous surge of Energy—he saw the reptilian man begin to change. His body swelled grotesquely, rippling as bones expanded and shifted beneath his flesh. The bloody cuts, gashes, and stab wounds spread wide, ripping and joining in long, gory furrows that rapidly filled in with glistening, iridescent green scales.

As the Big One’s body expanded, Arona’s trap formation fought to hold him down, to cut into him, but the Energy waves pouring out of Gorruk negated their deathly Energy, and, one by one, the sickly white metallic rods pinged out of the rocky ground, tumbling away to clang and clatter on the arena walls. Arona fell to her knees, her pale arms shakily catching her from falling onto her face.

Victor felt the dryness in his mouth and realized he’d been holding it open. He licked his lips. “Come on, Arona! Get up!” As if she’d heard him, the Death Caster struggled to her feet, stumbling back from the still writhing, still expanding, still roaring

Gorruk. Victor shifted his gaze to watch the gigantic reptilian form taking shape at the center of the arena.

Victor had likened the Big One’s snout to that of an alligator earlier, but now he was cursing the thought—Gorruk was, indeed, transforming into something gigantic and crocodilian. His scales were nothing like those of an Earth-based alligator or crocodile, though; they gleamed and

shimmered like metal. Worse, he'd sprouted a massive, twenty-foot tail, the tip of which ended in a knobby bone-like protrusion adorned with razor-sharp spines.

As the monster thrashed back and forth, shaking off the last vestiges of his former body and armor, he whirled to aim one of his crocodilian eyes at Arona. The giant monstrosity heaved and huffed, puffing great billowing breaths out through his enormous nostrils as the eye narrowed in a hungry, almost lecherous stare. Each of Gorruk's four legs was as big as Arona's entire body, and they all ended in great, black, scimitar-like claws. As the monster slowly began to circle his prey, for Victor couldn't see the depleted Death Caster as anything else, Ronkerz's voice boomed out, echoing off the canyon walls.

"Arona! You may yield! Gorruk's restraint is limited with his bloodline running wild!"

Arona, holding her staff between herself and the gigantic reptile, took a shaky step back and looked up at Ronkerz's shelf, then to her right, locking eyes with Victor. What he saw in those depthless black pools didn't look like resignation or even fear. Determination was plainly written on her face, and Victor sucked in his breath when he realized she wouldn't be giving up. He almost shouted for her to concede, but something in him wouldn't let his lips form those words. Instead, he took a deep breath and bellowed, "Kill that fucker!"

Arona gave him a brief nod, and then, just as before, Victor felt the temperature in the arena begin to dip as faintly luminescent, blue-tinged mist began to rise from the ground. Arona raised her staff high and took a deep breath. Victor could feel her gathering Energy; the potential of her spell pulled at him, almost like the weighty nature of Gorruk's transformation. He leaned forward in anticipation, waiting to see what she would do, but the great reptile wasn't willing to be patient. With a swish of its enormous tail for impetus, Gorruk launched himself forward and closed his great jaws over Arona with a thunderous snap.

One second, she'd been about to work her magic, her staff held high. The next, only half her body remained to bleed out onto the blacked stone of the arena floor. It happened so quickly that she never cried out. She'd been looking at Gorruk, so Victor never saw her face, never got a chance to see if fear entered her steely gaze. He'd never know if she'd been surprised or embarrassed. He hoped not. He hoped she was too focused on her magic, too full of adrenaline and anger to see Gorruk coming. He hoped she died with that bravery in her heart and that she'd carry it with her to the Spirit Plane.

The ground shook as Ronkerz leaped down and hooked one of his massive arms around Gorruk's thick, scaly neck. At first, Victor thought he was congratulating him, but when he saw him squeeze, he wondered if he was angry. Would he punish the giant reptile? Would he kill him? As he squeezed Gorruk's thick neck, holding him steady, Victor saw him snake his other arm into that toothy maw and slowly extract the bloody, saliva-covered other half of Arona's body. "Too much good equipment here for you to digest, champion."

The arena broke into an uproar of cheering as Arona's upper half landed on the stone with a wet squelch. Her bloody, slime-covered face happened to be staring directly at Victor. Those depthless pools had glazed over. Her pretty, pale face had deep tooth grooves ripped from brow to chin, and her tongue protruded from her carefully stained black lips. Victor felt heat rising in his chest, saw his vision tinting red, and, before he realized he was doing it, he started stalking toward the corpse.

"Halt, boy!" Ronkerz roared, and once again, Victor felt the weight of the veil walker's aura pushing him back. Victor ignored him, his eyes locked on Arona's defiled corpse. One after the other, he continued to take steps. It felt like walking up a mountain through burning, oxygenless air with ten-thousand-pound chains hooked to his ankles. Still, he progressed—vessels bursting in his eyes, blood flowing from his nose and ears, and veins standing out like rivers of blood on his engorged muscles.

Ronkerz scowled, and the arena grew hushed. He took two strides to Victor and reached up with one of his enormous hands to grasp his neck, halting his forward movement. The grip felt like a band of steel, and it reminded Victor of his time as a slave in the Greatbone Mine, further fueling his rage. He opened his pathways, letting his Core unload into them, ready to cast Volcanic Fury and go for broke, but then, as suddenly as a switch being thrown, he felt the pressure of a tremendous will pushing his Energy back into his Core.

His mind cleared, the red in his vision faded, and Victor realized that his hands were wrapped around Ronkerz's wrist, straining to pull his grasping fingers away from his neck. Lifedrinker lay at his feet. When had he dropped her? Ronkerz must have seen the clarity enter his eyes because he nodded, then slowly relaxed his grip on Victor's throat. "That eager to do battle, eh, boy? Well, you'll get your chance, but not against me. Not yet, anyway." He glanced down at Arona's mutilated corpse. "Angry at her rough treatment? I'm not terribly pleased, either. Take heart—I'll give her a good resting place."

Once again, Ronkerz moved—faster and more adroitly than Victor's eyes could properly track. He tried, though, and thought he saw some blurs of motion here and there, but still, almost without any trace, Ronkerz, Arona's body, and the gigantic crocodilian champion were gone. Victor stood alone in the arena. He stooped to pick up Lifedrinker and, with her resting on one shoulder, slowly turned, soaking in the attention of the onlookers.

He sent some Energy into the runes on his armor, reactivating it, cladding himself in heavy red-black metal, scales, and leather. Lifting Lifedrinker high, he screamed—nothing articulate, no words, just a primal, bloodthirsty cry for battle, chaos, and blood. His outburst was fueled by fear and rage, but when the crowd roared their enthusiasm, the glory in his Core surged, and a mad grin twisted Victor's lips as he deeply inhaled, soaking up their enthusiasm. They wanted to see him fight, and he would give them something to remember.

Book 8: Chapter 38: Stormclaw

Victor paced in a circle, Lifedrinker held over his head, shouting into the crowd's roaring enthusiasm. Ronkerz must have enjoyed the spectacle because he let it go on for quite some time before his basso voice boomed like a gong, reverberating through the canyon. He didn't try to silence Victor or the crowd; he simply allowed the power of his projected voice to overwhelm their noise as he hollered, "The last of our visitors is eager to fight, Rumble Town! Look at him! See the might of an elder bloodline, here to entertain you! Which of our Big Ones can stand against such fury?"

Ronkerz's echoing, booming voice broke through Victor's self-induced haze of anger, and he slowly lowered his axe as he listened. "Make no mistake! The man below might not be through his iron ranks, but he's a monster in his own right—a warrior with the blood of a titan in his veins, a berserker with a Core brimming with rage! You saw how he stood against my aura! Who among our champions could face such a challenger?"

The crowd, hushed by Ronkerz's thunderous voice, began to murmur in low tones—words that, disparate at first, started to coalesce into a single name that they repeated, louder and louder, until the canyon echoed with the sound: "Stormclaw! Stormclaw! Stormclaw!"

"My number one? My apprentice? My right hand? Lira Stormclaw? The Reaper of Bloodtide Cove? You think this challenger is worthy of her attention?" As he egged them on, the crowd grew more and more vociferous, howling her name and pounding their cudgels, shields, tankards, and brooms. They stomped their feet in rhythm to their frenzy, howling the Big One's name, "Stormclaw! Stormclaw! Stormclaw!"

Ronkerz seemed to like what he heard and saw, so he opened his massive arms and, he, too, shouted, "Stormclaw! Take the field!" With a flash of shining armor reflecting the moon's light, Lira Stormclaw leaped from the ledge, spreading her great, gray-feathered wings and slowly spiraling down to the arena floor. Just as Victor had seen her before, she wore shiny, silver chainmail, but now she also had her head encased in a gleaming, polished helmet. She clutched her giant, curved saber in one hand, and, on her other arm, she wore a bright, metallic buckler that glinted in the pale light of the moon.

Her talons crunched into the canyon floor, and Victor saw they'd cut grooves in the stone. When her hawklike gaze locked with his, she spread her wings wide and held up her sword, and the crowd went wild again. She was the biggest avian person he'd ever seen, easily nine feet tall, and her wingspan had to be more than twenty feet wide. She cut an imposing figure, especially considering her gleaming armor and the heavy, bold aura she let loose. Victor might have been intimidated if he hadn't already fought dozens of men, women, and creatures more intimidating—if he hadn't already stood up against Ronkerz's aura, which was a hundred times denser.

"Well?" Lira asked, her voice once again surprising Victor with its melodic nature. "Shall we dance?" She slashed her saber through the air between them, leaving trails of glittering light and somehow producing a crystalline ring with each cut.

Victor held Lifedrinker ready, hands loose on her haft, and began to circle the avian woman. “Ready when you are.”

Lira shrieked, cracked her wings, and launched into him, her curved sword whistling as she laid about with a frenzy of lightning-fast attacks. Victor tried to answer the ferocity of her blows but found himself unable to match her speed. Still, he was a skilled axe wielder and an experienced duelist, and she didn’t land any strikes clean enough to draw blood. She got past his guard a few times, but only because he saw her weapon would strike his armor and wanted to test its edge.

Once, he caught the saber on his heavy gauntlet, and, though it sparked and drew a narrow, shiny scratch in the metal, he hardly felt it. His wyrm-scale vest didn’t quite hold up as well, shedding a scale as she drew the blade along his ribs, but still, he was unharmed, and the armor immediately began to mend itself—the fallen scale crumbled to dust and rapidly reformed to fill the gap. It was plain that Lira was testing him, and Victor could see her shrewd, predatory gaze grow sharper as she was repeatedly rebuffed.

When she surged with Energy and began to move faster than he could track, Victor cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. As the white-gold Energy flooded his pathways and his consciousness expanded, he began to see the greater pattern of Lira’s movements, and, though he still had trouble tracking her scimitar’s flashing blade, he saw how she moved her feet, how her wings flexed, and where her center of gravity shifted as she went through the patterns of her attacks. He contemplated those patterns and formed responses in his mind as his armor amassed scrapes.

His grin turned savage as he predicted one of her slashes and, for the first time, stepped inside it and brought Lifedrinker down in a brutal hack against the armor on the outside of Lira’s thigh. Lifedrinker, still carrying a shard of Victor’s spirit, dented the shiny armor and split it just enough for her razor edge to draw a thin gash that wept blood. Lira screeched her pain and frustration and pumped her wings, hurling herself into the air, flying a dozen yards back.

Still brimming with inspiration, Victor tracked her trajectory and cast Energy Charge, flooding the spell’s pattern with fear-attuned Energy. In a cloud of black and purple shadows, he ripped through the fire-blasted arena and, with Lifedrinker’s edge leading the way, smashed into Lira just as she landed. She was fast, though, and put her shiny buckler in the path of Lifedrinker’s edge. Victor’s spell moved him like a missile, and Lifedrinker pulled and vibrated with the urgency of her hack, but, even so, that shiny, platter-sized shield stopped her cold. The impact rang out like a cannonball hitting a gong, and Victor’s momentum drove him past the impact point, nearly jerking the axe from his hands as Lira sidestepped his driving shoulder.

Victor’s grip was mighty, and Lifedrinker loathed the idea of being taken from him; it would take the weight of a mountain to pull her from his grip, so she slid along that shiny barrier, ringing out a crystalline screech as she tore a thin groove in the metal and followed Victor as he flew past Lira. The avian warrior snapped her wings and launched herself at Victor’s back, scoring two powerful blows, left and right, smashing his wyrm-scale vest in an X pattern, shattering scales, cutting the thick wyrm-hide material, and, for the first time, drawing blood. Victor stumbled forward but whirled, cleaving Lifedrinker in a wide, one-handed backswing.

Lira danced back, avoiding the savage blow, and then, with a surge of potent, sharp Energy that tasted like coppery blood and rust, a dozen black-iron blades, each the size and shape of Lira’s saber, exploded out of the ground and began to dance in the air, moving like a storm of razored metal toward Victor. Victor’s monstrous vitality, bolstered by Sovereign Will, had already closed the

wounds on his back, and he felt fresh, like he'd barely begun to exert himself. His savage grin widened as he waded into the magically hacking swords and began to dance, treating each like a new opponent.

The blades wove side to side, up and down, and hacked the air with palpable whooshes. Even so, they were far slower and duller than Lira's gleaming saber. Victor smashed them aside with Lifedrinker and his gauntlet. Sometimes, he even ducked his head and used his helmet to catch the blades. All the while, he kept track of Lira, watching as she moved around her sword storm, timing the many swinging sabers so she could slip in and drive her much deadlier primary weapon at Victor's exposed flank or try to interfere with one of his parries.

Victor took many hits from those magical swords, but most slid harmlessly off his armor. Still, his thick lava king-hide pants were beginning to show their wear and tear, and he began to bleed as the minor cuts started to mount. His right arm was the worst—no gauntlet protected his forearm, and it was repeatedly exposed as he swung Lifedrinker out to smash aside one sword or another. Even so, his natural regeneration could cope, and Victor fought the urge to scream his frustration and cast Iron Berserk. He knew Lira had more that she was holding back, and he didn't want to play his cards until he had to.

After several minutes of battle against Lira's sword storm, Victor fell into an inspiration-fueled trance, and fewer and fewer swords hit him. He'd begun to see a pattern to the whirling, weaving blades; they had to make room for each other and, thus, weren't truly random. If he had to explain the pattern, he couldn't have. He caught glimpses of it on an instinctual level and began to modify his footwork and the weaving motions of his axe to capitalize, and soon, he was smashing four blades aside with each swooping swing of Lifedrinker. As he found the rhythm and fell into the new dance, he could turn most of his attention to Lira and, once again, frustrate her efforts to cut him.

"Gods be damned! You're good with that axe!" she grunted after a while. The words hardly registered on Victor as he wove between the slashing sabers and tried to work his way closer to the woman controlling them. As he closed the distance and began to put pressure on her despite her hacking storm of swords, Lira grunted, but it wasn't so much a frustrated sound as an excited one. The same sharp Energy filled the air, again filling Victor's mouth with the taste of rust and blood. Then, in an explosion of rock fragments, black iron plates burst from the ground and began to spin violently around Lira.

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The swords crumbled to black dust, but the plates, varying in size, spun so rapidly that Victor was forced back. He ducked his head and held Lifedrinker up in defense, but Lira didn't press the attack; she was focused on her magic. The plates of magical iron wove in a whirling pattern around her body, and then, one by one, they began to slam into her. At first, Victor thought she'd made an error

or cast a spell she couldn't control. He soon realized what was happening, though, and growled as he watched Lira encase herself. The tall, lean warrior became a massive juggernaut of black metal.

Even her wings were covered, and though he doubted they could still be used to fly, they looked like formidable weapons in their own right. Rather than feathers, they were lined with razored blades, and, as she flexed them up and down, he could see they weren't immobile. As the last of the plates slammed into place, completing her suit of dense armor, Victor roared and cast Energy Charge again, this time fueling it with rage. He didn't want to risk Lifedrinker's edge or handle being damaged before he tested that thick armor, so he led the charge with his dense gauntlet, aiming to cave in the center of Lira's plated chest.

Lira spread her arms, her saber looking small in her metal-plated fist, and seemed to welcome Victor's impact. He soon learned why. As his gauntlet impacted that thick black plate, he realized it wasn't mundane armor that coated Lira's body. The metal was rife with Energy, infused with the magic of Lira's affinity, which, apparently, wasn't simple iron but something far more profound, something more like the very essence of "metal."

Victor's gauntlet rebounded, the knuckles bent in by the tremendous impact. Even as his fist flew back, his body continued forward, and Victor slammed into Lira with a boom that cracked the stone around them. Victor's Core flared, driving rage-attuned Energy into the magical shell meant to protect him. Even without looking, he could feel the hot sun at the center of his being cool as he depleted a tremendous portion of his reserves to keep from crushing himself against the immovable density of Lira's metal-clad form.

As the waves of force washed outward, throwing stones, boulders, and clouds of debris toward the arena's edges, Lira punched her empty, gauntleted fist into Victor's side. She turned with the action, putting her considerable weight behind the blow, and Victor was lifted from his feet and sent flying. As he tumbled through the air, sure he'd smash into a crowd of onlookers who stood between two buildings, he came up against the invisible force of Ronkerz's Energy. It felt like colliding with a stone wall.

"Fuck!" Victor groaned as he slid down the invisible barrier to the hard rubble-strewn ground. He struggled to take a full breath, sharp pain lancing through his torso. Coughing and wheezing, he planted his hands on the ground and clambered to his feet. He was sure some of his ribs were shattered; he could feel the bones grinding painfully as his passive regeneration worked to undo the damage. Just as he'd found his footing, he felt the ground trembling rhythmically, and that was when he realized Lira was already upon him. Victor whirled just in time to get his gauntleted left arm up and catch the descending edge of her brilliant saber.

The blow struck his gauntlet so solidly that the edge bit clean through the extremely dense, heavy metal, and he felt the saber bite a full inch into his arm, grinding into his wrist bones. Not only was Lira a great deal heavier with her armor plating, but she must have gotten some sort of strength boost; it felt like a pneumatic hammering machine had been unleashed on him as she began to

pummel, kick, and chop at him. Victor fought to deflect her blows, scrambling back, pain from a dozen new injuries spurring him away as her tremendously heavy feet stomped at him.

“Enough!” he roared and unleashed his Core, casting Iron Berserk. Lira swung a heavy, metal-plated boot at his knee, but Victor howled a roar of fury as his vision darkened with shades of crimson, and his body exploded with muscle. He caught her boot in one massive hand and, with a tremendous jerk of his entire body, with the muscles and tendons standing up around his neck like cords of woven steel, he threw her across the arena. Lira’s wail of surprise echoed strangely from her metal-clad head as she tumbled for two dozen yards before crashing onto the arena floor with a clamor akin to a head-on truck collision.

Victor bounded after her, already bunching his legs for a leap before she even hit the ground. He soared through the air, his gigantic form outstretched, his back arched, Lifedrinker held high in one hand. She smoldered and burst into baleful flames as her own rage and battle lust rose to match Victor’s. When he came down like a falling mountainside, he planted Lifedrinker firmly in Lira’s metallic shoulder as she struggled to rise. With a screech of rending metal, Lifedrinker burned through the armor, flaring white-hot at her edge as she melted her way in.

Lira screamed as Lifedrinker’s merciless edge bit her flesh, severing muscles and tendons and boiling away her flesh and blood as she dug her way deeper. Victor let his rage mount, let his will to remain lucid fall away, and, with his renewed strength and much greater stature, he began to repay Lira’s pummeling and then some.

He let Lifedrinker work, tugging Energy out of his opponent, and, with his right hand, he grasped Lira so his left, gauntleted fist could pound her metal casing. Each blow sounded like a cannon firing, the great bong sound echoing through the arena, overwhelming the roars of the crowd. His gauntlet had grown with him and hadn’t lost any of its density. No longer did the knuckles bend when he pounded against Lira’s armor—now she bent. Victor jerked and punched, pounding dents into her back, her sides, her helmet, and her chest. All the while, Lifedrinker streamed black smoke from the rip in Lira’s shoulder armor as she dug and burned her way into her flesh.

Lira screamed over and over. Her cries might have stopped Victor if he’d been lucid—if he’d allowed his will to keep his rage at bay—but he didn’t and continued to punish her. He saw visions of Arona’s torn corpse, and, somewhere in his mind, they got convoluted with memories of a different face, a different woman who’d died as he watched, helpless and slow, stupidly looking on when he should have done something. That frustration that remembered helplessness drove him nearly mad with rage, and Victor didn’t let up his pounding, even when Lira’s screams changed.

At first, he didn't notice the difference, but slowly, even in his rage-addled mind, Victor began to register a tonal shift in Lira's screams. They went from pain-filled to angry. Still, Victor drove her to the ground, pressed his powerful knee into her lower back, and grabbed both sides of her metal-clad head, intent on either pulling off her armor or her head—he didn't care which. "Aaaaaaaagh!" Lira screamed, and then, like a charge in the air before a lightning strike, Victor felt her gathering that sharp, metallic Energy.

"Die!" he screamed, and, with all his might, he pulled, determined to stop whatever she was doing. He might have done it. He might have killed her, but, just as he felt the metal start to give, it expanded, and suddenly, he was struggling to keep his grip as Lira's body grew, lifting him off the ground as his titanic form was dwarfed by hers. Lira's metallic body outgrew his by a third, and the rent Lifedrinker had made filled in with new metal—brighter, shinier, harder. It pushed the axe out, and Victor grabbed her haft just as Lira reached around to snag his arm and slam him to the ground.

Victor's back hit the cracked stone with a ground-shaking impact that shattered his ribs, drove the air from his lungs, and dented the back of his helm, rattling his brain and stunning him. He lay there, stars flashing in his vision, and watched the titanic form of the metal-clad avian warrior as she held up her saber. Another surge of that weird metallic Energy flooded the air, and shards of metal flew from the ground to wrap her saber, expanding it, lengthening it, until Lira stood with a monstrous sword that gleamed with iridescent, rainbow-hued metal, shining like the light of a star.

Victor grunted, trying to breathe, contemplating that amazing sword and its ten-foot blade. Lira held it above him, a metallic juggernaut poised to execute him. Victor's mind reeled, searching for a strategy, wondering if he could roll aside and avoid that deadly gleaming edge. He knew he couldn't block it with Lifedrinker. He doubted his arm would survive the attempt to block it with his gauntlet. He'd just taken his first full breath, allowing the stars to fade from his vision, when he realized why Lira hadn't struck him yet—she was waiting for him to yield. As if to confirm things, Ronkerz's voice boomed through the arena. "Yield, titan. Live to grow stronger and repay Lira for the lesson."

On his back, with a titanic blade poised to carve him in half, he felt his rage fading. Victor began to growl. It was a low, guttural sound that had little to do with his bloodline and a lot to do with his stubborn refusal to lose. If his iron berserk was running out and he couldn't pummel that powerful metallic shell until its occupant died, he'd try something else. Ronkerz's voice echoed through the arena again, "Do you yield?" Victor continued to growl as he poured Energy into his spell. Dark tendrils of tangible shadow began to coalesce around him, flowing out of the ground, out of the air, out of him.

Lira screamed and brought her blade down like a gleaming guillotine, but it was too late—a wave of palpable terror exploded out of those shadows, and Lira balked, botching the aim of her killing blow. Victor, recovered from his dazed

state, felt his consciousness receding as the other took over. A scream that scratched his throat erupted from his lungs, and the lights around the arena flickered, their weak Energy sources overwhelmed by the darkness of his terror-fueled will.

With a crack of midnight wings, he burst from the pool of shadows into the air, circling the darkened arena. As he banked, swooping through the canyon, Terror observed the darkness and the many bright spirits surrounding him. A few were too dim to bother with, but hundreds were bright and tempting. Still, something lay between him and most of those morsels, something that, even as he watched, began to obscure them. Soon, all he could see was the single, brilliant spirit that glowed like an inferno beneath him. Gigantic, true, with a shell hard to pierce and a bright, gleaming edge that could surely cause him harm, but tempting, nonetheless.

As the spirit turned its eyes upward, spreading its broad metallic limbs and holding aloft that brilliant razor edge, Terror screamed and dove, weaving his shadows to obscure himself and confound the spirit's attempt to cut him. He had to infect his prey, had to poison that brilliant, sharp Energy with a seed of fear. As he swooped near, he screamed again, putting everything he knew of nightmares into the sound—millennia of tortured, pleading prey, conjured terrors, and lost, broken spirits.

The bright edge arced out and nearly cut him, but the shadows did their work, obscuring his true position, and Terror pulled away into the air, circling, coming around, gathering his strength for another projection of fear. This time, when he passed close, screeching his worst, most terrifying sound, the bright spirit deceived him. It fainted with its gleaming edge, but the actual attack came from those spiny, metal wings. They arced upward, and the spirit spun. Terror was caught on the sharp spines and ripped from the sky to tumble onto the stony ground.

As the ground shook with the spirit's great, metallic steps, Terror tried to right himself, tried to launch back into the air, but his wings didn't work right; they were broken, and he wasn't healing quickly enough. In the back of his mind, the other growled, and he heard his command: Enough. You're not right for this fight. Terror relented; he was broken—let the other deal with this spirit.

As Victor came back to himself, his body still wrapped in shadow, painfully reverting to his normal form, he bunched his legs and activated Titanic Leap, narrowly escaping a devastating blow from Lira's saber. Soaring through the air, aiming for a clump of broken, scorched stones, he glanced back to see the giant metallic figure stomping toward his destination. He turned his gaze inward, saw his Core was nearly depleted, and groaned. He had to buy some time, had to give his Core a chance to regenerate some Energy. Even if he managed that, though, he wasn't sure what he'd do. Lira's armor was too dense; she was too large and strong. How was he going to beat her?

Book 8: Chapter 39: Colossal Takedown

As he ran, leaping and dodging the brutal, weighty blows of Lira's blazing saber, Victor reached back and slung Lifedrinker into her harness. The axe had grown considerably since he'd first acquired her, but she was still only a hand axe to him in his titanic form. Against a foe like Lira, clad in her dense, magical metal skin, Lifedrinker was too small, too light. It was a problem—

considering she was his favored weapon—but one that he'd have to tackle another day. For now, he had a colossus to kill.

As he leaped, landing hard in a pile of jagged broken stones where one of Arcus's meteors had torn up the arena floor, Victor took another look at his Core. Thanks to his enormous will attribute, his Energy was regenerating at a decent pace, but he still only had a third of his maximum pool to draw from. Was it enough? His breath Core was bursting with magma-attuned Energy. Would the fiery, titanic form granted by his Volcanic Fury be sufficient to stand against Lira's enormous, metallic body?

Knowing he'd lose himself to the rage and likely be unable to strategize, Victor continued to stall, suffering the jeers and taunts of the crowd while he dodged another of Lira's ground-shaking charges. As she pounded past him, hacking her massive, curved sword in a brilliant arc that seemed to cut the very air, Victor used Titanic Leap to launch himself to the far side of the arena. Mid-flight, he summoned the gigantic axe he'd taken from Karl the Crimson, grunting as thousands of pounds of dense, black metal appeared in his hands, pulling him toward the ground.

As his feet touched down, he said, "Sorry, chica," and canceled his Imbue Spirit, taking his shard back from Lifedrinker. In the next heartbeat, he recast the spell, sending a shard of Glory-attuned spirit into the enormous axe as he ran, dragging it behind him like a plow blade. The axe vibrated in his hands, humming with potential as the spell took hold, and Victor whirled, lifting the tremendous weapon crossways in both hands. The muscles on his shoulders and back bulged with the effort as he stared at Lira, watching her approach for the tenth time, her blazing sword held high, ready to cleave him in twain.

Karl's axe, usually dark as night and heavy as a fallen star, glowed with golden Energy, shedding sparks that sizzled and popped against the stone ground. Victor could feel its eagerness—his eagerness, considering the spirit within the weapon came from him. He smiled fiercely, watching Lira. When she'd closed the distance to just thirty yards—a few short steps for her—Victor opened both his Cores, flooding his pathways with magma and rage. Gathering that Energy up, he cast Volcanic Fury.

Lira, clad in her magical, metallic form, had to weigh thousands of tons. Each of her steps crunched the stone beneath her boots, sending spiderwebs of cracks outward. When she stepped on loose rocks or even small boulders, she ground them to dust. Even so, she could move. She bunched her enormous legs and bound toward Victor, perhaps hoping to interrupt his spell. It was too late, though; Victor's berserk transformations were nearly instantaneous, and by the time that blazing, star-bright saber ripped through the air at him, Victor had doubled in size, allowing him to lift Karl's axe high, as though it weighed no more than slender reed.

Victor's parry was instinctual; he had no mind for strategy. The world had turned orange and yellow. He saw everything through a haze of heat, smoke, and flickering fire. He knew nothing but the desire to fight and kill, to destroy and

demolish. When he saw the giant bearing down on him, swinging that bright, curved sword, he jerked his axe upward, catching the blazing blade with the edge of his metal, wedge-shaped axe head. If he'd had the wherewithal to worry, it might have alarmed him that, following the ear-shattering clang of the weapons' impact, a sliver of black, sparkling metal fell, steaming and glowing white-hot to the rubble-strewn ground.

Victor—faster, nimbler, and much, much stronger now that he'd embraced the wrath of his Volcanic Fury—stepped around the enormous, metallic woman and swung Karl's axe in a full three-hundred-sixty degree arc, winding it up so it whooshed through the air—thousands of pounds of dense, enchanted metal—and pounded it into her exposed right flank. The wedged axe head struck her right beneath her wing, clanging against that impossibly dense, thick, metallic body with a reverberating gong that sent painful vibrations through the metallic haft of the axe.

The sparkling, golden glow of Victor's imbuelement flared like fireworks exploding, and he felt the axe skip and slide down the woman's side. When the sparks faded, he saw the rewards for his efforts—a thin, silvery scratch in the otherwise iridescent blue-black armor. Fury tinted the sepia tones of his vision toward red, and Victor roared, his mind knowing one thing—frustration. How could this obstacle stand before his wrath? How dare it? As renewed strength exploded through his muscles, he went truly berserk, so mad with a frenzied need

to smash and destroy that his conscious mind was pushed deep beneath the surface as his instincts drove him into a deep madness.

With fire in his eyes, black smoke streaming from his nostrils, and a wild, crazed snarl on his face, Victor swung his hammer of an axe in great arcing blows that rang like a madman pounding on a massive bell. He pummeled Lira's metallic form, driving her back despite her enormous mass. She tried to swing her saber to intervene, and each *whooshing* slash might have ended him, might have cut limbs from his body, but Victor moved too fast in his frenzy, and his powerful blows made Lira clumsy, her slashes ugly and obvious. Victor ducked them and knocked them aside with his axe, failing to note the damage the saber inflicted as it carved grooves in the dense, black metal and even slashed off bits of the axe head.

Despite his titanic strength, despite his impossible fury, Victor's frenzy had little effect other than to push Lira around. He never dented the armor, and the superficial scrapes and gouges had little impact on its effectiveness. Meanwhile, he was draining his Cores dry; his rage-attuned Energy was drawn from the deep, powerful well of his spirit Core, but his magma's source was far shallower.

Victor's breath Core was a tenth the size of his spirit Core, and his Volcanic Fury required fuel from both Cores.

Unfortunately, Victor's madness didn't allow him to worry about trivialities like the source of his rage and power; he only cared that it flowed and that he could use it to destroy and kill those who stood before him. Destruction was everything, and nothing else mattered. As his frustration mounted and he failed to damage or even knock down the giant metallic warrior, almost instinctually, he pulled great torrents of Energy from both of his Cores and, with a ground-shaking stomp of his boot, cast Wake the Earth.

The effort of creating the spell drained his breath Core of Energy, and Victor felt his reason return as his Volcanic Fury was cut short. The abrupt loss of his size and strength might have spelled his doom, as Lira was just about to hack her saber in a tremendous overhead chop, but the ground lurched violently, and she was knocked aside by a fragment of steaming stone that split the earth between them. Victor was a Herald of the Mountain's Wrath and, as such, felt little discomfort as the ground roiled and heaved around him. He rode the shifting stone with sturdy feet—a sailor well-accustomed to the bounding waves.

Victor's wits had returned with the loss of his fury. As he rode the heaving shelves of rock, watching as steam exploded from fissures, stones burst from the ground, and Lira was tossed about like a ship in a hurricane, he looked up to see Ronkerz standing tall, his arms wide, constraining the massive destruction of his spell to the arena. Victor's faint, half-formed hope that he might bring the canyon walls down and bury the whole damn town died before it truly had a chance to take shape.

Still, Ronkerz's efforts to force the spell to remain localized seemed to be concentrating its effects. The ground continued to buck and tilt while geysers of steam and smoke exploded from one rift after another. Shards of black, smoldering stone erupted from the already tortured surface of the arena, tilting great slabs of rock upward to grind against one another. Meanwhile, Victor found it harder and harder to maintain his balance, but nowhere near as much as poor Lira.

The gigantic metal-clad woman was tossed from one surging hunk of stone to another, and it wasn't long before her dense, blade-covered wings were bent and deformed. Victor might not have been able to impact the shape of her armored shell, but her own weight worked against her as she smashed and rolled around the cataclysmic, smoke-filled scene. Riding a slab of stone that suddenly surged beneath his feet, Victor began to laugh as he watched his colossal foe struggle.

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Somewhere in the madness, he'd lost track of Karl's axe and briefly lamented the fact; it was an excellent, sturdy weapon for pounding on foes too resolute for Lifedrinker's edge. He couldn't worry long, however, because even he was beginning to struggle in the madness of the arena. The air was thick with hot black smoke, the fissures splitting the stone ground were starting to pool with actual lava, and Victor was finding less and less solid ground on which to regain his balance between tremors. He had to focus everything he had on the process.

When the ground finally stopped moving, his spell having run its course, he stood on a peak of stone created by two plates colliding near the center of the arena. Turning in a slow circle, he found himself in a miniature hellscape. Black smoke filled the air, and where there wasn't smoke, his eyes and lungs found hot, acrid steam—not surprising, considering the geysers venting near the magma-filled fissures. Where the ground was solid, it was covered in piles of jumbled, broken, blackened

stone. Lira, still in her colossal form, still clad in iridescent blue-gray metal, lay with one of her legs submerged in a pool of lava. Her wings were bent like old TV antennae, and her armor was scuffed and dented—not an inch of it was pristine.

Victor hopped down, hoisting Lifedrinker from her harness. He canceled his Imbue Spirit, drawing his shard back from Karl's axe, wherever it had fallen, and then recast it on Lifedrinker, giving her back her usual shard of inspiration-attuned spirit. On nimble feet, he jumped from stone to stone, avoiding the bubbling, sulfur-scented pools of molten stone and giving a wide berth to a periodically spurting steam geyser. Lira hadn't moved, and he was hopeful that whatever spell she'd cast to encase herself in that near-impervious metallic casing would fade.

As he drew near, her giant helmet-shaped head turned toward him, and then, with a deep, hollow, echoing grunt, she lifted her gigantic leg out of the lava and let it fall to the stone with a ground-shaking thud. The metal glowed a soft orange-red, and magma dripped off it like oil from a hot skillet. The leg was clean of residue in seconds, and the glow faded, revealing unmarred metal. "That was a good effort," she grunted in that same hollow, echoing voice, then, with a tremendous grinding of metal on stone, she began to clamber to her feet.

Victor watched her, his knuckles white where they gripped Lifedrinker's haft, and he began to despair. How deep must her reserves of Energy be to maintain that metallic shell? How was he supposed to damage her? Earlier, he'd contemplated employing his whip or even breathing magma on her, hoping it would cook her inside that shell, but she seemed immune to the heat. Lifedrinker couldn't pierce her shell. His giant axe could barely scratch it, and, besides, he didn't know where it was.

As he slowly backed away from the colossus, watching her struggle to stand, her giant limbs slipping and scraping on the broken ground, Victor hastily scanned his dimensional containers, seeking a weapon that might pierce that shell. He glanced over his many spears left over from Karnice and silently cursed the fact that he'd traded the best of them away. "Not that a spear would be ideal," he grunted. No, he decided, what he really needed was an enormous maul made of something heavy enough to crack that shell—something he simply didn't have. Karl's axe had been his heaviest, densest weapon, and it hadn't worked.

Victor looked inward and saw that his spirit Core was up to about twenty percent. It was enough to cast Iron Berserk, though not to maintain it for long. Sighing in frustration, he gripped Lifedrinker, holding her close as Lira took her first, ground-jarring step toward him. Victor wanted to fight. He wanted to win, to break that shell and peel it off his enemy. He wanted to make Ronkerz eat his pride. Even as the last thought crossed his mind, he recognized his own wounded pride. Was he really going to lose? Was he going to kneel and accept Ronkerz's judgment?

He thought about begging his ancestors for help, but something didn't feel right about it. He was in a duel where he could yield at any moment—no one's life was on the line. Arcus and Arona had already been defeated. His people were safe back in Sojourn. Asking his ancestors to intervene felt...wasteful. Maybe, if he lost and took the defeat honorably, Ronkerz would work with him.

Perhaps he could strike up a deal where Ronkerz would gain more by letting him leave than by keeping him around. Glancing up, he wasn't surprised to have the giant simian's angular purple eyes lock onto his. "What's your game, asshole?" Victor mouthed the words more than spoke them, but he meant them all the same.

As Lira took another step toward him, Victor nearly backed into a pool of still-bubbling magma. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that it was too large a pool to step over; the ground had split for a dozen yards in either direction, and the rift was nearly fifteen feet wide at the center, filled with hot magma that bubbled with the steam of a buried geyser. Victor stood with his back to the pool and turned to watch Lira. Growling with frustration, he slung Lifedrinker over his shoulder and let her harness snatch her into place.

"Okay, puta madre! Let's fucking do this!" He growled the words and took up a wrestling stance—his center of gravity low, his hands loose and ready before him. He watched the enormous metallic giant approach. She couldn't take full strides or even travel straight to him; the ground was too broken up. When she was two steps away, just seconds from being able to cleave him with that brilliant saber, Victor cast Iron Berserk, surging in size and strength. Lira didn't slow as he exploded with power, roaring as his vision tinted red.

Her enormous sword held high, Lira stepped forward and chopped down. Victor didn't stand still, however. He also stepped forward, squatting low. Now inside the arc of her sword's cleave, he slammed his chest into her metal-clad belly—she was still a good deal taller than he—and, wrapping his arms around the back of her thighs, he pulled with all his might, lifting with his quads, his glutes, and every damn muscle he could dig into. Victor's center of gravity was far lower than hers, and he stunned himself by how easily he popped her off the ground.

Everything after that was reflex, taught to his muscles through thousands of drills. He pivoted on his left foot and fell to the side, using her momentum as he'd done in a hundred wrestling and football practices. Call it a "double-leg takedown" or "wrapping up" a tackle—it didn't matter; either way, he dropped her to the ground or, in this case, into the pool of bubbling magma. Lira's arms flailed, her scimitar went flying, and then her head and shoulders splashed into the boiling, molten stone. Victor released her waist and scrambled away as she began to slide, kicking and splashing, into the crevice.

He stood and, brushing the gravel and dust off his hands, watched her slip, inch by inch, deeper into the lava. Her legs kicked at first, but she stopped, perhaps realizing she was speeding her descent by thrashing. He could see the armor turning orange-hot near the lava line, and he wondered what she was thinking. He figured she must be panicked; if she ended the armor spell, she'd be deep in the lava without protection. If she didn't, she would keep sinking, her arms too inflexible to reach up and grasp the fissure's stone edge.

Frowning, remembering how she'd held her blade back and given him a chance to yield, Victor stepped forward and grasped one of her enormous ankles under his arm, stopping her from slipping further into the lava. He looked up at Ronkerz and shouted, "Does she yield?" The crowd, recovered from the madness of his earthquake, had been screaming for his blood as Lira recovered and stood. However, a hush had fallen over the arena when Victor had thrown their champion.

Ronkerz stood and opened his arms, shouting into the canyon in his booming basso voice, “Well, Rumble Town? Who’s the winner? Victor the Titan or Lira the Big One?”

As if they’d been waiting for his permission, the crowd’s hushed silence disappeared as they buzzed with conversation, shouted curses, and excited cheers. In seconds, someone took up a chant, and slowly but surely, more and more voices joined in, “Victor, Victor, Victor.”

Ronkerz spread his arms wide and shouted, “Victor! You are the champion! Lira’s life is yours.” Victor locked eyes with the great simian again and knew what Ronkerz knew: He wouldn’t kill his Big One. Things might have been different if she hadn’t offered him mercy and if his Core wasn’t empty of rage. Still, Lira wasn’t the one who’d killed Arona. If he wanted to kill anyone at that moment, it was Ronkerz, and that was a fight he wasn’t ready for. Victor grunted as he took a step back, heaving on Lira’s enormous leg. She slid a couple of inches, grinding over the stone as more of her red-hot armor emerged from the lava.

“Come on, then, mujer grandota,” he chuckled, backing up another step, heaving on the leg. With great effort, he slowly backed her out of the lava until he’d dragged her entire, unmoving form a dozen feet from the bubbling chasm. When he was finished and dropped the leg with a heavy, hollow clang, Ronkerz appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. “You could have helped,” he grunted, leaning forward with his hands on his knees to suck in some deep breaths.

Ronkerz shrugged. “Better that she owes you her life cleanly.” As Lira’s metal casing cooled, ticking and steaming, deep, heaving breaths echoed hollowly from within. “As she recovers, you should go back to your resting cave. I will repair this blasted landscape, and then you will receive your awards.”

“Awards?”

Ronkerz nodded. “Rasso Hine and a treasure from Lira. Something dear enough that she remembers this lesson well.”

Victor nodded, more than a little surprised that it seemed Ronkerz would stick to their bargain and then some. “Can I speak to Arcus?”

The giant simian nodded. “The man weeps, begging for an audience with you. He has something to get off his chest. I’ll bring him around. I’ll have words with you, too, before you quit this place.” He nodded toward the cave on the far side of the smoldering canyon. “Go now. I must put this place right so my people can return to their lives.”

Victor nodded, glanced at the enormous woman, still clad in her cooling armor, still lying unmoving, and turned to walk toward the cave. The crowd saw him separate from Ronkerz, saw him walking away of his own volition, and they began their chant again, hushed at first, then louder and louder until the canyon walls echoed with his name, “Victor, Victor, Victor!” Hearing their adulation, feeling their eyes on him, Victor’s back straightened, and he lifted an arm, slowly turning from side to side, clenching his fist. He felt his Core begin to flare with

renewed Energy, and something in him wanted to go berserk again, to lift his axe and scream his warcry, but he restrained himself and, with a broad smile on his lips, simply basked in the glory.

Book 8: Chapter 40: Prizes

Victor sat on the stone bench where, just hours earlier, he'd been chatting quietly with Arona. Despite his victory and the still-lingering buzz of glory-fueled endorphins, images of her broken, torn body persisted in their attempts to worm their way into his mind's eye, but he pushed them away. He didn't know her all that well, so he didn't want to let himself feel for her the way his heart kept trying to. Was that something you could or should push aside? He doubted the wisdom of it, but he decided he'd try. He'd box it up until one day, when the thought of her death came around, it would be blunted by time, and he could look at it objectively. Right then, it was too fresh, too raw.

To pass the time while he waited for Ronkerz to make good on his promises, Victor pulled Lifedrinker from her harness and contemplated her edge. Despite her difficulties with Lira, she'd fought hard and managed to drain a good bit of Energy out of the "steel seeker." He could see it pulsing darkly—rivulets of metallic Energy buried in the depths of Lifedrinker's silvery metal. "I'm proud of you, chica. You cut her nice and deep before she grew." The axe pulsed with prideful emotion, and Victor grinned.

"You treat her well," a melodic voice said out of the dim shadows near the cave wall, and Victor looked up to see Lira approaching. She was no longer clad in armor of any kind. Rather, she wore plain, rough-spun pants and a baggy, sleeveless tunic that hung loosely around her feathery figure. She ruffled her wings, flexing them slightly as she approached, her talons surprisingly quiet on the stone floor.

Victor shrugged, straightening to look at Lira more directly. "She's a good companion, and she tried her best."

Lira nodded. "She's a wondrous weapon, and I hope you know how rare she is. Spirit-bonded metals are uncommon enough, but she's especially conscious. If I couldn't sense the age of her heart-silver, I'd think she was millennia older than she is."

Victor smiled and lifted Lifedrinker over his shoulder, allowing her harness to pull her into place. "Hey, uh, thanks for not trying to finish me right away when I was down. Seems like you might have had a chance to cut me pretty good."

"Oof! That must sting your titan's ego, hmm? Well, I can say the same. You could have nudged me into that pool of lava rather than drag me out." Lira moved closer and pointed to the empty area on the stone bench where Victor

sat. When he nodded, she sat down, flexing her wings to accommodate her. “You’re a resilient bastard, you know that?”

“Me?” Victor chuckled. “Can you tell me about your affinity? I know it has to do with metal. At first, I thought it was iron—”

“Hah! You would have trounced me if it were only iron. Part of my quest for steel—in the figurative sense—has led me to refine my affinity, to broaden and strengthen it. When I was a child, I had a variant of an earth affinity, and it was, as you guessed, iron. I won’t say much more simply because I don’t want you to make the mistake of thinking all steel seekers go through the same sort of refinement. It would be unkind for me to lead you down a dead-end road. My affinity is, however, the reason for my visit. Ronkerz says I must give you something dear, and I understand the intention behind his lesson. That being the case, I have something very dear, indeed, for you.”

“Hey,” Victor held up his hands, shaking his head with his lips quirked in half a smile, “forget about it. You put up a hell of a fight, and I don’t see why I should get any—”

“No, Victor. This isn’t something you can decide for me. Ronkerz made a demand, and he is my master. This gift I bear does not leave my hands grudgingly but with utmost respect for you and for Ronkerz. He is wise enough to know that I must feel loss when I consider my defeat. No battle should be entered lightly, and to walk away, defeated, from a contest such as ours, with no penalty, would upset my karmic balance.”

With one hand, she dusted the stone bench between them, then gestured at the air, and suddenly, an oblong package wrapped in deep, blue silk appeared on the stone. It was about the size of a football, and when Victor reached to grasp it, he found it was hard and incredibly dense. The muscles on his forearm bulged as he tried to lift it with one hand and failed. He gave up and let his palm rest on the cool silk, smiling as the object throbbed with potent Energy. “What is it?”

“Well, you have some inkling about my affinity; you saw me summoning metal from the earth to use as weapons and armor. I can feel metal. I can hear it singing to me. Not long after I learned to...” She trailed off and shrugged. “I won’t get into the secrets of my affinity, but let’s just say I learned to do something very difficult with metal. I’m sure you caught a glimpse of it in my colossus armor. That’s beside the point, however. The point is that I gained a new insight into metal after that particular accomplishment—that’s the important part. I began to hear different types of metal singing from the depths of the world, but I only ever heard this song once.”

Lira reached out one of her feathered arms and, with polished black nails, gripped the blue silk surrounding the heavy object under Victor’s hand. When she tugged, the silk slid away, and Victor lost all awareness of his surroundings as his eyes focused on the magnificent ore resting on the

stone slab. The lump of lustrous metal was a deep, depthless black, but, at the same time, it was luminous, giving off an intangible glow that made Victor feel like he was staring into a person's eye, almost like he could see something in that ore, some kind of hidden intelligence or spirit.

After a while, Lira cleared her throat. "Mesmerizing, isn't it?"

Victor had to cough and lick his lips before he could respond. "Amazing. What is it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've never seen it before, never read about it in any books, and none of the masters I've ever had have mentioned anything like it. Before I learned to fight, you see, I was a crafter—a metal worker. I might have gone down a different path if I'd come upon this metal back then. Anyway, I've called it soul ore simply because I feel like I'm looking into a person's soul when I stare into that depthless metal."

"Wait, you found this in this world?" Victor waved his hand around them, indicating the dungeon.

"Yes. I believe the System may have provided it as a reward for my breakthrough. Make no mistake; even with my new sense for metal, I had to explore dangerous depths in this dungeon before I heard this metal's song."

Victor stared at the metal while she spoke, and after he'd absorbed her words, he asked, "What do I do with it?" He reached out and, this time, wrapped both his hands around the lump of metal, heaving it up off the stone bench. His muscles strained with the effort; while it was a fraction of the size, he figured it weighed more than Karl's gigantic axe. Grunting, he set it back onto the stone with a dull, reverberating thud.

"Is that a serious question?" Lira cocked her head, looking at him sideways like he was stupid. When Victor continued to stare, unblinking and unapologetic for his question, she made an irritated clicking sound in her throat. "Feed it to your axe, of course!"

"She absorbs Energy—"

"She can do much more than that!" Lira chuckled, shaking her head. "Gods! Can't you feel her hunger? She wants to grow, to be a match for you, but there's only so much she can do with Energy alone. You've got to feed her materials, too! Ugh!" She huffed an exasperated sigh and scratched her long, pointed nails through the feathers on the side of her head. "I have to remind myself how young your axe is. Perhaps she doesn't even know what she needs. Has she not asked for ore?" When Victor slowly began to shake his head, understanding dawning in his eyes, Lira smiled and nodded. "I can see that. Trust me, Victor, this is exactly what she needs."

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"How..." Victor trailed off, his question unfinished because he couldn't think of a way to ask how to feed metal to his axe without sounding like an idiot.

Lira smiled and leaned forward, slapping Victor's knee. "I don't mind helping. I owe you, after all, do I not? It's easier than you think; simply put the axe against the ore and leave her in peace for a while. It may take her a week or a month, but she'll slowly pull this dense metal into herself. Beware—she's going to be much more of a handful after absorbing the soul ore."

"Wait." Victor rested his hand on the ore again, enjoying the steady buzz of potential he felt tingling his flesh. "Does it really have one? A soul, I mean. I don't want Lifedrinker's personality to—"

"No! It's not alive, as much as it seems to be." She reached down to rest her hand on the stone with Victor's, her palm surprisingly warm and soft against his fingers. "There's no intelligence in there. At least not in the sense that you, Lifedrinker, and I view intelligence. If I were guessing, I'd say this ore is the stuff of the primordial universe. It has the wisdom of eons in its molecules but no real mind to use it." She shifted her hand to grasp Victor's, and after a gentle squeeze, she let go and stood up. "That's my duty done. When we meet again, I hope it won't be as foes."

"I..." Victor stood up, overwhelmed by how gracious Lira had been. "Thank you, Lira. I learned a lot during our fight, and now you've given me something precious. I hope you'll consider me a friend."

"I will, but that doesn't mean I won't heed Ronkerz if he says we must be foes. I hope that, when the time comes, you aren't defending the Sojourn Consulate."

"Tut, Lira," a deep basso voice rumbled from the shadowy depths of the cave. "Don't give away all of my secrets." Victor looked past Lira to see twin, angular, purple lights approaching—Ronkerz's eyes.

"Goodbye, Victor." Lira ducked her head, her feathers ruffling as her wings twitched, then she turned and hurried away, walking past the massive shadowy form of the simian lord.

When Ronkerz stepped into the dim light of the glow lamp, he announced, "I'll have words with you before you speak to Arcus and complete your quest." He gestured to the lump of soul ore. "Put that prize away."

Vitor touched the hunk of ore and sent it into the storage device Dar had given him. He wondered how much of a strain it was for the ring to hold all the powerful items he'd put inside it. It worried him, and he decided he'd better move the ore into his vault at the earliest opportunity. Ronkerz, ignorant of his inner conversation, interrupted Victor's thoughts, "I will ask a favor of you."

That got Victor's attention. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Even in my time, your master, Ranish Dar, was often at odds with the council. Is that still so?"

Victor thought about the question and weighed his response. He didn't want to give something valuable away to the renegade veil walker, but he also didn't want to get his head crushed by one of those massive ape-like hands. "He doesn't get along with all of the, uh, consuls."

"Good! That's the way I remember him. Tell me, do you serve Sojourn, or do you serve Ranish Dar?"

"I already told you: I'm not here because I work for the council; I'm here because I owe them. It's a...punishment, I guess."

"Good!" Ronkerz grunted again, thumping one of his fists on the stone. "You must know something, boy. I already know how to break this dungeon and free everyone inside it. I'm waiting for some of my Big Ones to break through into their lustrous veils, and then we'll leave this place. You needn't worry about the children born here or the suffering you think you see. Their lives are hard but not desperate, and, as you saw, great strength can be found here under my tutelage."

Victor frowned. "What about the people in the other settlements?"

"They'll come around to my way of thinking. As the time grows near for us to make our move, they'll join me. If they don't, they'll still be freed. I'm telling you this so that you won't return and raise any alarms with the council. I know we struck a bargain, Victor, but if you don't promise to hold your report for any but Dar's ears, then I won't let you leave."

Victor folded his arms over his chest, contemplating the warning in Ronkerz's words. "I can still tell Dar everything?"

"Yes."

"Won't the council be able to see what's happening in here? Can't they tell who's alive and who's dead?"

"They can see much, aye, but I can block and obscure just as much. At the moment, I'm quite sure they think Arcus is just as dead as Arona. They also think I'm still struggling with my ascension through the test of steel and that my Big Ones are iron rankers." He leaned forward, his knuckles grinding on the stone. "Can you do what I asked? Can you save your report for Dar's ears alone?"

Victor shrugged. "I can do that."

For the third time, Ronkerz thumped his fist on the stone and said, "Good!" Then he nodded and turned. "Arcus and Rasso Hine approach. When your erstwhile companion has said his piece, you may depart with Hine." With that, Ronkerz turned and took a lumbering step into the shadows.

Victor watched him leave, wondering if he should say something—a promise of vengeance for Arona, a threat to fight him someday, a thank you, a curse. He couldn't decide, and before he settled on how he was supposed to feel, how he was supposed to act, Ronkerz was gone. Much smaller,

lighter footsteps approached, and two humanoid figures emerged from the shadows. Both Arcus and Rasso Hine wore gray rough-spun clothes. Neither held any sort of weapon, and neither wore any jewelry.

Arcus sighed and shrugged, gesturing at his much-humbled appearance, his tentacle arm twitching and writhing as it hung by his side. “I’ll be a while earning some privileges back.” He gestured to the clean-shaven, bald man beside him. “This is the infamous Rasso Hine.”

Rasso appeared to be human. Victor couldn’t see anything about him that would make him stand out on Earth. Even his size was average—probably a few inches shy of six feet. He bowed somewhat stiffly. “Hello,” he said in a hoarse, accented voice that sounded more like a mumble than a word.

Arcus shrugged. “I already filled him in on what the council said. He says he doesn’t know anything about the invasion, but he’s happy to leave this place to tell them so himself.”

Victor frowned at Arcus. “You seem pretty upbeat.”

“I am! Something about being irrevocably sprung from the grasp of my father and the demands of society—it feels good. Ronkerz is powerful, Victor, and I intend to learn a thing or two in here. If it takes a few centuries, what do I care? I’ve no love waiting for me. I’ve no family of any consequence. My father hates me, my sisters and brothers won’t miss me, and my mother is busy with her wars.”

Victor stepped closer, looking into Arcus’s eyes, trying to gauge how much of his attitude was bravado and how much was sincere. The Pyromancer stared back at him, unflinching. Victor frowned. “Sucks about Arona, though, doesn’t it?”

Those words broke Arcus’s façade, and he looked down, inhaling shakily through his nose. “I can’t believe she died. She was the best of us—our generation.” He looked up, his eyes red and watery, the flames behind his irises mere smolders. “Please tell them I’m dead, Victor.” His eyes sprang wide. “Gods! That’s why I needed to speak to you!”

“What?”

“My father! He uses my sister, Trin, as a pawn. He intends to trap your friends in our family’s dungeon. You have to stop them; don’t let them go in.”

“What?” Victor blinked, confused by the sudden turn of the conversation, but something in him understood—his heart began to thud in his chest, and his rage slowly trickled into his pathways.

“Our dungeon, it’s a wave challenge, but it won’t end. There’s no exit provided until the dungeon is completed. Worse, it only allows tier-one iron rankers to enter, so you won’t be able to go after—” Arcus’s words were cut short as Victor surged forward and grabbed his shirt in his fists, lifting him so their faces were an inch apart.

“You’re telling me this now?”

“I’m sorry! Victor, I’m sorry! I meant to tell you—I swear it. I’d grown to respect you, grudgingly, yes, but it was there. I’ve told you how I hate my father; I was going to help you.”

Victor growled but released Arcus. “What if I’m too late? Something like two weeks have passed on the outside since we entered this dungeon!”

“My father has the dungeon control stone. He can end it. He can get them out. I’m sure that was his plan: trap them, with death looming, then offer to let them out for some sort of bargain—a debt owed, or perhaps a piece of property from Ranish Dar, or—”

“I’ll just kill him. You said he’s only tier-five.”

“Ah! He has a champion. A steel seeker. Better to have Dar confront him. But... he’d lose much political clout getting my father to release your friends. Do you want Dar to hold that over your head? I don’t know what he’s like, but I’ve never thought it wise to collect debts to veil walkers.”

Victor growled, punching his fist into his palm and pacing back and forth as he considered his options. If Arcus was right, he needed to haul ass to wherever his family home was and make sure Edeya, Darren, and Lam weren’t inside their dungeon. Frowning at the thought, he looked at Arcus. “What about your sister?”

Arcus shrugged, his face pained. “Um, different mother, but still not exactly loved by my father. She’s mostly ignored by him, and I wouldn’t be surprised to find her used as a sacrificial pawn; she’s not exactly talented.”

Victor was still struggling to wrap his head around the scheme. “I don’t get it. What if Lam and the others just win? If you have to be tier one to enter the dungeon—”

“There’s a reason our dungeon isn’t listed in the guidebook—it’s basically useless unless my father intervenes with the control stone, which strips the entrants of prizes. The only group that’s ever completed the dungeon was composed of six level nineteen prodigies, including Arona and me. I know your friends are talented, but...” He let his words trail off, and Victor drew his own conclusion: Lam and Edeya were good, but they weren’t that good. If they brought Darren, he would probably barely be at level ten. At the low ranks, nine levels made a big difference.

“Listen, Arcus. You need to tell me everything you know about your dad’s champion. I also need detailed instructions on the fastest route to your family home.” He glared at Rasso Hine. “Stand close, ‘cause we’re leaving in a minute, and I’m dumping you off with the council.”

Arcus nodded, licking his lips. “Right, well, you need to know that he’s a wizard with two powerful affinities—nature and blood. His nature affinity has allowed him to cultivate a relationship with a

powerful beast—a bog lion. Besides controlling his companion, his affinity allows him to use vegetation to...”

Victor listened to Arcus go on and on about his father’s champion, Fak Loyle, slowly building a picture of the man in his mind. Arcus described his powers, and Victor contemplated counters for them, slowly sketching a dance in his mind, one in which Fak Loyle was his partner. They moved in counterpoint to each other, Victor matching Fak’s talents with those of his own, and when Arcus finished, he felt confident that he’d have a chance. “That’s all I can think of. I’m sure that’s everything, though—I’ve seen him duel a dozen times. If he has a secret, it’s one he hasn’t used in forty years.”

“Right. Thanks, Arcus. Good luck in here.” Victor punched him lightly in the chest, then reached out to grasp Hine’s shoulder. “Let’s go.” With that, he summoned the recall token from his storage ring and channeled a trickle of Energy into it. He felt a surge of Energy, like being struck by a bolt of lightning, and the world faded in a brilliant flash of light.