

Victor BK8: Ch41

Book 8: Chapter 41: A Time for Killing

Darren stood back and listened as Lam and Edeya chatted with Trin and her father. He thought about that, about how he deferred to Lam with her years of experience and superior abilities, and wondered if it would have made the “old” Darren resentful. Didn’t he used to have to be at the center of every conversation? Didn’t he used to think people would judge him if he didn’t speak for whatever group he was a part of? He smiled wryly at the thought, almost like he’d learned a secret, and maybe he had—it felt good to let other people handle things, to not be responsible for everything.

Trin’s father was an imposing fellow. His skin was well-weathered, as though he’d spent much of his time working hard in the sun, but his manicured nails and carefully subtle makeup gave the lie to that impression. His clothes were impossibly fine—a silken suit in shades of brown and gold cut to fit him perfectly. His leather belt and boots were polished to a near-reflective sheen, and his many rings glittered with jewels. Again, Darren thought of his “old” self and how he would have envied Bohn Volpuré for his regal appearance.

“A party of four, dear Trin?” Lord Volpuré asked, arching an eyebrow. “At least I can see that you heeded my advice and sought the friends of that most competent fellow who bested your brother.”

“Yes, four. You said the dungeon would open for as few as three and no more than six.”

“That’s right, dear. I’m just confirming a thing or two.” His eyes, rather hawklike under his sharp brows, glanced over Trin’s three guests, then settled on Lam. “And have you been practicing? You’re familiar with each other’s capabilities?”

Lam nodded. “Yes, Lord Volpuré. Just two days ago, we completed the Grotto, even the tier-one area.”

Trin’s father nodded, folding his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his desk chair. “Yes, yes. Very good. Well, dear Trin, I gave you the pass. Whether your party is ready or not is your decision.” He reached toward a small, gilded brass statuette made in the likeness of a young woman carrying a tray and tapped his golden signet ring against it with a tiny metallic click-click. “I’ll have Efanie open the entrance hall for you.”

“Thank you, father!”

Edeya cleared her throat and stepped up beside Trin. “Sir, would you mind telling us how long it usually takes people to clear the dungeon? I’d like to leave a note for our friends.”

Volpuré frowned and stroked his chin. “Well, it’s called First Clash Coliseum for a reason. The dungeon is a series of coliseum battles, and after each battle, you’re taken to a ready room, where

you can rest between bouts. The arena master will permit nearly a full day of rest, but you don't have to take that long. When you're ready to fight, you simply report to the gate and strike the gong there. Conversely, if you rest too long, the monstrous gladiator handlers will force you into the arena at spear-point. A word of advice: do not attempt to battle the coliseum personnel."

"How many rounds are there?" Darren shifted and cleared his throat nervously, embarrassed by his blurted question.

"Good question, young man! The answer is that I don't know. It seems to have some random component to it. I believe the last people to clear it went through more than twenty rounds." He looked at Trin. "Do you know the answer more precisely?"

Trin looked down, her dark brows cloaking her eyes in shadow. "No, father. I'm sorry; I don't know much more about the dungeon than what you told me when you gave me the pass."

Darren looked more closely at Bohn Volpuré, his perfect suit, refined appearance, and the all-too-familiar disingenuous glint in his eyes. This man was a political creature, and Darren's gut told him never to trust a word he said. Of course, he wasn't sure how that might apply to their present circumstance. All they were doing was paying their respects on the way to a dungeon adventure, but he resolved to be wary of Trin's father if he and his friends continued to associate with the Volpuré family. A gentle tap at the door broke him from his musings, and he turned to see a young woman in a very prim and stylish uniform standing in the open doorway.

"You called, Lord Volpuré?"

"Yes, Efanie, please guide my daughter and her companions to the family dungeon portal and unlock it for them."

"Certainly." Efanie, like all of the people Darren had seen in the Volpuré household, was a very human-looking woman, though her upturned nose, delicately pointed ears, and large, amber-tinted eyes gave hints to a more exotic parentage. "Right this way, Lady Trin." She turned, took a few steps, then paused, waiting for the rest of them.

"Thank you again, Lord Volpuré," Lam said before following Efanie.

"It's my pleasure. Say, I wonder, do you suppose I might entice your comrade, Victor, to attend a celebration here upon your successful exit from the dungeon?"

Lam chuckled. "I can't speak for Victor, but I've never known him to turn down a feast."

"Excellent! My sort of fellow. I'll send him an invitation." He looked at Trin, who was already standing near the door. "Did you say he's staying at Ranish Dar's lake house?"

"I believe so—"

“Actually,” Edeya’s sharp voice cut through Trin’s hesitant reply. “He’s currently in a dungeon, doing some kind of task for the council.”

“Ah, yes! Of course, of course!”

Trin narrowed her eyes and held a finger up. “Father, isn’t Arcus—”

“Never mind Arcus!” Volpuré snapped, suddenly irritable. “Suffice it to say, I’m familiar with the task your companion is toiling to complete. Well,” he sighed and shrugged, “we can only hope he’ll make his exit from that unpleasant place in time to celebrate your victory, hmm? Off you go now, good luck!”

Darren followed the others out, sparing one last glance at Trin’s father. He’d already turned to read something in a leather-bound journal—a Farscribe book if he were to guess. He trailed behind the four women, listening to their chatter. Trin seemed significantly more excited than anyone else, and Darren sort of felt sorry for her. He could tell she’d led a sheltered life, and, seeing the pristine, rather sterile nature of their family estate, he couldn’t help comparing her to the child of some of the more prominent politicians he’d worked with back on Earth.

The thought struck a chord in his mind, jarring loose a memory that had been nagging at him, and Darren hurried his steps so he could walk beside Trin. “Didn’t you tell Edeya and me that you sought us out because Victor beat your brother?”

“Um, that’s right, Darren.”

“But your father—” he started to say, but Lam spoke over him, completing his thought.

“Said he sent you to us.”

“He didn’t send me to you! He suggested that any man who could trounce my brother so handily likely had companions worthy of note. I’m the one who figured out who you were and where to find you. Of course, my father wants to take credit—I can’t do anything without guidance as far as he’s concerned.”

“Hush now, Lady Trin,” Efanie said. “Don’t give your guests the wrong impression.”

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“Efanie, why is he like that?”

Darren watched as the smartly dressed woman tilted her head, her ringlets of neatly coiffed hair bouncing as she considered the question. Before she spoke, she gestured to a dimly lit stairwell and started down it. “You’ve never shown much interest in advancement, sweet girl. Your father favors his motivated children; I believe it’s as simple as that.”

“What about Renny? He’s still in the first tier and spends all his days lazing about, waiting for the next party to attend.”

“Well, Renny’s a little special, isn’t he?” To Darren’s surprise, Efanie looked past Trin to wink in the general direction of Lam and Edeya. “Renny’s the only child from Lord Volpuré’s seventh marriage.”

“His favorite wife.” Trin emphasized “favorite” like a curse.

“Well, she died very young, and I don’t think your father had yet had a chance to fall out of love.” Again, Efanie looked at Lam, Edeya, and Darren, this time frowning slightly. “I’m sorry, we shouldn’t air our usual banter in front of guests.”

Lam shrugged. “It’s fine. We won’t repeat any of it.”

Trin waved Lam’s assurances away. “Oh, don’t worry about that. Sniping, sarcasm, and making judgments about others are quite the normal, expected behavior in this household. Still, Efanie’s right; I shouldn’t do it in front of guests.”

Darren continued to listen as Efanie lamented her trouble wrangling enough staff for an upcoming feast; apparently, the head chef and his wife—the manor’s head maid—were away with their four children—also employed by Volpuré—for a family reunion. “I’ll have to borrow staff from Lord Arcorage at this rate!”

“I’m sorry, Efanie, but that’s the price you pay for being father’s favor—”

“Here we are!” Efanie announced, pointing to a large archway containing a twelve-foot-high gray metal door. She produced a metal key longer than her hand with teeth pointing in every direction, inserted it into the lock, and twisted it. With half a dozen smooth, well-lubricated clicks, the door unlocked. Pulling it wide, she gestured into the room beyond and said, “Head on through. I need a quick word with Trin.”

Darren followed Lam and Edeya into the chamber but didn’t miss the long look Lam gave Efanie as she pulled Trin to the side. He lost track of any unfolding drama, though, when he saw the strange room. It was spherical in nature, built from large, carved stone blocks, each inlaid with a silvery sigil. At the apex of the chamber, a warm, yellow light shone down on a teleportation pad, or, at least, that’s what Darren thought the metallic, circular platform was. He strode over to it, but before he could step on it, for some reason eager to hear his boots click on the dull gray metal, Edeya grabbed his elbow and hissed, “Woah, Dare.”

“Woah?” He stumbled back a step as she continued to pull on his arm.

“Yeah, woah! We don’t know if it’s all right to step on it. Wait for Trin.”

“Ah, yeah. Of course.” Darren turned and saw Lam walking the room’s perimeter, intently studying the sigils in the stone blocks. He looked at Edeya, “Can she read those?”

“I don’t think so. She’s just . . . inspecting. Probably an old habit from being a military commander.” She took a breath and looked like she’d say more, but the sound of the huge metal door closing with a clank interrupted her.

“Well, are we ready?” Trin’s smile and enthusiasm were contagious, at least to Darren, and he smiled along with her.

“I am!” he announced.

“Ready—” Edeya began, but then Lam spoke, cutting off anything else she might say.

“What did your father’s chamberlain have to say?”

“Efanie?” Trin’s eyes opened wide, and Darren instinctively expected a lie to come out of her lips next. That’s what people who were going to lie did—repeat or clarify an obvious question before answering. He knew that because he’d often practiced the behavior; it gave a person’s mind a couple of seconds to craft the lie. When Lam only nodded, Trin continued, “Well, it was a little strange, to be honest. She said I was free to use the token my father gave us but that I might want to reconsider. She said it would be safer with a party of six.”

“Is that all?” Lam pressed.

“She said something else a little odd, and not once, but twice.”

“Which was?” This time, Edeya was the one asking, and Darren could hear the exasperation in her voice.

“Simply that my father can end the dungeon run at any moment.”

“Why would she tell you that?”

“I really don’t know.” Despite his earlier misgivings, Darren couldn’t spot any duplicity in Trin’s body language. “She was acting very strangely. I’ve known her a long time; I suppose I should clarify her role here at the manor. She’s part of my family’s personal guard. She was assigned to me as a child and later to my younger sister, Raella.” She smiled and shrugged, stepping onto the teleportation pad and throwing Lam another smile. “That’s why your question threw me off. My father’s chamberlain is an absolute pig of an old lecher.”

Edeya giggled, and Lam smiled, shrugging. “If that’s all, then I’m game to give this dungeon a try despite our smaller-than-optimal party.”

Darren nodded his agreement and stepped beside Trin, grinning as his boots clicked hollowly on the metal disk. Lam and Edeya were right behind him, and then Trin summoned a gilded piece of paper about the size of one of Darren’s old business cards. She held it aloft, and Darren watched as a ribbon of golden Energy surged through the card. In seconds, it was gone, replaced by a cloud of glowing, golden motes.

The motes danced around in the air at the center of the platform and seemed to multiply, growing in density and size. Before Darren knew it, they'd taken on an oval shape that seemed to shimmer and solidify until it looked like a pool of golden liquid hung in the air at the center of the room. "Now we just step into it," Trin announced, drawing her fancy, basket-hilted rapier with a ring of metal on metal. "Ready?"

"Ready!" they all said in one way or another, and then Trin led the way, stepping through the portal with a liquid ripple. Darren looked from Lam to Edeya, nodded, and, gripping his staff tightly, stepped through the portal.

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When the light faded from his eyes, Victor found himself standing in the chamber from which the Consuls had sent him into the prison dungeon. This time, the room was much more dimly lit, with only a single amber glow lamp pulsing down onto the teleportation pad. For some reason, he'd snatched Lifedrinker from her harness as he came through, but as he saw the two armor-clad men striding toward him from the doorway, he was glad he had. He gripped Rasso's rough, cloth shirt and pulled him behind him. The man was like a child to him, easily obscured by his bulk as Victor faced down the approaching figures.

"State your name and business in this chamber!" the armored figure on the left demanded. They were both sizeable warriors—something close to eight feet tall if you counted the plumes on their shiny metal helms. The one who spoke, however, was significantly broader at the shoulders, and his growled demand had the tone Victor recognized as belonging to someone itching for a fight.

"Victor Sandoval. I'm here 'cause that's where the pinché recall token dumped me."

"Recall? You were in the prison?"

"But—" the second warrior—guard, Victor figured—said in a much higher, more feminine voice, only to be cut off as the first guard chopped a hand sideways.

"Silence. Fetch Watch Commander Reythis." As the woman turned and double-timed it out of the chamber, the remaining guard turned back to Victor. "Stand down. Violence will be met with a lethal response."

Victor shrugged and put Lifedrinker in her harness. Then he reached back, put a heavy hand around Rasso's thin neck, and pulled him in front of him. He had a feeling Ronkerz had been cloaking a lot more than he let on. It seemed to Victor that the Council might have considered him lost. Maybe when they saw Arcus's severed arm return with a token and then registered Arona's death, they'd decided Victor would soon be dead as well. Considering the time difference, he supposed it wasn't surprising they weren't standing around in the chamber waiting for him; if he got hung up for even a week in the dungeon, it would be almost two months on the outside.

“Listen, I dunno why you weren’t expecting me, but I was supposed to get this dude out of the dungeon.” Victor jostled Rasso a little, and the man tried to pull away but found Victor’s grip unyielding. “I don’t have time to mess around. I’ve got places to be. Can I turn him over to you?”

“Wait for the watch commander!”

Victor sighed but shrugged, reaching into his ring to pull out the Farscribe book he shared with Dar. Unlike many standard dungeons, the prison dungeon wouldn’t allow the books to work, but now that he was out, he figured he should let some people know. He started with Dar because he thought he might need his mentor’s support with the council, assuming these guards didn’t let him leave. As quickly as he could, which was quite fast, considering his much-improved dexterity, he scrawled out a note, letting Dar know he was out of the dungeon and had successfully secured Rasso Hine. He also said he’d be visiting the Volpuré estate for a “personal” reason.

Arcus had suggested he not tell anyone what he was going to do, and, though Victor barely trusted the Pyromancer, he’d thought it was good advice. If he told Dar what he was about to do, his “master” might try to intervene, and then Victor would owe him even more. No, if Volpuré wanted to mess with Victor, then Victor would be the one to mess back. He wasn’t an idiot; he wouldn’t try to stand up to a veil walker, but an iron ranker with a steel-seeker bodyguard? “Yeah, I’ll take those odds,” Victor growled, closing the book and sending it back into his ring.

The clatter of running footsteps and clanking armor made him look toward the doorway. “Sir Victor!” a new voice said as the female guard and another man, this one dressed in fine Sojourn livery, strode into the room. “Welcome back, sir. We didn’t expect you so soon.”

“Really?” Victor frowned. “That’s strange, isn’t it? I was gone for a couple of days in there.”

“Verily, sir, but Lord Roil seemed to think it would be quite some time before anyone from your party might emerge. Is this the prisoner, sir?” He strode forward and stared hard at Rasso. “Are you Hine?”

“I am—”

“Come with me! I’m to bring you directly to the council hall. Victor, you should come along; the council is bound to have ques—”

“No.” Victor gave Rasso a shove toward the watch commander, then started toward the door. “I’ve fulfilled my obligation to the City of Sojourn. Pass my regards to the council and let them know they can reach me through Lord Ranish Dar.” As he spoke, Victor’s voice started out clear and strident but ended in a growling snarl. His eyes had flooded with fire, and black smoke drifted from his nostrils. The guards, likely all steel seekers, backed away as he stomped through the doorway. He didn’t mean for it to happen, but his mind had already gone ahead, visualizing his battle with Lord Volpuré’s champion.

If he’d seen his face, if he’d seen the baleful flicker of the magmatic flames roiling behind his irises, or seen his forearms flex as he clenched his fists, or smelled the brimstone in the smoke drifting out

of his lungs, or if he'd tasted the blood and murder laced through his aura, then Victor would have understood why three steel seekers backed away, casting long, searching looks into each other's eyes. Those glances seemed to ask, "Is it only me? Am I mad, or should we fear this iron-ranker?"

Of course, Victor didn't see those glances. He'd dismissed the guards from his mind as he began to play out the upcoming battle in his mind. In a way, he was glad Arcus had counseled him from telling Dar about the fight, and it wasn't because he didn't want to be further in Dar's debt. The truth was that Victor didn't want anyone to stop him. If he were willing to face that fact and understand his feelings, he might have seen that it was also why he didn't consider writing in his other Farscribe books. He loved Valla and was eager to see her, but he didn't want to lose his focus.

"There's a time for killing and a time for loving, chica," he grunted, Lifedrinker once more in his hands.

The deepest bonds of love are forged with the blood of battle. Let us kill together! Her crystal-clear reply sounded in his mind, her voice half growl and half purr. Lifedrinker's reply almost broke him from his pre-battle focus, but rather than let it freak him out, Victor grinned and accepted the honesty of Lifedrinker's nature.

As he stomped down the steps of the council spire toward the busy street, people hurried out of his way, and he could understand why; he was fully limned in flame, almost like he'd cast Volcanic Fury. Victor summoned Guapo with a surge of rage-attuned Energy. Unbidden, the spell swooped up some of the magma-attuned Energy in his pathways, and Guapo appeared from a cloud of black smoke with a wild, angry whinny, rearing high, kicking his flaming front hooves in the air. Victor leaped onto his back, and, with the directions Arcus had given him firmly in mind, he raced toward the eastern edge of the city, where, a few dozen miles away, the Volpuré estate awaited.

Book 8: Chapter 42: Trapped

Darren spun, scanning the platform where the enemy archers kept appearing, but it was empty. "Was that..." He paused to lean on his staff, catching his breath. "Was that the last one?" Lam stood over the giant, her hammer dripping gore, her shield battered and likewise decorated. She didn't answer, so Darren turned toward Trin and Edeya; they'd been fighting off the spearmen pouring out of the western portcullis. They, too, gasped for breath, and Darren saw Edeya's lips move, but he couldn't hear her over the roars of the monstrous spectators.

It didn't matter because the announcer's voice bellowed through the air, drowning out the noise, "Congratulations, challengers! You've passed your fourth wave! Return to the ready room and see to your wounds. You have one day before your next match is required!" As he finished his announcement, Darren stopped scanning the stadium, trying to guess where the announcer stood—he'd never been able to lay eyes on him.

It wasn't surprising that he couldn't single out the owner of that booming voice; the crowd was hysterical and unruly. Furry, horned, clawed, scaled, or tentacled, monstrous humanoids caroused in the stands—drinking, eating, cheering, jeering, and generally making football fans look like a children's choir. The stadium rows were ramshackle affairs of great wooden beams and pillars, and the "seating" was whatever the strange onlookers brought to sit on—backpacks, stools, buckets,

furs, blankets, or...nothing. All in all, it was a wild, noisy, intimidating spectacle, and each time Darren had stepped into the arena, he'd wanted to back out almost immediately.

Lam clapped him on the shoulder, bringing him back to the current reality, and, though she shouted, he barely heard her words as she leaned close. "Let's head out! The Energy is forming up!"

"Right!" Darren held up a blood-stained hand, offering a thumbs up. He was a little upset to see his hand shaking, but he figured it was exhaustion or the dregs of adrenaline still in his system; the last battle hadn't been a smooth one. He started for the iron portcullis, click-clacking upward on its rusty chains. The team had unanimously agreed to try to be out of the main arena before the System awarded them Energy; they didn't want to risk being delayed and have to fight the next wave without a rest. As soon as they were all in the sandy tunnel, leaning against the rough stone walls, Darren looked out to see the golden Energy coalescing over the corpses of their vanquished foes.

In a rush, the Energy flowed through the air toward the four of them and split into four distinct streams. One of them slammed into Darren's chest, and he felt himself slide down the wall, nearly knocked out by the rush of warm euphoria that flooded his body and mind. He saw stars and flashes of rainbow starbursts, and, as it all began to fade, he saw a System message in his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 13 Chaos Sorcerer. You have gained 6 intelligence, 5 will, 5 dexterity, and 5 vitality.*****

"Yes!" Darren hissed, pumping his fist as he called up his status page:

Status

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

Chaos Sorcerer - Advanced

Level:

13

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 2

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

602/602

Strength:

6

Vitality:

47

Dexterity:

20

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

27

Will:

43

“Not bad!” He looked up to see the others also staring blankly into space; apparently, he wasn’t the only one with messages from the System. His attributes were really starting to take off now that he’d gained a few levels with his “advanced” Class—rather than five points per level as a “base” human, he got twenty-one. He hated seeing his pathetic strength and agility, but, as the others kept telling him, no one could hope to maximize all of their attributes, and he could get items and learn spells to bolster his deficiencies. Failing that, he might refine his Class to shore up his weaknesses.

“Leveled, Dare?” Edeya asked, standing with a grunt.

“Yep. Thirteen now.”

“Nice, catching up fast. I just hit fifteen, and Lammy did, too.” She looked over at Trin, who was fruitlessly trying to wipe dried blood from her face with a well-used rag. “What about you, Trin?”

“Nineteen. I must be close to twenty, though.”

“Come.” Lam gestured for them to follow, trudging through the thick sand into the tunnel. “We can talk in the ready room.” Nobody argued, and soon they were all stomping through the deep sand—it was the same in the arena proper, probably meant to absorb blood and, as Darren had learned half a dozen times, provide for soft landings as combatants were thrown or knocked down. Not that

soft landings helped all that much when people were ready to jam spears into you or crush you with massive hammers.

“Or pepper you with arrows.” Darren finished his musing aloud as he rubbed at a fresh pink scar on his shoulder; he’d been struck there by an arrow two battles earlier. Nobody paid him any mind; everyone was muttering to themselves. It wasn’t exactly restful in the “ready room,” and they’d been staying there, between fights, for four days. Everyone was kind of tired and raw. When they stepped out of the sand onto hard flagstone and followed the smoldering torches into the square, dimly lit room, Darren groaned and sat on one of the benches lining the rough, wooden table.

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“Tired, Dare?” Lam asked, lightly punching his shoulder as she stepped around to sit on the other side of the table. The only other furnishings in the room were the six wooden cots and rough spun blankets folded atop them. When they’d first arrived, Lam had snorted at the cots and attempted to summon her own camping gear from a storage ring; that had been when they learned that the dungeon somehow blocked their access to dimensional containers.

“Food should be here soon.” Trin peered through the peephole in the door on the far wall as she spoke. It was a stout, iron-banded door through which the coliseum attendants delivered their single daily meal. Considering the chef was probably a monstrous humanoid like the spectators, Darren had to admit that he was a little surprised by how tasty and filling the meal usually was—always some variety of stew, something like grease-smear bread, and a large tankard of surprisingly cold beer.

“How much longer can we keep this up?” Edeya asked, her sapphire wings drooping in exhaustion as she sat beside Darren.

Lam shrugged. “I’d like to try another round or two. This one was hectic, but Darren did a good job neutralizing the archers with his area spells.” It was true; his Chaos Storm and Fractured Reality spells had effectively nullified the archers standing on the platforms, forcing them to flee down to the arena sands where Edeya and Trin had slaughtered them. Still, it had been a long fight.

He said what he was thinking, “It was a long battle, though. I was almost out of Energy, and if more than another wave came...” he trailed off, letting them use their imaginations.

“I have potions to restore Energy,” Trin sighed. “I wish I’d known we couldn’t use our storage devices. I can’t believe my father didn’t say anything!”

Darren shrugged. “Well, it seems like that woman, Efanie, tried to warn us off. I don’t see us getting through twenty waves, especially at the rate they seem to grow in difficulty.”

“Do you think...” Trin’s words lost their impetus, and Darren could see from the unfocused nature of her eyes that she was lost in thought.

“I’m game to try another. Is there any way to retreat if we’re losing, though?” Edeya asked.

“I—” Trin started to answer, but then a loud pounding on the door interrupted her. Lam jumped up and walked over to the iron-banded door, and just as she reached it, a brown, furry arm pushed it open. A woman who looked more bear than person stepped in carrying a large tray laden with four enormous tankards—their evening beer. She handed it to Lam, belched loudly, and turned to leave. Behind her, another fur-covered woman, this one hunched and far less physically fit, pushed her way in.

“Coming!” Edeya fluttered her wings so she veritably floated through the room to take the tray from the small, hunched bear-woman. Darren squinted, trying to make out what their dinner would be, but all he saw were four wooden bowls and a large paper sack. The bear-woman grunted something that sounded a little like “thanks,” then turned and followed the other woman out. They pulled the door shut with a resounding thud.

Lam and Edeya brought the trays over to the table, setting them near the center. Darren reached out and took his bowl. “Stew again.”

Edeya sighed and shrugged. “At least it’s seasoned well, and they use plenty of veggies.”

“What’s in the sack?” Lam asked, reaching to lift it from the tray. “Heavy!” She pulled it open, and Darren laughed at the familiar smell.

“Fries!”

“Fries?” Lam frowned and lifted out a golden wedge of fried potato. It still had the skin on it, but Darren’s nose told him he was going to love the flavor. Lam tentatively took a bite, and she laughed. “Potato!”

“Yeah! Deep fried in oil or, probably, lard or tallow.” Darren cupped his hands and held them out. “Can I have some?”

“Let them cool a little, or you’ll burn your hands.” Lam set the bag down, and they all tucked into their stew using the provided wooden spoons. Darren paused when he realized Trin hadn’t taken her bowl.

“Something wrong? Not hungry?”

“I—When Edeya asked about retreating, I realized I have no idea how we’re supposed to leave. I know we can ring the gong by the gate to start our next fight early, but…” She looked around, apparently at a loss for words. Lam and Edeya looked up from eating, Lam still chewing, but Edeya wearing a deep frown.

The younger Ghelli pushed her bowl away and glared at Trin. “Are you teasing us?”

“I wish I were—”

“Trin,” Darren interrupted, “what was it your, uh, security person said to you before we entered the dungeon?”

“Efanie said—” Trin’s eyes widened as things came together for her. “She said my father could stop the dungeon at any time!”

“Right, so just message him—” Edeya started to say but stopped short as her eyes widened. “We can’t access our storage devices!”

“Do you think your father is monitoring us?” Darren looked across the table as he spoke, noting that Lam had yet to say anything on the topic. She was still chewing, but Darren could see the storm clouds behind her eyes. She wasn’t happy.

“He may be—Gods! How do I know so little? I’m an idiot!”

“You’re a pawn,” Lam finally said. “There’s no way your father would send you in here without explaining these rules unless he meant for you to lure us inside. He knows you’re not a scheming, conniving scum, so he didn’t explain the dangers to you—you would have warned us, right?”

“Of course! I swear it! I’m—” Trin rapidly looked around the table. “Why? I don’t understand why my father would—”

“He told you to find us.” Darren groaned as everything fell into place. Trin started to object, but he held up his hand. “He planted the seed, right? Victor beat the snot out of his son, so he sent his daughter to lure some of Victor’s friends into a trap.”

“To what end, though?” Lam asked, nodding along as Darren spoke.

“Right. That’s the million-dollar question.”

“Dollar?” Edeya frowned. “Dare, speak plainly.”

“I mean, we don’t know if Trin’s dad wants us all dead or if he just wants to hold us hostage to get something from Victor. Either way, we’re trapped.” Darren looked at Trin and saw she had tears pooling in her eyes, staring into space, utterly stunned by the turn of events. “Would your father be upset if you died, Trin? Be honest with yourself.”

“Yes! He loves me!” The tears broke free from her eyes and streaked down her cheeks as she clenched her thin, pale hands into tight fists. “He buys me dresses, sends me to galas, shows me off to his friends—”

“Just you? How many brothers and sisters do you have?” Darren pressed.

Trin grew quiet, and her lips trembled as silent tears streamed down her cheeks. “Many. My mother is not on good terms...” Her voice fell to a near whisper as she tremulously admitted, “He has other favorites.”

“Well,” Lam sighed, reaching for the bag of fried potatoes, “looks like we need to win tomorrow, and we need to drag this out as long as possible, taking our full day of rest between each battle.” She looked hard at Darren. “Conserve your Energy on crowds. Use one area spell or the other; don’t stack them unless we’re getting overwhelmed.”

“Come on,” Edeya said, pushing Trin’s bowl toward her. “You need to stay strong. We’ll eat, then you, me, and Lam can work on some coordinated attacks.” Trin didn’t say anything, but she took the bowl and began to eat.

Darren stared into his bowl pensively, idly turning the hunks of fatty meat and soft root vegetables with his spoon. He tried to think about Trin’s father’s motives objectively. What would he gain by killing his own daughter along with three strangers? Vengeance? He supposed there were some people that petty, that...honor-obsessed. Still, he didn’t buy it. No, if Darren were a betting man, he’d say that Lord Volpuré was bargaining for their release even now. He nodded, comforted enough by the thought to bite into a crisp, fried potato wedge before a panicked thought raced through his mind: Victor was in some kind of prison dungeon!

#

Guapo tore down the strange, black, crystalline road leading away from the city of Sojourn, his hooves resounding almost hollowly on the surface as it flexed with his mighty strides. Victor held Lifedrinker in one hand, and the Mustang, the axe, and he, himself, all flickered with rage-and-magma-fueled flames. Guapo’s hooves thundered, and Victor hardly noticed the citizens he flew past; he moved so quickly that his vision had narrowed to a tunnel, and only Guapo’s supernatural ability to manage his incredible speed kept him from colliding with other vehicles or pedestrians. After a time, perhaps frustrated with the traffic, Guapo moved to the edge of the road and pounded over the grassy berm to charge in the open space where others didn’t walk.

He might have run the risk of angering some influential citizen, but that wasn’t likely, not on the ground—anyone with significant means in Sojourn flew, either under their own power or in a flying vehicle. No, Victor tore past ordinary iron rankers, people who wouldn’t dare challenge him for his hasty, careless passage. His aura was on full display, and even a steel seeker would pause before accosting him in the face of that potent, rage-filled weight.

Victor was rage-filled. He’d kept his fury simmering while he listened to Arcus. He’d held it at bay when he’d delivered Rasso Hine to the guards in the portal room. But as he’d strode through the Council Spire, it had begun to boil out of his mental containment like a pot left too long on the stove. Summoning Guapo, holding Lifedrinker, feeling and hearing their anger echo his own, Victor found his fury mounting, building to a point where, as he tore over the grasslands, he almost felt like his old self, fighting in the pits for Yund.

Even so, there was rationality left in him. He could still think. He could still objectively look at his rage and wonder why it was so stoked. He couldn't pin down a single reason; he had many. He was furious that Arcus's father was such a piece of garbage, for one. How could a man raise a son with no love, only fear, respect, and the tremendous weight of expectations? How could that same man be willing to sacrifice such a nice, sweet girl like Trin? Victor had only met her once, but he'd liked her! The idea that their father was so callous as to use her as a fishing lure—

Victor growled as his anger began to boil over, and flickering flames joined the black smoke escaping his lips with each heaving breath. Bohn Volpuré's failings as a father were only the tip of the iceberg of Victor's rage. The idea that two of the people he most cared about were selected as targets by that man simply because they were acquainted with Victor was enough to send him into apoplexy. Edeya! After all they'd done to save her spirit, this piece of shit was willing to try to use her life as a bargaining chip? And Lam? Lam, whom Victor had bonded with, coaxing her spirit home from a desperate crucible of the soul?

Victor lifted his head and screamed his mounting fury, and flames licked his lips as black smoke rode the soundwaves of the terrible roar. Adding to his fury was the idea that this weaseling worm of a man did all of this, knowing full well that Victor couldn't legally kill him, not without first issuing a challenge, a challenge that he could accept while insisting on the use of his champion.

The laws of Sojourn were strange to Victor, but, according to Arcus, there were rules about who could challenge whom in this society. An iron ranker could challenge anyone, but any iron ranker could also have a champion, and a person's champion could be any rank beneath veil walker—even a steel seeker. A steel seeker could only challenge other steel seekers or veil walkers, and veil walkers could only directly challenge other veil walkers. If someone above the iron ranks wanted to contend with an iron ranker, they had to employ an iron-ranked "champion."

So, Dar could challenge Bohn Volpuré, but he'd need an iron-ranked champion. Bohn could then use his champion to fight Dar's champion. That being the case, Victor didn't see any point in getting Dar involved and perhaps earning another debt with the master Spirit Caster. No, he'd handle Bohn's champion on his own. Of course, none of this might bear any relevance—Volpuré might have a bargain in mind, something he intended to tempt Victor with, hoping to dissuade a duel because of his formidable champion. Victor had already resolved to listen to his offer and terms, but deep in his heart, deep in his belly, full of fiery rage, Victor wanted to fight.

When he came to a fork in the road, he turned to the south, where the sign said the Venture Hills Estates lay. "Close now, chica. Close."

Time to cut and rend. Time to bathe in the blood of our foes.

Book 8: Chapter 43: Challenge

When Victor crested a rise, and the Volpuré estate came into view, he urged Guapo to slow to a stop. He sat there, limned in orange flames, black smoke leaking from his nostrils astride a similarly furious-looking mustang. He still clutched Lifedrinker in one hand, and she hung down beside Guapo's flank, hissing and vibrating with her eagerness to kill. Victor knew better than to ride into Volpuré's estate in such a state. If he didn't get a grip on himself, witnesses would argue that he began hostilities before issuing a legal challenge.

If that were the case, Volpuré would be within his rights to have his household guard swarm him. Victor might slaughter many, but Arcus had made it clear that his father's champion wasn't the only formidable fighter in his family's employ. Reluctantly, despite his boiling blood, Victor lifted Lifedrinker over his shoulder. She just had time to send thoughts of confusion, anger, and even a hint of betrayal his way before the harness snatched her out of his hand.

"Sorry, beautiful. I have to do this with a level head." As if to reassure himself of that capability, Victor closed his eyes, inhaled deeply through his nostrils, and turned his gaze inward, staring at the beautiful balance of his Core.

He'd allowed his rage to run rampant while he traveled. In a way, he'd been venting, and he figured riding hard and contemplating murder was a better way to vent than getting into fights or shooting his mouth off at the wrong person. Having done so, he felt some relief from the pressure of the anger that had wanted to take hold of him when Arcus first revealed his father's scheme.

Still, his pathways were brimming with magma and rage-attuned Energy, and he needed to put their influence in check. Slowly exhaling and then inhaling again, Victor drew the rage out of his pathways and pushed it into his Core. He watched as the baleful red band around his white-gold Core pulsed brightly and began spinning a bit faster as the hot red Energy returned. Nodding, already feeling much cooled, Victor exhaled and inhaled again; this time, as his breath surged into his lungs, he pushed the magma-attuned Energy in his pathways along with it, pulling it back into his breath Core.

"Better," he sighed, sliding off Guapo's back. "Thanks, hermano." He gave Guapo's shoulder a pat. "Go back to the Spirit Plane and charge around the meadows for a while. Burn off that anger!" He chuckled as Guapo whinnied and reared up on his hind legs, but before the stallion could argue further, Victor severed his connection to his Wild Totem spell and sent him home.

Nodding and clearing his throat, Victor reached up to smooth the front of his finely stitched gray shirt and brushed the road's dust from his thighs and knees. He didn't need to—the garments would be spotless by the time he walked to the estate gates, but it felt good; it was another way to settle his mind.

He'd long since left behind the black, springy crystal roadways of Sojourn City and its nearby environs, but a few miles back, the dirt roads had transitioned to red-brown cobbles. Victor had passed by a few other estates, and he figured the wealthy lords had paid to improve the road passing through the area. Wealthy was probably an understatement. Volpuré's estate looked like a small town with a tremendous, monolithic, pale-gray stone keep at its center. A stone wall of similar make

surrounded the outbuildings, gardens, and courtyards, but the central keep stood alone, unguarded by an inner wall, yet imposing in its towering grandeur.

As he approached the wall and the guards at the gate, Victor studied that central keep. It was probably fifty yards on a side and maybe four or five hundred feet tall. He'd seen larger buildings, certainly, but the way it stood there, like a single, massive stone planted in the hillside, was impressive; he couldn't deny it.

Windows didn't mar its surface for the first third of its height, but starting there at some invisible demarcation line, stained glass and balconies peppered the smooth surface, and Victor could make out tiny people going about their lives—shaking out rugs, watering little gardens, and leaning on balcony railings as they gestured and conversed. Volpuré's household looked to be bustling and full of life. "How many kids does that pendejo have? Thirty-something? I guess that means a lot of grandkids and in-laws."

By then, he'd stepped into the shadow of the gatehouse, and one of the men wearing Volpuré's livery—a silver raptor on a lavender background—stepped forward. "When you stopped yonder, we'd wondered if you'd approach. What can we help you with, stranger?"

Victor, reduced to his more "human" size of something close to seven feet, smiled and hooked his thumbs onto his supple leather belt. "I need to speak to Bohn Volpuré."

"Ah! Do you have an appointment with Lord Volpuré?"

"I think he's probably expecting me. I'm Victor Sandoval. He might have some information about a few of my friends who went into the family dungeon. 'Something, something coliseum.' Does that ring a bell?"

The guard, a tall, stout fellow with a shock of bright red hair hanging down from the rim of his black-lacquered metal helm, stepped closer, glancing at his partner whose eyes widened. "Victor? The giant from the Vault of Valor? The one who beat Lord Arcus?"

"Ah, yeah. That's me." Victor shrugged, still standing nonchalantly.

"I'll fetch Chamberlain Potts," the second guard said, and Victor gave him a double-take because he'd never heard such a high voice. The fellow's cheeks reddened at Victor's quick glance, and then he hurried away.

"Right, well, I've instructions to bring you to the lord's parlor. I'm assuming you received his invitation?"

"I did not. I've just returned to town from a...quest, I guess. I heard rumors about my friends, so I came straight here."

"Well, please follow me, sir." The guard looked Victor up and down before he turned, and he seemed to want to say something, but perhaps his sense of propriety wouldn't allow it. He clamped his jaw tight and turned to lead the way through the gatehouse and into an expansive, cobbled courtyard.

Fruit trees grew in circular planters along the edges, and a fountain bubbled at the center, surrounded by a low stone bench. Victor smiled and inhaled the scent of citrus, and as children's laughter caught his ear, he turned to see a small boy climbing one of the trees while a pair of girls in bright dresses tried to poke him with little sticks. They all giggled, so he didn't think anything untoward was happening.

"We should make haste, sir," the guard said from several feet ahead. Victor hadn't realized he'd stopped walking, but the guard's words didn't spur him. He folded his arms and arched an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"Well, the lord's parlor is on the top floor, and we wouldn't want to keep him waiting—"

"I think I'll wait for him here. I like this courtyard fine, and the fountain pleases my weary ears. Tell your master not to hurry on my account." Victor strode over the cobbles to the fountain as he spoke, admiring the delicately carved fish that served as the water spouts.

"But, sir, I'm sure you'd be more comfortable in the manor—"

"Manor?" Victor glanced up at the imposing stone edifice. "That looks more like a keep to me. No, I've had enough of gloomy stone interiors. I'll sit here in the sun, under the stars, and listen to the fountain while I wait. Thank you for the kind invitation, however."

"As you say, sir. I'll, well, I'll let the chamberlain know. I'm sure he'll have some refreshments sent your way. I'm not sure how long it will take Lord Volpuré to make his way down to see you—"

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"No worries." Victor waved him off as he sat down, leaned back against the fountain's rim, and crossed his feet at the ankles. "I'll watch the children play while I wait."

"As you say," the guard repeated, then he bowed stiffly and hurried toward the stone steps leading up to the manor's sizeable double doors. Victor watched him for a moment, then turned his gaze toward the parapets surrounding the courtyard. Just as he'd hoped, there were dozens of guards making rounds, often sending glances his way. More than that, he could see picnic tables situated in the little gardens at the edge of the courtyard and, seated at them, several finely dressed adults. Arcus had told him that the courtyard was well-populated and the perfect place to issue his challenge. He'd warned Victor not to allow himself to be sequestered away from the eyes of potential witnesses.

“I hope you were right,” he muttered as he considered the objection he’d thrown at Arcus: what if Lord Volpuré instructed his kin and staff to lie about the challenge? Arcus had laughed, saying that too many people in the household had too much to gain from the lord’s downfall. They wouldn’t lie to the Sojourn Council for him, not about something so important as a challenge.

Victor thought it was pitiful that a man of such means held such little loyalty from his own family, but, on reflection, he figured it was a simple case of “you reap what you sow.” Volpuré used his family for influence and treated them like tools, so it wasn’t surprising that at least some of them might do the same to him.

He hadn’t been lying about enjoying the sun and the sound of the fountain tinkling behind him. As he leaned back, Victor closed his eyes and tilted his face toward the warmth, letting it soak through his coppery flesh into the blood coursing beneath. He could almost imagine the warmer blood spreading through spiderwebs of veins, into his larger vessels and arteries, and carrying the sun’s invisible touch through his body. He sat that way for quite some time, and he might have dozed if not for the knot of worry still eating at the pit of his stomach whenever he thought about Lam, Edeya, and even Darren.

“Who are you?” a high-pitched voice asked. Victor opened one eye and peered down to see one of the children he’d been watching earlier standing by his feet. She wore a bright yellow dress with a huge grass stain near where her knees must be. As he watched, he could see the stain slowly fading as the garment’s enchantments worked overtime to keep the little rascal clean.

He grunted as he uncrossed his ankles and sat up a little. “I’m Victor. Who are you?”

“Jillian.”

“Jillian, huh?” Victor studied her rosy cheeks, bright yellow eyes, and golden curls. She didn’t look like Arcus or Trin. Still, it was a big family. “Are you related to Arcus and Trin?”

“They’re cousins. Are you one of my uncles?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Is Lord Volpuré your grandpa?”

“That’s great-grandpa!”

“Ah.” Victor nodded and winked at the little girl. He glanced over her head to see the others she’d been playing with lurking near the fruit tree, intently watching their conversation. “Are those your siblings or more cousins?”

“Rin is my sister, but Lop is Lord Stravian’s son.”

Victor rubbed his chin and nodded sagely. “Mmhmm, I see, I see. Well—”

“Sir Victor?” Victor turned toward the feminine voice to see a lithe, graceful young woman approaching. She wore the Volpuré livery, but her uniform was clearly a custom design, far better fitting than those of the guards at the gate. Her hand rested on the basket hilt of a long, slender sword, but she bore a pleasant expression as she said, “Run and play, Jillian, you nosy fetter-fetch!”

The little girl squealed a scandalized giggle and ran toward her playmates, repeating, “Fetter-fetch! She called me a fetter-fetch!”

“Apologies, sir.” The woman stopped a few feet away, standing in a stiff, military fashion that brought a twinge of homesick longing to Victor’s heart as it reminded him of Valla. “I’m Efanie, Commander of the Volpuré household guard. I understand you’re waiting for Lord Volpuré?”

“I am. Maybe you can answer a simple question. If the answer is no, I’ll leave now without any trouble.”

“And if it’s yes?”

Victor shrugged. “Then there might be some trouble.”

“Very well.” Efanie broadened her stance and clasped her hands behind her back. “What is the question?”

“Does Lord Volpuré have some friends of mine trapped in the family dungeon?”

“Trapped is a strong word—”

“Don’t bullshit me, lady.” Victor sat up straight and leaned forward, resting an elbow on his knee.

Efanie narrowed her large, almond-shaped, amber eyes and glanced over her shoulder toward the closed doors of the manor. When she looked back at Victor, she offered a quick nod and whispered, “The lord will argue that they entered of their own volition and that it would be an interference to pull them out. He’ll try to gain favors from you, perhaps even to force you to sign a contract of servitude in exchange for their release.”

Victor regarded her while inwardly feeling quite proud of his poker face. He didn’t smile, frown, or even blink; Arcus had already told him that much, so nothing was a surprise. Well, he admitted to himself, the fact that she was whispering this to him was a surprise. Did none of Bohn Volpuré’s people like him? He kept his voice low and calm as he asked, “And if I refuse?”

“I’m afraid he’s prepared to risk even his daughter, Trin’s, life. He included her with purpose of forethought; the council will see her death as proof that he meant no ill will, or at least that’s what his advocates will argue.”

Victor smiled. “It won’t come to that.”

Efanie blew out a sigh, and he could see the relief behind her eyes. “So, you mean to bargain with him, then?”

“Not exactly.”

Efanie looked over her shoulder again, then whispered, even more softly than before, “You must understand—Lord Volpuré holds the only control stone for the dungeon. You can’t—”

“Challenge him?”

Efanie groaned and shook her head. “Of course. You’re new to Sojourn.” She chuckled wryly and leaned a little closer, speaking conspiratorially. “He has the means to buy the best champion, Victor. Fak Loyle has never lost a duel.”

Victor nodded, leaning back against the fountain again. “Makes sense, I guess, or he’d be dead, right?”

“He’s a steel seeker

!” she hissed just as the large manor door swung wide, and a portly man in the Volpuré livery stepped to the edge of the stoop and looked down at Victor and Efanie.

“Lord Bohn Volpuré!” he bellowed, his voice echoing around the courtyard. Efanie jumped like she’d been electrocuted and took a few steps back, standing at attention. Victor didn’t want to look like a boor, so he stood from the stone bench and turned to look squarely at the doorway. A moment later, a tall, swarthy man dressed in the finest suit Victor had seen outside of a movie back on Earth strode through the doorway. He was followed by a train of attendants and soldiers, but only one followed him down the steps to approach Victor—a short, round fellow wearing a deeply cowled, blood-red robe and carrying a gnarled, polished length of wood topped with a pulsing green crystal.

When the two stopped before him, the man in the robe stood back a few feet, and all Victor could see of his face was the bottom edge of an unkempt brown beard. Bohn Volpuré cleared his throat. “Victor, was it?”

“That’s right.” Victor held out a hand, and Lord Volpuré looked at it momentarily before lifting his gaze, fluttering his overlong eyelashes as he regarded Victor’s face.

“How might I help you, young man?”

Victor let his hand fall to his side. Maybe once upon a time, such blatant disrespect would have gotten a rise out of him. Maybe it was the improvements he’d done with his Core, the influence of his inspiration-attuned Energy, or maybe it was just that Victor had met with enough assholes that nothing fazed him anymore. Whatever it was, the only thought that crossed his mind as Volpuré refused to shake his hand was that it would make it all the sweeter when he brought him to his knees. “You can get my friends out of your dungeon.”

“Your...friends?” He affected a puzzled expression, rubbing at his chin.

“My daughter is currently in the family dungeon, exploring it with her team. I’m afraid there must be some sort of error on your behalf.”

“You think so?” Victor grinned, chuckling softly. He lifted his arms to fold them over his chest. “I’m sorry if I’ve challenged your wits, Bohn, but try to deduce the facts. Your daughter is in the dungeon with some friends, and I’m asking you to get my friends out of your dungeon. Perhaps those friends are the same people, hmm?”

“Use respect when addressing Lord Volpuré!” the robed man growled roughly. At the same time, he unleashed his aura, and Victor felt it hit him like a heavy, thorn-filled blanket, dragging him down, scoring his flesh with psychic barbs. The pressure was immense, the aura dense and powerful, and Victor moved with it, stumbling back and even falling to one knee, ducking his head, pumping his lungs to draw breath.

“Enough, Loyle. Let the man speak.” Like a switch turning off, Loyle’s aura faded, and Victor took a deep breath, rising shakily to his feet. He looked around to see a crowd had gathered. The guards watched from the parapets, and dozens of finely dressed, beautiful people lined the courtyard’s perimeter. Arcus hadn’t been wrong.

“Will you let them out?” Victor asked, still avoiding making eye contact with Bohn.

“I’d rather not interfere, young man. My daughter’s future depends on her learning to fend for herself and not to rely on the might of her family name to rescue her from predicaments. That dungeon serves a valuable purpose: exposing the entrants to the very real risk of death helps to forge their character. So, in short, no, I will not. It would take something equally as valuable as the lesson my daughter would be losing out on to entice me. Have you anything of the sort?”

“Money? A fine, magical weapon?” Victor knew nothing he offered would be acceptable, so he threw those out for the witnesses to add to their gossiping.

Bohn waved his hand, “I’ve no need of such things. I could buy your weapons a thousand—nay, a million times. Have you nothing unique?”

“I could give your daughter lessons. I’m sure you recognize the value in learning from a stranger with some talent—”

Bohn cut him off. “Unacceptable, but you’ve given me an idea. If you’re willing to work for my daughter, why not sign a contract with my household? I could use a man like you.”

“I already owe service to Ranish Dar.” Victor finally looked up, locking his eyes—bright, amber, and predatory—with Bohn Volpuré’s pretty blue ones hiding behind their long, dark lashes.

Bohn frowned, a crease appearing over the bridge of his nose, perhaps surprised by the angry glint in Victor’s gaze. “Yet the man isn’t here. Is he not your patron?”

Victor frowned, his real emotions beginning to impact his acting. “He is, but I owe him enough. I’d hoped to solve this problem on my own. I thought you might be reasoned with—”

“Watch your tone,” Fak Loyle growled.

Bohn Volpuré raised a hand, holding his dog in check. “If you will not leave Ranish Dar’s service nor ask him to bargain in your stead, I cannot help you.”

Victor nodded and stood up straight. He looked around the courtyard, ensuring that hundreds of eyes were on the small group at the center of the square, then he cleared his throat and said, in a booming proclamation, “In that case, Lord Bohn Volpuré, I challenge you to a duel to the death. Should I emerge victorious, by right of conquest, I claim the freedom of my friends and your own daughter from your dungeon.”

“Fool!” Volpuré snorted. “My champion is a steel seeker. You’ve only felt a taste of his power.” He turned to look at the short, rotund man in his silky red robes. “What say you, Loyle? Up for a bit of a display?”

“Indeed, Lord Volpuré. I’ll craft you something especially handsome from this fellow’s hot blood.” While they spoke, Victor did his best to look like a confused idiot. He glanced from Fak to Bohn and then over to Efanie. All the while, he let his eyes bulge out and his mouth hang open.

Volpuré chuckled and held his arms wide, looking around at the many witnesses in the courtyard. “Challenge accepted! We shall feast afterward!”

Book 8: Chapter 44: A Walk in the Sunlight

The onlookers didn’t exactly cheer, but a definite hubbub arose at Lord Volpuré’s proclamation. More of the finely dressed fae-human-looking members of Volpuré’s household had quietly begun to crowd the edges of the courtyard, and Victor started to wonder if the duel would take place right then and there. He looked up at the proud edifice of Arcus’s family manor and wondered how it would weather an earthquake. As though he’d read Victor’s mind, Bohn cleared his throat noisily, and the buzz of conversations died down.

“The duel shall take place atop Arkhun’s Hill at sundown. Will that be amenable to you, young man?” Bohn Volpuré’s smug tone was so rankling to Victor that he almost dropped all pretense. His muscles tensed, but he held himself in check, the only evidence of his rancor a small muscle twitching near his eye.

“That’s fine with me. What does that give us? A couple of hours?”

Before Bohn could reply, the slender, prim woman with the golden curls stepped forward. “I’ll guide him to the hilltop, Lord Volpuré. Someone should attend him while he waits.”

Again, before Bohn could speak, Fak Loyle growled, “Might I suggest, generous lord, that you send a scribe along with the young challenger that he might employ his services to meticulously document his final wishes for those he holds dear. After all, one must prepare for the inevitable, no matter the bitter taste.”

“An excellent and kind suggestion, Loyle. Efanie, do keep Victor company. I’ll send one of Preceptor Lovus’s boys out to take down his final words.” Bohn turned and immediately started up the steps, Victor and everyone else, apparently, dismissed from his mind. The lord’s smug confidence was so over the top that Victor’s eyes widened with disbelief. Could a man truly be so contemptuous?

Fak Loyle watched his master disappear back into the manor, then turned to Victor. “Worry not, lad. Your name won’t be forgotten. My personal historian documents each of my duels. You’ll be in good company on the pages of my exploits.” Victor closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t speak as the red-robed mage turned his back and mounted the steps.

Efanie unclasped her hands from behind her and took another step toward Victor. She didn’t speak, though, watching his face as he marked the progress of the steel seeker on his way up into the keep. Maybe she saw the murder behind Victor’s amber irises. Perhaps she felt the tiny flicker of his aura that slipped the firm bindings of his iron will—whatever the case, she didn’t say anything until Victor exhaled noisily and turned his gaze on her. “Shall we walk, sir?”

Victor looked at her for a long moment, caught up in the bright spots of white light where the sun reflected off her emerald irises. She seemed too good, too pleasant for a place where a man like Bohn Volpuré reigned. As he had the thought, he lifted his gaze and surveyed the gathered onlookers. Not the guards who’d made a show of returning to work, but the nobility, the rich, finely dressed members of the Volpuré household. They, too, looked pleasant, for the most part. Could a detestable man raise such pleasant folks? Were they all putting on a false front? His gaze shifted back to the tree, to the children he’d watched playing earlier. No, he decided. For some reason, not all of Bohn’s children were devoid of redeeming qualities.

“Sir?” Efanie prompted again.

“Hmm? Oh, right, the hilltop. How far is it?”

“A few short miles down the lane. I could call us a carriage, but, unless you’ve something else to do, I thought a stroll might do nicely to ease your nerves.”

Victor smiled. “My nerves?” He reached up and scratched the rough, dark stubble along his jaw. “Yeah, I guess a walk could do me some good. I’m enjoying the sunlight.” She nodded and walked to his side, and for a panicked moment, he wondered if he was supposed to offer his arm or something, but she cleared her throat and started ahead, guiding him back toward the gate.

As they approached the dark opening of the gatehouse tunnel, one of the finely dressed younger men approached, doffing his velvety maroon hat and holding it to his chest as he cleared his throat. “Ahem. Excuse me, Efanie, might I speak a moment with your charge?”

“Lord Volpuré.” Efanie paused and inclined her head, taking a step back.

“Volpuré?” Victor raised an eyebrow.

“Channer Volpuré. I believe you know my brother, Arcus?”

Victor folded his arms over his chest. “Yeah, I did.”

“Did? Has something befallen him?”

“Your dad didn’t tell you, huh?”

“Tell—What is it, man?” Channer looked a bit older than Arcus but seemed a great deal softer, and Victor didn’t feel a whiff of power leaking off him.

“Well, your brother got killed in the prison dungeon in the Council Spire. You know the one?”

“I...” Channer looked appropriately disturbed by the news, and Victor’s frown turned more genuine. Hadn’t Arcus said his siblings didn’t care for him? Or had he said most of them? Victor honestly couldn’t remember and was beginning to feel a little bad for being so blunt with the man.

“Look. Sorry to break the news to you. You should let your brothers and sisters know that he died bravely, fighting a, uh...” As he spun the tale of Arcus’s demise, doing a favor for his Pyromancer friend, he nearly broke his promise to Ronkerz about revealing the power of the great simian and his Big Ones.

“A what, man?”

Victor shrugged. “A really dangerous criminal. I think your dad and Arcus’s master underestimated that place.”

Efanie cleared her throat and stepped partially between Victor and Channer. “We should keep moving, Sir Victor. It’s best not to linger on the estate of a gentleman you’ve just challenged.”

“Right.” Victor grasped Channer’s shoulder, engulfing it with his broad, powerful hand. “My condolences. You should probably let your family know about Arcus.” He released him and turned, following Efanie out the gates. Channer tracked him with his eyes—Victor could feel them on his back—but he didn’t say anything more.

Efanie turned to the left, away from the main, cobbled road, and followed a narrower path of pavers on grass. After they’d gone a few dozen strides beyond the gate and away from the people living in the Volpuré manor, she turned to regard Victor through narrowed eyes. “That was rather callously done.”

“Hmm?” Victor’s mind had begun to wander toward his upcoming fight, and he wasn’t sure what she meant.

“Telling a man his brother was dead. You could have been a bit gentler.”

“Well,” Victor sighed, “to tell you the truth, I didn’t think that guy would feel bad about Arcus’s death. He gave me the impression that he and his siblings weren’t too fond of each other.”

“I suppose that’s a fair explanation. Arcus wasn’t well-loved, but at least as many of his siblings liked him as hated him.” Victor noted her emphasis on “liked” and chuckled.

“Not loved, though?”

“Perhaps a small handful of sisters, one brother, and some nieces and nephews. He will be missed.” Again, Victor felt stupid when he caught the glint of moisture in Efanie’s eyes.

“Ah, shit,” he groaned. “I should have realized you probably knew him damn well. Sorry about that.” He thought about telling her the truth—that Arcus was still alive—but bit his tongue; just because she was pleasant and pretty didn’t mean she wouldn’t report every word he said to her “lord.”

Efanie looked away and shrugged. “It’s understandable, you’ve got—”

“Nah, it’s not okay. I should have thought of your feelings. You should know Arcus died like a hero, fighting off enemies who greatly outnumbered him. He saved me from more than one deadly blow. I hope you all remember him that way.” It was a lie, but only because Victor had promised Arcus not to tell the truth. He wondered just how long Arcus would be in the dungeon. Would he escape relatively soon, or would new generations of nieces and nephews be living in this great house before he found his way home?

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Efanie didn’t look at him, her gaze firmly fixed ahead and to the left, and she reached up to rub her eyes briefly before saying, “Thank you. I, um, well, I helped raise him. I spent a lot of time training him as a boy. He wasn’t the easiest person to get along with, but he had...a difficult road. I’m glad he made a friend out of you before he died.”

Victor nodded, unwilling to add more lies to the mound he’d already dished out. They walked in silence for a while, but as they left the manor’s outer wall behind and wended through a small citrus orchard to the north, he caught his first glimpse of their destination. A great, grassy hill rose from the nearby farmland. At its base were a series of enormous, dark gray obelisks that jutted out of the grassy soil in a faintly curved line toward the east. If Victor squinted, he could almost imagine the stone monuments were fingers and the hill a giant, swollen thumb.

“Arkun’s Hill.” Efanie pointed to the distant grassy slope.

“Practically a mountain,” Victor grunted.

“Tell me, Sir Vict—”

“Just Victor.”

Efanie inclined her head. “Tell me, Victor, why do you throw your life away this evening?”

“Hmm? The duel?” He knew he was being obtuse but was having fun, so he waited for her to answer.

“Yes. Surely you don’t hope—”

Victor cut her off, squeezing his left fist until his knuckles cracked. “Well, what else can I do? Volpuré wants to teach me a lesson, and he’s using—”

“Your friends and his own daughter as instruments in that lesson? Yes, I understand that, but they won’t be any safer if you lose a duel—” Her eyes widened, and her mouth formed an “O” before she covered it with her hand. “If you lose, he’ll have no reason to punish them.”

Victor smiled and nodded. “Yeah, the duel’s a win-win for them.” He shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets, smiling into the clouds. “Besides, there wasn’t another solution. I could have tried to sue the guy, you know, dragged him before the council, but that would take time, and I don’t think my friends have much time, yeah?”

“You could have swallowed your pride and brought your master to intervene.”

“Ah, well, that’s the issue, isn’t it? My pride. It’s a mighty big mouthful, and I didn’t feel like choking it down.”

Efanie turned to him and stared while he continued to walk, almost blithely, smiling into the sunny sky, a carefree spring in his step. “Are you suicidal, then? You’ve no loved ones to miss you?”

“Actually, I appreciate you mentioning it. When we get up on that hill, I’d like a few minutes to write notes to my loved ones.” He winked at her. “You know, just in case.” He’d planned to use his Farscribe book but found the idea of using Volpuré’s scribe to send notes to his loved ones amusing. He thought about that—loved ones. He had more than a few, and it felt good to remember that.

“I’m not sure if it’s bad luck,” he said, chuckling as he gave voice to his thoughts. “I mean, if I write them all notes about what to do when I die, doesn’t that open the door, at least subconsciously, to the thought that I won’t win? Nah, I think I’ll just send them notes telling ‘em how much I love and appreciate them.”

“Victor!” Efanie stopped and whirled, reaching out to take his wrist.

“I appreciate that you’re doing this to save your friends and, consequently, a young woman that I think of almost like a daughter, but you must realize you’re doomed! You couldn’t even stand inside Loyle’s aura! How do you propose to fight him?”

Victor smiled at her, then lifted his gaze to the hill that had grown significantly closer as they’d spoken. He thought he could make out a grassy path carved in switchbacks leading up the southern slope. “It’s bigger up close.”

Efanie sighed and turned to follow his gaze. “Yes, and well-watered with the blood of heroes. I’ve watched Loyle kill at least a dozen men on that hilltop.”

Victor grunted and started walking again. As Efanie hurried to catch up to him, he looked at her. “Just Loyle? Do other people fight up there?”

“Yes. It’s used by all the local lords and their families—a storied, bloody piece of land. You’ll have that, at least. Your blood will mingle with that of some very great men and women.”

Victor thought about it, a macabre sense of satisfaction washing over him as he pictured his spirit rising up from that hilltop, meeting some of the great spirits who’d stayed behind to haunt the place. “Yeah. Yeah, that wouldn’t be a bad place to die.”

Efanie gave him a sideways look, then turned back to the hill. “I don’t know why I care. I don’t know why I don’t simply encourage you. I should be glad you’re doing this. I think I’m just angry that, once again, Bohn Volpuré’s greed will cost the world at least one good life.”

“It’s too bad, isn’t it? I mean, about the dueling laws of Sojourn. It’s kind of bullshit that he gets to buy his life today, you know? Even if I beat his champion, he doesn’t really lose anything.”

Efanie chuckled, shaking her head. “Oh, that’s where you’re wrong, Victor. If it were possible for you to win, then the dear lord of the Volpuré clan would lose a great deal of face, and to the people who rule Sojourn, face is everything. Worse, he’d lose his champion, and, once people learned of the great Fak Loyle’s demise, Bohn would find dozens of challenges coming his way. Each refusal he made would reduce his standing and open him to civil suits. Inch by inch, he’d be ruined and forced to step down as the Volpuré patriarch, elevating one of his sons.” She gave him a look, narrowing her eyes as she smiled ruefully. “A pretty fantasy, but still just a fantasy.”

Those were details that Arcus hadn’t had time to impart, and Victor found Efanie’s words quite heartening. His smile must have made that apparent because she scoffed, looking away and hurrying her steps, leading from several yards ahead as they mounted the trail that climbed the hillside. He could imagine families with children and elderly parents climbing the wide, well-worn path on their way to attend a duel. Frowning, he called out, “Is that all that goes on up there? Duels?”

Efanie didn’t respond at first as she continued to hike up the hill. When they reached the next switchback, though, she paused and looked down at Victor as she rounded the corner. “No. Celebrations for the seasons, for various old gods, and even events like weddings take place atop this hill.”

“Huh.” Victor nodded, and they resumed their climb in silence. When they reached the top, Victor looked past Efanie to see a broad, grassy field, much flatter than he would have expected. Delicately carved stone pillars formed a loose circle about twenty yards from the edge. Victor counted thirty-three of the

columns surrounding a space about half the size of a football field. Other than that, the top of the hill was bare of anything but ankle-high grass. “I guess we’re supposed to fight in the middle?”

“The watch stones are enchanted to absorb Energy. They’ll keep spectators safe from...misguided spells.”

Victor chuckled at her choice of words. He wasn’t too sure some carved stone pillars would protect people atop a hill if he used Wake the Earth, but he was hopeful they’d at least give people time to flee. Efanie walked over to one of the nearby columns and leaned against it, folding her arms and watching him. She seemed to have grown tired of his refusal to take the duel seriously and didn’t have anything more to say.

Victor trudged past her into the circle, and he could feel the pressure and hum of potent Energy as he passed over the line of “watch stones.” It was like stepping through a layer of dense, thick air. The depth of the power made him reconsider things; perhaps there was something far more potent buried in the hill, some Energy source that could, indeed, absorb his spells’ power or redirect it away from the spectators. He’d only taken a few steps when a woosh in the air caught his attention. He turned his eyes upward to see an avian man with bright orange feathers spiraling downward.

He wore Volpuré livery and carried a well-worn leather satchel. He landed, stumbling forward, and barely caught himself before falling. “Oof! The updraft was more than I bargained for!” He turned, fluttering his wings and making clucking sounds in his throat as he straightened his uniform.

“Don’t be alarmed!” Efanie called from the circle’s edge. “He’s one of the scribes.”

“Ahem, yes.” The avian fellow stepped toward Victor and held out a hand. “Tibbion at your service, sir. I’ve been ordered to take your last wishes down and deliver them to your family.”

Victor squeezed the man’s slender, downy hand in his own, careful to only apply a slight pressure. “Could you give me some stationary and envelopes? I’ll write a few notes for you to deliver.”

“I was told to take dictation—”

“Tibbion,” Victor interrupted, “I may look like a brute, but I know how to write.” With that, Victor sat down, folded his legs, and held out an empty hand. A moment later, the scribe set a stack of blank, surprisingly white, uniform pages in his palm along with a fancy, curlicued magical pen. As he began to write his first note, one to Ranish Dar, Victor remembered that he would be handing it off to a man who worked for Bohn Volpuré, so he decided to keep things short and amusing.

He wrote about his training and his plans to keep working on his cultivation. He said trite, meaningless things like how he was looking forward to swimming in the lake or how he hoped to have a rainstorm in the shower of his own future home. Overall, it was just a pleasant little note

culminating in Victor's thanks for being such a good mentor. By the time he folded Dar's note and put it in an envelope, nearly a dozen people had arrived on the hilltop and were sitting in comfortable chairs or on blankets outside the stone circle.

Victor handed the envelope to Tibbion, then began writing quick notes to his closest friends. He wrote to Lesh, Edeya, Lam, and Darren, and then, just to be thorough, he wrote notes to Thayla, Deyni, Chandri, Chala, and even Rellia and Kethelket. When he finished, he glanced around the clearing and saw that maybe a hundred people had arrived, and the hilltop had taken on a certain festive air. As he handed the stack of envelopes to Tibbion, he asked, "How much time before the duel?"

"Nearly half an hour, sir."

Victor nodded and bent his head to the last letter he intended to write:

Valla,

I've just gotten out of the dungeon, and I know I should have written to you immediately in the Farscribe book, but I had some business to take care of. Now I'm writing you this letter, partially to pass some time and partially because I think it's amusing that my enemy will deliver a love note for me. "Love note" is a funny phrase as I think about it, but that's what I'm writing. I just want you to know how much I appreciate you and how much you mean to me. I'm young and sometimes stupid, but I know a good thing when I see it.

Victor frowned and tapped the pen against his chin for a moment. He'd meant to write something light-hearted, something that wouldn't mean much to anyone other than that he cared about Valla, but suddenly, a dark musing passed through his mind: what if these were the last words he ever said to her? Frowning, suddenly more serious than he'd been since issuing his challenge to Volpuré, he continued to write:

If I died today, I hope you'd miss me for a while, but I also hope you'd let our love become a warm memory and that you'd find new people to love and new hopes and dreams to chase. Let your life be filled with good things, and always look for ways to enjoy the better parts of living. Don't ever dwell on vengeance or hate, on fear or envy—remember that our spirits take those things with them when we die. I want your spirit to find me in our next lives, even if it's just to say 'hello.'

I love you,

-Victor

Victor smiled, folded the paper neatly, and then slipped it into the envelope. On the outside, he wrote Valla's name and handed it to Tibbion. "Take all of those to Lord Ranish Dar's lake house."

"As you command, sir!" To Victor's surprise, the avian slipped the letters into his satchel, spread his wings, and launched himself aloft, rapidly pumping his wings as he gained altitude.

"Shit," Victor chuckled, "I didn't think he'd leave right this second." He looked around and was surprised to see hundreds of people lining the circle of stones. When he saw peoples' mouths moving, their hands gesturing, but didn't hear anything but a low background murmur, he realized that the magic of the stone

circle must be creating a sort of bubble, a barrier that made it hard for even sound to penetrate.

With a grunt, he pushed himself to his feet and scanned the crowd for Lord Volpuré. Sure enough, he spotted him on the southern edge of the circle, sitting in an oversized, throne-like chair, surrounded by finely dressed people in similarly comfortable-looking chairs. Victor looked to the east and saw the orange and red streaks in the sky that marked a Sojourn sunset. It was nearly time.

When he turned back, he saw the short, round, crimson figure of Fak Loyle pushing his way through the crowd and into the circle. As he began striding toward Victor, the chamberlain's voice boomed out, loud enough for even Victor to hear inside the magical circle, "As dusk is upon us, the duel will commence. Victor Sandoval, challenger to Lord Bohn Volpuré, are you ready?"

Victor reached over his shoulder and drew Lifedrinker from her harness. She vibrated with eager fury, not a small part of which was directed at Victor for making her wait so long. He chuckled as he sent a small surge of Energy into the runes on his clothing, instantly cladding himself in his heavy red-black wyrm-scale and lava king hide armor. From within his fearsome helm, he bellowed, "I am ready."

The hugely rotund chamberlain immediately bellowed, "Fak Loyle, champion of House Volpuré, are you ready?"

The stocky, red-robed figure stopped about ten paces from Victor and lifted his twisted green-gemstone wand high. "Ready," he growled.

"Let the duel begin!" the chamberlain roared.

Victor held still, watching Loyle, waiting to see what he'd do. The wizard chuckled, and, with a palpable weight, he unleashed his aura. It was so real and thick that the grass between Victor and the wizard flattened. Victor felt it touch him, slamming down like a lead blanket adorned with needle-tipped psychic thorns that sought to pierce his very spirit. This time, however, he didn't flinch, and he certainly didn't stumble back or fall to his knee. Instead, Victor relaxed his formidable will, unleashing his own aura that rippled out like a wave of murderous fire.

It was Loyle's turn to take a stumbling, hesitant step back, and he threw his hood back in disbelief. When Victor saw his blood-red eyes sunken in deep, pale flesh, he grinned, exposing his white, powerful Quinametzin teeth. "What?" he growled. "Did you think your aura was so fearsome? I've felt worse." It was true—Ronkerz's aura was a hundred times heavier than Fak Loyle's. Even Lira's had been weightier. Of course, the surprise on Loyle's face only added to Victor's enthusiasm, so his grin was something mad, indeed, as he canceled his Alter Self spell and surged with power. The fight was on.

Book 8: Chapter 45: Blood and Thorn

Loyle didn't stand still for Victor's first lightning-fast cleave. As Lifedrinker ripped the air, black smoke trailing in her wake, the spellcaster sank into the ground, leaving behind a pool of shimmering blood. Victor whirled, only to see Loyle reappear on the far side of the circle, springing from an identical pool. "Blood magic," Victor growled. Arcus had told him about the spell, and he'd also told Victor that Loyle couldn't perform the spell rapidly, back-to-back. Victor focused on his adversary and cast Energy Charge, fueling the spell with fear-attuned Energy.

As he streaked over the ground in a cloud of purple-black shadows, Victor heard Arcus's words in his mind, "Keep pressure on him, Victor. Anyone who ever came close to beating him never gave him a moment to rest. Be certain, though, that no matter how beaten he seems, he has another trick up his sleeve. Never let your guard down." As though the words were prophecy, just as Lifedrinker was about to split the much smaller man in half, he surged into the air, hoisted off the ground by a thorny green vine that burst out of the grassy soil, surging upward like a mythical beanstalk.

Victor collided with the thorny stalk, Lifedrinker leading the way. His armor flattened the spines that tried to pierce his flesh, and his axe gleefully ripped through the yard-thick strand of fibrous plant matter in an explosion of splinters and green juice. As he regained his senses, Victor looked up at the wildly shaking stalk, only to see it was bereft of its passenger. He whirled, looking for any sign of the mage's bright red robes. Sure enough, Loyle was on the other side of the circle again, this time dancing in a strange ritual—stomping his feet, shaking his hands, throwing his head back to cough and howl in a strange language.

Energy Charge had a short cooldown, but it wasn't yet ready, so Victor bunched his legs and used Titanic Leap to launch himself toward the wizard. As he reached the apex of his jump and started down, he saw Loyle seem to explode—blood boiled out of him like a water balloon popping in slow motion, but it didn't splash to the ground. Instead, it hung in the air like a great crimson bubble, and just as Victor began to fall toward it, the blood seemed to solidify and sprout millions of hairs. Only when Victor was about to impact the strange mass did it ripple and form into Loyle's intent—a great crimson bear.

He hacked Lifedrinker toward its enormous, glowering brow, but the monstrous creature swiped madly at him with a tree-like arm tipped with crimson scythe-like claws. Victor just had time to tuck his chin and pull his limbs in close as the massive paw smashed him out of the air. The claws cut like razors as they sliced his shoulder and side, slipping through his armor like it wasn't there, shredding his flesh and biting deep into his bones. Victor roared in pain and fury as his rage-attuned Energy exploded out of his Core. It flooded his pathways and turned his vision so deeply red that he almost lost sight of the monstrous bear as he rolled on the grass.

When he stood, Victor had more than doubled in mass; he'd been so enraged that Iron Berserk had nearly cast itself. His flesh knitted together almost instantly, and a low, angry chuckle escaped his lips as he turned toward his foe. As the bear charged him, Victor flicked out his left hand, Energy already surging into the gauntlet on his fist. A coil of sizzling, dripping magma—enlarged to match his titanic form—whipped out with a crack, splashing hot, liquid fire over the bear's red fur and tearing a huge chunk of bloody, sizzling flesh from its shoulder. The creature roared in agony but kept coming, its furious eyes a match for Victor's. Victor welcomed it, spreading his arms wide.

Just as Loyle, in his blood-bear form, leaped to try to latch his massive jaws around Victor's throat, Lifedrinker came down like a falling star, blazing and rippling with Energy as she crunched into the side of the monster's head, just above the ear. The bear slumped, but its momentum carried it into Victor, smashing against his chest. Victor, surging with pride for Lifedrinker's tremendous blow, turned and threw the bear to the side. Thousands of pounds

of fur, blood, and bone shook the earth as the monstrous animal impacted the grassy sod, tearing a furrow twenty yards long.

Victor, remembering Arcus's words, didn't let up the pressure. He lashed out with his magma whip, hooking it around one of the bear's rear legs. As liquid fire splashed and fur and flesh sizzled, he pulled himself as he lunged, closing the distance in a mere second. Then, he began to lay into the downed bear with Lifedrinker, hacking great, gaping wounds with each downward blow. As blood sprayed and drenched him in its hot, liquid embrace, Victor began to roar with wild, maniacal laughter. Lifedrinker crunched through bones along with the fleshy parts of the enormous bear, and soon the beast's thrashing, clawing attempts to right itself or lash out faded, and then...it was gone. Victor stood, heaving for breath over a mound of mushy, coagulated blood—nothing more.

He straightened, perplexed. Had he won? A tickle at the nape of his neck, some instinctual sixth sense spurred him to dive to the side just as a hail of needle-sharp thorns ripped through the air where he'd been standing. Victor bounded to his feet, whirling to scan the circle, only to see Loyle waving his hand, hurling another torrent of magically generated thorny missiles. Victor ran diagonally, dodging the attack. As soon as he was clear, he cast Energy Charge and hurtled on waves of sparkling, Glory-attuned Energy toward his enemy. Again, Loyle used his blood-pool teleportation and escaped, forcing Victor to abandon his spell as he streaked through the space where the wizard had earlier stood.

In his mind, Victor tried to calculate the timing of Loyle's teleportation cooldown. It wasn't instant, but it wasn't as long as he'd hoped. He turned, frustration mounting, rage building, and scanned for his adversary. Once again, he saw the man's portly, robed figure dancing, and this time, with each awkward stomp of his feet, saplings sprang from the soil and wove together, forming an archway with the mage at its center. Victor didn't know what he was doing but meant to interrupt it.

He leaped into action, his long legs powering him across the fighting circle in just a few broad strides, and then he lashed out with his magma whip, aiming to yank Fak Loyle toward him. The wizard threw out his arm at the last second, and a tangle of saplings sprang from the ground, intercepting Victor's whip. Loyle turned and bounded away, leaving his strange archway behind. Victor stalked toward it, Lifedrinker raised high, intent on chopping it to kindling before Loyle's purpose could come to light.

Unfortunately, he'd just closed the distance when the air inside the archway shimmered with sparkling green Energy, and then a great bundle of claws and black fur exploded out of it and slammed into Victor, knocking him to the side, despite his titanic size. The creature roared, a sound that woke something primal in Victor, an instinctual desire to fight or flee. When he regained his balance and whipped Lifedrinker around, fending off the raking claws, he got his first good look at what had to be Loyle's "bog lion" companion.

The creature was close to the size of his cave bear spirit companion, but it reeked of power. Its fur was black, but its mane was tawnier, brown at the base, and much paler on the fringes. The creature had deep green eyes the color of moss, and they glinted with intelligence as the lion regarded Victor. As its massive claws dug into the turf, it growled and paced, calculated violence in those eyes.

The lion's aura was heavy and full of primal cunning and murderous intent. Victor suddenly realized he wasn't just battling with one steel seeker; this "companion" was likely as formidable as

Loyle. Wasting no time, he channeled Energy into the pattern for his Wild Totem spell, summoning his coyotes with fear-attuned Energy. When he'd spoken to Arcus, his initial plan had been to summon his bear and use that powerful companion to battle with the lion. Having seen and felt the lion's power, though, he knew that would be a waste; his bear would put up a brave fight, but the lion would kill it, and it wouldn't take long.

No, this was a foe that Victor would have to deal with himself. His coyotes wouldn't be able to kill Loyle, but hopefully, they could keep the mage on the defensive, at least long enough for him to slay the mighty bog creature. His five mastiff-sized coyotes sprang from pools of shadow, their glowering purple eyes gleaming out of dark, shadowy countenances, their yips and cries haunting and strange. Victor mentally urged them to harry the mage, and they immediately spread out, crossing the circle and rapidly closing with Loyle.

Meanwhile, the lion dove at him, swiping its powerful arms. Victor knocked its grasping claws aside with Lifedrinker's smoldering edge. The beast was strong and fast, and as they began to spar in earnest, Victor enjoyed the rhythm of his battle with it. The lion was a master in the use of its natural weapons, and it had a dozen combinations of swipes and bites that kept Victor guessing. Often, it would land hits on his armor, scoring long, shining dents in his wyrm-scale and rending his lava king hide. Even so, it rarely drew any blood; his armor was sufficient, and Victor was adept at minimizing damage by moving with the impacts.

He felt one of his coyotes depart the Material Plane, and he knew he couldn't drag out his fight, though a part of him wanted to. However much he was learning from the skilled melee combat of the lion, he couldn't allow Loyle and the beast to work together. Frowning, almost feeling guilty, he employed his magma lash. The creature could block his axe with its diamond-strong, foot-long claws, but the whip was another matter. The very first time he snapped it out, the lion, roaring and growling, swiped at it with its claws, only to have the length of molten, smoldering stone coil around its paw and foreleg. It sizzled and popped, melting through the lion's fur and flesh. The beast recoiled, yowling madly as it thrashed and bucked, trying to pull its limb free.

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Victor yanked on the lash, pulling the enormous lion off balance, and Lifedrinker was ready and waiting for the opening. He hacked her down, and her orange-hot edge bit halfway through the lion's left shoulder, severing muscle and tendon and digging deep into the bone. The lion went mad with pain and panic, roaring and screeching as it exploded in a frenzy of movement that only a feline could pull off. It ripped its right foreleg free of Victor's whip and flung itself backward, scrambling to flee. One of its forelimbs wouldn't move right, and the other was degloved, nothing but bloody bone as it tried to scamper away.

If Victor hadn't been in a fight for his life, if he hadn't been hot with rage long before the fight even started, if he hadn't been stoking his pathways with rage-attuned Energy, he might have turned his back on the creature and let it skulk away. He might have risked it recovering somehow and coming for him. As it was, Victor was seeing red, and he was aware that only two of his coyotes were still "alive." He couldn't risk that Loyle might somehow heal the beast and that it might catch him unawares while he dealt with the mage. No, Victor reasoned grimly—he had to finish it.

So, as the great, once-proud lion limped away, hobbled and broken, Victor swallowed his sympathy and cast Energy Charge. As usual, he led his charge with Lifedrinker's gleaming, hungry edge. He smashed into the monstrous beast's haunches, and his deadly axe split the great cat's spine like a master woodsman's axe felling a young oak. The crack rang out, and Victor's impact sent the broken, listless body of the beast flopping like a terrier's stuffed animal toward the edge of the circle.

He just had time to register the onlookers scrambling to escape being flattened by the dead or paralyzed beast before Loyle's howl of dismay caught his attention. Victor whirled in time to see the mage roiling with red, bubbling Energy, surging in size as his body swelled and engorged, blowing up like an obscene doll, his white, sun-starved arms and legs sprouting from his robes, which, apparently, weren't enchanted to grow to match the size of their wearer. He wasn't just growing; he was stretching, and Victor could see the blood roiling and pulsing under his stretched-thin skin.

One of his coyotes yet remained, and it lunged in, grabbing hold of Loyle's Achilles tendon. It viciously shook its head as it tried to rip it out. Loyle reached down one of his massive, swollen hands and grasped the coyote by the neck. Victor saw that weird, pulsating limb contract, and then the crunch of bones signaled his totem's demise. Loyle, now something like fifteen feet tall and twice as bulky as Victor, held aloft his bulbous right hand, and blood streamed out, solidifying in the air into the shape of a scythe. Then the steel seeker stomped toward him, the ground lurching with each impact of his overlarge feet.

Victor stared, amazed by the spectacle. The man's robes were stretched tight, and the lower hem failed to cover his engorged, bouncing family jewels. It was so distracting that Victor nearly failed to react as that enormous, blood-red scythe whistled through the air toward his right knee. He parried the blow just in time, his epic-level axe skills too well-honed to allow such a well-broadcast attack to hit home. As the scythe bounced away, Victor took a step back and grunted, "Arcus didn't mention this bullshit!"

Loyle's face was disfigured by the blood that had swelled his form; his flesh was drawn taut, his eyes bulged like pasty puffer fish, and his teeth looked tiny behind his sausage-like lips. Still, his tongue waggled in that oversized mouth, and garbled words flowed forth, "Yawl pay for thaaah!"

Having had enough of the freakshow, Victor scowled and launched a vicious attack, hacking Lifedrinker low and high, dancing inside the arc of that stupidly massive scythe. Her burning blade sizzled as she split Loyle's pasty flesh and released torrents of blood not once or twice but five times as Victor smoothly glided around the swollen monstrosity. Loyle teetered and wobbled with each blow, and as Victor danced away, spinning to watch his handiwork, a great pool of blood formed around the mage as he veritably deflated, gouts of blood pouring from the gashes Victor had made.

Victor wanted to put an end to the disgusting sight of Loyle's sagging, overlarge skin hanging from his emaciated form. He gathered himself for another Energy Charge, but then the blood pool bubbled and boiled, rising from the ground as though animated. The blood took on the form of a liquid serpent, and its crimson head lunged toward Victor, quick as lightning. The thing must have sprouted fangs because he felt them pierce his thigh as it latched on. He jerked back and hacked down with Lifedrinker, but her razor-sharp, smoldering edge slid along the blood serpent's flesh like he was trying to cut a rubber hose with a butter knife.

Suddenly, he felt a pulse, and something hot and vile entered his leg. It wasn't like venom; it was more like his earlier comparison of a hose—a great quantity of something was being pumped into his body through the blood serpent's bite. With each pulse, a hot, burning, dirty wave pushed into his flesh and spread further and further. He lost control of his leg, stumbled, and fell backward.

Victor scrabbled back on his hands, kicking with his good leg, but the blood serpent stretched from the pool with his movement, and another pulse of that stuff

entered his body. Victor's vision began to tunnel, and a weird, high-pitched ringing echoed through his ears. His legs, his chest, even his shoulders were numb, and they felt *wrong*, like they weren't even his. He found it difficult to concentrate or remember what he was doing. His muscles relaxed, and he slumped back onto his elbows as the thing pulsed again, and more of the sickening sensation of having someone else *inside* his skin threatened to drive him mad.

Victor's thoughts drifted to odd places as his vision darkened further and his mind grew numb. He thought of Valla and felt relief that he'd sent her a letter. He imagined Deyni running through fields, chasing her raptor as it hunted for prey. He remembered Old Mother as she'd hugged him and said she'd see him in another life. As his limbs turned cold, and his heart's steady thump slowed, pausing for a dozen seconds between each sluggish beat, he remembered Tes and felt his first regret—he'd wanted to meet her again. The thought tickled something in Victor, woke some part of him that remembered who he was.

With a tremendous effort of will, he forced his wandering mind back to the present and, with his vision dark, he turned his gaze inward and regarded his Core. It was besieged, surrounded by cold, red Energy. Victor turned to his breath Core and, using the pathway he'd long ago opened when he'd learned to use his magma-attuned Energy, pulled some of that hot, burning power out, watching with glee as it burned up the cold, bloody, invading Energy. As his magma-attuned Energy burned its way to his spirit Core, Victor felt parts of himself waking up. His heart's slow thump became a thump-thump, and the

magma rushed into the chamber of his Spirit Core and seared a pathway for his rage to spill forth.

As feeling returned to his chest, spreading outward from his pounding heart, Victor inhaled deeply and let magma and rage-attuned Energy mingle in his pathways. His vision came back to him, and he saw the stars in all their splendor hanging bright in the dark sky over his head. He felt the grass under his fingers, Lifedrinker's haft in his palm. He felt the blood serpent digging into his thigh, pushing its vile concoction into him, but his body was resisting now; he could feel the sickening stuff burning up in his chest, in his Core.

Unwilling to lose ground again, remembering the enormous size of Loyle's blood pool, he gathered his magma and rage and pushed them together, casting Volcanic Fury. As fire ignited in his blood, as flames flickered to life in his dim vision, Victor let his head roll back, opened his mouth, and roared his primal rage. His madness was tinged with cruel amusement as he felt Loyle's blood burn to ash in his veins.

Victor inhaled deeply and turned his gaze on the serpent, smoking and steaming as it continued to try to pump its vile concoction into his leg. He gathered his breath and exhaled a plume of magma. The liquid fire eradicated the serpent, popping and melting away its form like blood spilled into an inferno. Victor continued to blow, lifting his face toward Loyle where he stood, his sagging flesh still hanging from his much-reduced body, and doused him with the remainder of the fire in his lungs.

Loyle screamed and writhed. Perhaps instinctually, he cast his blood pool teleportation, but when he reappeared on the far side of the circle, he was still aflame and still thrashing and screaming in agony. Victor sprang to his feet, leaving a blackened, body-shaped scorch mark on the grass. His vision was tinted yellow, and it pulsed red with each beat of his heart as he approached his tortured foe. Lifedrinker no longer smoldered—she blazed. Her edge was white-hot, and she burned the very air as Victor stalked forward, trailing black smoke and leaving behind fiery footsteps that burned the damp, green grass to ash.

Despite his agony, Loyle managed to get off a spell; green tendrils of vines erupted from the soil and wrapped around him, smothering the flames and, perhaps, healing him with their pulsing green sap. Victor didn't care. All he knew was his need for destruction and that this was a fool who'd tempted his rage. He blew out another stream of doubly effective magma, enhanced by his Volcanic Fury, and it splashed over those coiled green shoots, instantly bursting them as the sap within boiled to steam. Loyle screamed, and Lifedrinker answered him as she ripped through the air to cleave him in twain.

His foe undeniably vanquished, Victor arched his back, lifted his face to the stars, and roared. When he was certain all around knew of his victory, of his rage, of his hunger for destruction, he straightened and turned his gaze on those lurking outside the circle of stones. He wasn't discriminating; all were welcome to feel his fury. Victor stalked toward the first group of onlookers, unlucky enough to catch his eye. He only took two burning steps, though, before a warm, malleable, but unyielding force caught him in its grasp.

A voice, familiar but unexpected, spoke into his ear, "That was well-fought, lad, but now you must cool that rage." As that weird, warm Energy pushed against him, then into him, driving the rage and magma Energy out of his pathways,

Victor realized it was Ranish Dar. He fell to his knees as the fury left him, and he felt the draining after-effects of his battle lust. He looked around, trying to catch sight of his mentor, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. Could a veil walker so effortlessly subdue even a titan? He'd taken his rage away and never even revealed himself.

His titanic form had left him, along with his rage, and Victor could feel the dampness in the grass under his knees. As he grunted, pushing himself to his feet, he saw Efanie jogging toward him. "Are you well?" she asked breathlessly, her face flushed with excitement. "Gods! How—"

"Where's Bohn?" Victor asked, cutting her off.

"He's there, sulking on his throne. There are far too many people present for him to skulk off. Everyone's in shock, me included." Victor followed her pointing finger and saw that, indeed, Bohn and his retinue were sitting still, subdued and quiet. Not everyone was calm, though—a hubbub had arisen around the circle, and Victor could see that people were still wrapping their heads around what they'd witnessed.

"An iron-ranker! You realize...I think the last iron-ranker to kill a steel-seeker in Sojourn was Ronkerz. He was—"

"I know who he was." Victor looked at her and then at the finely dressed nobility and their families. Did they realize how close they'd come to feeling the brunt of his fury? He hadn't wanted to use Volcanic Fury for that very reason, but had Loyle given him a choice? He'd almost overwhelmed him with that blood invasion. "Thank you, Dar," he said to the air, hoping his mentor could hear him. He took a single step toward Bohn Volpuré, but Efanie gripped his wrist.

"Your award! Gods! Look! The Energy—it's so bright!" Victor looked where she pointed, and sure enough, great balls of Energy were gathering around Loyle's corpse. They weren't golden or purple or rainbow-hued. They were like moonlight—white, ethereal, and so bright they lit up the hilltop like floodlights. Victor squinted as he watched them bubble together.

"Yeah. My awards." He grinned as he stalked toward the corpse. Not only would he take his Energy award from the System, but he had a heart and perhaps some dimensional containers to claim.

Book 8: Chapter 46: Responsibility

The crowd around the circle grew hushed as the brilliant, ethereal moonlight Energy gathered. Apparently, even the jaded nobility of Sojourn didn't see a steel seeker die every day. Victor strode toward Loyle's corpse, his head high, his back straight. Watching the Energy gather, he wondered about the bog lion. Shouldn't he see two corpses bleeding out their Energy? He glanced in the direction he'd sent the beast tumbling but saw nothing. Had Loyle somehow sent his companion

back from whence it came? Further questions were driven from his mind as the brilliant, potent stream of light surged into him.

He heard the crowd gasp, but that was the last input his corporeal senses provided before they were overwhelmed by his universe coming apart around him. Victor had the sensation of seeing time and space peeled apart, layer by layer, as a sound like the inside of a tornado rushed through his ears. He smelled and tasted things he couldn't name, a series of sensations that tore through his mind so rapidly as to become a single stream of incomprehensible input. As one color after another—one stratum after another—peeled away before his dumbstruck inner eye, Victor witnessed things he knew he'd never remember.

He saw beings of light and darkness, creatures too big to fully grasp, and a world so vast that Earth and all its neighboring planets might disappear into one of its continents. Voices whispered to him—cryptic messages that he immediately forgot and songs that would have made him weep if he'd had any sense of his physical body. And then it was over, and he found himself on his knees in the blood-stained grass before Loyle's broken corpse. He heard the hubbub around him; apparently, he'd put on quite a show while he absorbed the Energy. Victor ignored the voices—even Efanie's, as she hurried to his side once again. He was too focused on the System messages:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 68 Herald of the Mountain's Wrath and gained 24 strength, 34 vitality, and 24 will.*****

The message only added to the euphoria he was feeling from the massive Energy infusion. He'd gained two levels by killing Loyle, and that was no small boost considering how slowly he was "supposed" to level now that he was nearing tier seven. He'd begun to carry some dread about gaining levels now that he was climbing well into the upper half of the "iron ranks." Everyone he spoke to seemed to have a reminder about how slow it would be and how tedious it was. So far, Victor hadn't felt it, not to any significant degree, and he was hopeful he could keep proving people wrong. He continued reading:

*****Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Volcanic Fury – Improved.*****

*****Volcanic Fury – Improved: Prerequisites: Affinity – Rage, Fury or Hatred, Affinity – Magma. You channel the fury of the fiery depths. While affected by this transformation, you are immune to fire-based attacks, your magma-based abilities double in effectiveness, you recover magma-attuned Energy at a vastly improved rate, and you benefit from the effects of Berserk: Double strength and speed, increased resilience, and powerful regenerative capabilities. Be cautious, for the fury of the volcano knows no bounds—reason and compassion will flee before its heat. Energy Cost: Minimum 1000 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

"Shit!" Victor grunted, swiping the messages away. His Herald of the Mountain's Fury Class spells seemed to synergize incredibly well with his breath Core—almost like they were made to go with each other. Was Herald of the Mountain's Fury a dragon Class? Did dragons even have Classes? Whatever the case, it only made him want to improve his breath Core all the more.

"Something's wrong?" Efanie asked.

"Nah, something's good." Victor stood and approached Loyle's corpse.

“Victor, Lord Volpuré waits for you; the crowd is eager to see him grant your demanded conquest price.”

“He can wait a little longer.” Victor leaned over the corpse, saw that Lifedrinker’s slash had split the torso right beside the heart, and reached into the charred, bloody flesh to grasp hold of the thick, cooling organ. With a soft grunt, accompanied by the pops

of snapping arteries, he pulled it out. Efanie recoiled, shock on her face, but Victor ignored her. He set the heart on the grass and then proceeded to strip Loyle’s fingers of their rings—four in total. He picked up the heart and, with his prizes in one giant fist, dripping blood between his knuckles, strode toward Bohn Volpuré’s pretentiously oversized chair.

The crowd had gravitated toward that side of the circle, and Victor could feel the hundreds of eyes on him. As he walked, Efanie babbled, “I’ve never seen anyone absorb that much Energy at once. Even before, when I watched Loyle duel—none of those he beat had that much; they were always high-level iron-rankers or steel seekers who, obviously, hadn’t cultivated as long as him. I think he’s been a steel seeker for centuries.” She glanced back at the corpse. “Or, I mean, he was.” Victor was halfway across the circle, and when he didn’t respond, Efanie quickly asked, “How, Victor? How’d you do it?”

“You didn’t watch? His affinities were a bad match for me. He put too much weight on his status—on his aura. Weight. Aura. Hah.” Victor chuckled at his unintended pun.

“Why the heart?”

Again, Victor ignored her. He was before Volpuré. “Let them out,” he said, his voice rumbling, almost gutturally from his gut.

“Now wait just a moment—” Bohn’s rotund chamberlain began to say, but Victor’s fist was around his ruffled collar in a flash. He lifted the fellow’s enormous body onto his tiptoes, pulling his swollen, inflamed cheeks close to his face.

“Don’t interrupt,” he growled, then released the man. The chamberlain stumbled backward, and the crowd gasped as he almost fell. Two of the younger men standing nearby caught him, though, propping him up.

“There’s no call for further violence, Victor,” Bohn said, his voice smooth and calm. When Victor turned his glare on him, he cleared his throat. “Now, I understand your demands, and I’m sure we can speak about trying to come to terms, but there’s the matter of the nature of your victory—”

“The hell are you talking about? I challenged you, you picked a champion, we fought, and I won. End of story.” Victor glared around the crowd and was heartened to see quite a few of the gathered onlookers nodding along with his words.

“Well, there’s some murmuring going around, Victor, that you may have had some help. Some ill-placed but well-meaning aid from a benefactor.” When Bohn spoke, he affected an arch tone, and, despite Victor’s height, he managed to make it seem like he was looking down his nose at him as he perched there atop his throne-like chair. “Of course, I’m willing to turn a blind eye—I wouldn’t want to run afoul of a veil walker . . .” He let his words fade as he nodded to himself, looking around the crowd knowingly, as though everyone was in on the “secret.”

Victor had lost matches before. He’d dealt with cocky winners, but he’d dealt with a lot more sore losers. He’d heard the old “cheating” line of bull enough times that he didn’t feel surprised when Bohn’s words, fancy though they were, accused him of it. It didn’t make him any less angry, however. Without thinking about it, he let his rage flood his pathways and completely relaxed his will. It felt like he’d shrugged off an oil tanker’s anchor chain as his aura rippled out around him.

Victor’s aura was a hot, abysmally heavy thing—a blanket of molten burning lead. Riding that heavy, painful burden were waves of glorious, bloody battle triumphs, a thousand flavors of rage, and the deep, undeniable fear and terror of countless personal nightmares. Perhaps if the gathered people knew Victor and recognized the touch of his aura or saw him as a friend, they’d also find inspiration in those waves—some hint at the unknown or the key to a puzzle that had eluded them—but not many in the crowd around Volpuré’s throne were lucky enough to feel that thin band of brightness amid the savage, brutal, painful waves that pulsed outward from his giant, heaving body.

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Nearly everyone stumbled back; some recovered quickly and stared with steel in their eyes at Victor’s savage countenance, but most recoiled and continued to back off until they found it easier to breathe. Bohn had fallen from his throne and attempted to stand but fell again. Victor watched him crawl. He stepped forward, and a few of Bohn’s sturdier relatives closed in, hands summoning weapons. Victor held up one hand, looking around as he slowly shook his head, discouraging interference. “I’ll give you one chance to apologize for calling my honor into question, Bohn. One chance, otherwise, I’ll accept your words for what they are—a fresh challenge.”

“N-no!” Bohn rolled to his side, his hands pumping futilely as he attempted to push something invisible and intangible away from him. “I was—” he gasped, his eyes widening in horror as some imagined nightmare flitted through his field of view. “I was wrong to listen to any such rumors. Of course—” He screamed and wrapped his arms over his face, then tried again, “Of course, I don’t believe them. Your honor is intact, good

sir!”

Victor nodded, pushed the rage back into his Core, and gathered up his aura. Bohn and several other nearby people gasped in relief. He scrambled to his knees, and then some of his liveried servants ran forward to take his arms, pulling him to his feet. Once he'd recovered, Volpuré glared around, and the servants backed away. Victor knew it must have been a very long time since he'd been embarrassed like that. Centuries, perhaps. He wasn't a weak man—at tier five, he was stronger than most people on Fanwath. Still, he'd grown used to having a steel seeker champion; he wasn't a big fish on Sojourn.

“I'll, um, I'll head back to the keep and close the dungeon instance; it will bring your friends and my daughter out. They'll be sorry for the loss of a valuable learning—”

“Cut the bullshit, Bohn.” More gasps and murmurs followed Victor's dismissive interruption, but he didn't care. He was done playing nice; hadn't Bohn and all his boot lickers thought they would watch Victor die that night? “Just go do what you promised. I'll have what's owed.”

Bohn frowned, but he turned and snapped his fingers. A moment later, a pair of liveried servants ran forward, dragging a floating pavilion by gilded black cords. Bohn climbed aboard the magical conveyance, looked down at Victor and the crowd of relatives and neighbors, and said, “I'm a man of my word. Seek your comrades outside my manor's gates before the next hour chimes from the bell.” With that, he banked the weird flying platform and streaked toward the tall obelisk-like keep in the distance.

Victor watched him go and, glancing away from the diminishing figure, admired the view. Beyond Bohn's manor, he could see a dozen others spread out around the nearby hills, their windows lit up against the nighttime gloom. They glowed with amber and rainbow hues as the interior illumination shone through stained glass here and there. Victor was forced to pause and step outside his righteous, rage-filled moment, admiring the beauty.

“Ahem,” a man said, clearing his throat from off to Victor's left. “I say, well fought, Victor! Three cheers!” To Victor's amusement, the people around him complied.

“Victor! Victor! Victor!”

“Heh. Thanks!” He turned in a slow circle, meeting the gazes of people who looked genuinely star-struck. A few glowered, sure, but almost everyone was smiling, and quite a few were trying to jostle their way closer to him.

“How?” one man cried out. “Tell us how, Victor! How does an iron ranker have such an aura? How did you stand against Loyle's spells?”

Victor ignored the question, but a woman quite close, right behind Efanie, cried out, “Why the heart, Victor?”

Victor grinned, exposing his bright Quinametzin teeth. “I eat the hearts of worthy foes!” His declaration was met with gasps, retches, laughter, and even cheers.” Victor joined those laughing, holding his bloody fist high. “Where's the lion?”

“It got up!” someone shouted.

Another person confirmed: “Aye! When Loyle died! It got up and ran off into the tall grass!”

“Huh.” Victor rubbed his chin. “Good for that tough bastard, I guess.” For some reason, his words made people cheer again, and Victor continued to chuckle, turning to the trailhead leading down the hill. “Time to go get my friends and get home.” He looked around at the expectant faces and tried to tune out the buzz of conversation, questions, and adulation. He pushed his way through the crowd to the path, saying things like, “Sorry” or “I’m tired, folks” by way of excuse as he fled the festive scene. Efanie hurried behind him.

As he walked, Victor realized he was still clutching Loyle’s heart and sent it into his storage ring. He contemplated the rings in his palm, then, sending a trickle of Energy into his armor so it converted to his comfortable clothing, he tucked them into a pocket.

Efanie, still hurrying behind him, asked, “Would you like me to summon a coach?”

“I could ride my—” Victor cut himself off as he realized a man in a fine gray suit, wearing a pointy, wide-brimmed hat and accompanied by a girl who couldn’t be more than thirteen, followed close behind Efanie. They were a third of the way down the hill, and, in his haste, Victor had left the rest of the crowd behind. Only Efanie and the breathless duo were with him on that particular stretch of trail. He stepped to the side, hoping they’d hurry past, but they stopped. Victor groaned inwardly as the man cleared his throat, and the girl looked at him with fierce, angry eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

“Ahem. Sir Victor, I am Torka Vinchan, personal historian of the late Fak Loyle. This, here, is his daughter Cora Loyle—his only surviving family member. As she is of tender years and you vanquished her guardian and claimed his riches, I hereby, in full view of a member of Sojourn Society in good standing,” he nodded to Efanie, “entrust her to your care. I bid you farewell, sir.” He paused briefly to look at the young girl, gave her a pained smile and a nod, then turned away and started down the slope. Victor reached out to grab his shoulder.

“Hold on a minute! What the hell are you talking about?”

“The child, sir—she’s without a guardian, and you’ve claimed her family wealth. It’s only honorable that you take responsibility for her.”

Victor kept a firm grip on the man’s shoulder but turned to Efanie. “What the hell?”

“Um, yes, well, I believe he makes a valid point. If he’s not contracted to care for the girl—”

“I am not,” Torka said, his grim smile almost smug.

Victor's scowl deepened. "Shouldn't Loyle's employer take responsibility?"

"Volpuré?" Efanie's frown deepened, and she leaned close, her voice a near whisper. "I don't believe he'd be a kind guardian, Victor."

Victor looked from the historian to the distant manor and then down at the girl. Her eyes were dark in the dim light, and she glared at him briefly, with bloodshot, angry eyes, before looking down as she furrowed her thick eyebrows—Victor could see she'd inherited her father's unruly, wild-looking hair. Inwardly, he groaned, but he kept it contained. This girl had just lost what was, apparently, her only family—her father—and he'd been the one to kill him. Unable to stop himself, he voiced what was on his mind: "You can't possibly want to come with me."

The girl refused to look him in the face, but Victor saw tears leak from her eyes as she mumbled, "I'm happy to look after myself, sir." Victor reached out to grasp her chin, forcing her eyes to lock onto his. He saw anger behind her sadness, something kindred that spoke to the depths of his rage-soaked heart.

"All right." He let go of her, and she immediately averted her gaze. "I won't let you fall on Volpuré's mercy. I'll find someone to look after you."

"Sir, I must insist you unhand me. I've done my duty." Victor glanced at the historian and released his shoulder with poorly masked contempt. Torka Vinchan didn't immediately scamper off, however. He paused and held a finger to his chin. "I wouldn't mind a quote or three for the final chapter."

"Final chapter?"

"Yes sir—of Fak Loyle's biography."

Victor glared at him. A small part of him wanted to be polite and think up a quote—something interesting or even flattering about the dead duelist, mainly because his daughter was present. It was a very tiny voice, though—easily ignored. Instead, he growled, "Get out of here." Some hint of his potential for violence must have registered with the historian because he turned and practically ran down the trail. "All right. Enough of this shit. I need to get things moving." Victor summoned Guapo using glory-attuned Energy, and the golden mustang burst from a cloud of sparkling, brilliant light, whinnying and pawing at the air with his front hooves.

Victor hoisted himself onto the great stallion's back, then held a hand down to the young girl. She wore a ruffled gray blouse over layered skirts, and she looked at Guapo with horror in her eyes. "Listen, I doubt you want anything to do with me. I'm sorry about that. Come along, though, and, like I said, I'll make sure we find a proper home or caretaker for you."

Efanie nodded. "Wisely said, Victor." She nudged Cora's narrow shoulders, pushing her closer to Victor's hand. "Go on, child. He's honorable." Cora looked up at Victor, and he could see her gather her courage before she tentatively stretched her tiny hand toward his. Victor leaned down further, snatched her wrist, and hoisted her up. She felt weightless, and he was struck by her fragility, her precarious position in a violent universe. Deyni came to mind, and he was suddenly glad she was back on Fanwath among people who cared about her. Pushing away the sudden wave of melancholy homesickness, he set the girl sideways onto Guapo's back in front of him.

“Nice meeting you, Efanie. If my friends are out of the dungeon before you get back to the manor, I’ll probably be gone.” Efanie looked from Victor to Cora. She didn’t say anything at first, but Victor could see she had a lot on her mind.

“Listen, I’m not a man like—well, like Volpuré. I’ll make sure she’s okay. Unless you—”

“No! No, Victor, I couldn’t. My duties . . . My finances . . .” Her objections felt half-hearted to Victor, so he stretched his hand back down.

“Come on. I’ll give you a ride, and you ought to think about working for someone new. If not me, I bet I can get Dar to take you on. Cora could use someone familiar around.” To his amazement, Efanie nodded and snatched his hand, easily hoisting herself up behind him.

“It’s good your mount is so powerful!”

“Fast, too! Hold on!” Victor put a steadying arm around the girl, and she cringed. Naturally, that made him feel like an asshole, but he couldn’t help the circumstances. Was it his fault her father worked as a duelist for hire? Was Victor to blame for fighting for his life? Of course, he might see things differently from her shoes, but that was a problem for another day. At the moment, he wanted to be done with this whole ordeal, so he urged Guapo to pick up the pace, and soon Efanie was whooping and laughing as the wind whistled past and Guapo’s powerful hooves ate up the distance between the hill and the manor.

When the stallion exploded out of the orchard, and the manor’s wall and gates came into view, Victor said, “Woah!” and Guapo rapidly slowed to a more sedate trot. He could see people under the glow lanterns above the gate, and as they approached, he recognized the beautiful, light-filled dragonfly wings belonging to Lam and Edeya. They turned toward him, and that’s when he saw the figure on the ground between them—a human-shaped figure on a stretcher, wrapped in blood-stained rags.

Book 8: Chapter 47: Stories to Tell

As Guapo rapidly approached, Lam turned to face him, and Victor saw nothing but puzzlement on her face. When Edeya, who’d been crouching next to the prostrate figure on the ground, also looked toward the sound of clattering hooves on cobbles, she leaped into the air, her wings buzzing and throwing off motes of azure Energy. “Victor!”

Guapo came to a stop, and Victor gripped Cora around the waist and hopped down. As soon as his feet hit the ground, she began to writhe, so he let her go. She ran toward the edge of the road, and he wondered if she would keep going, but she stopped once she was a few yards away. She crossed her arms over her chest and pointedly looked away from the manor toward the very distant lights of the city, avoiding Victor’s gaze.

Efanie slid off Guapo’s back, and Victor sent his stallion back to the Spirit Plane to make space. “Who’s on the stretcher,” he asked by way of greeting. He didn’t wait for an answer, stomping

forward, nudging past Lam to peer at the bandage-wrapped face. That's when he saw the pale wisps of steamy mist rising off the body. "Darren," he grunted.

"He was near death, but when we completed the tenth round, we were awarded racial advancement cakes. We fed him his in hopes of saving his life." She leaned over and pressed her fingers to Darren's pale forehead. "We think it's working—his wounds closed up during the first few hours."

Victor scowled, looking up from Darren's bandaged face and neck to Lam. "No potions?"

She shrugged. "The dungeon locked our dimensional containers."

Edeya walked over and grabbed onto Victor's arm, hugging it close. "It's a lucky thing Lord Volpuré rescued us when he did. We had less than an hour before the next round of comb—"

Victor's barking laugh interrupted her, but it was Efanie who spoke up.

"He rescued you? Your friend, here, just fought a duel to force him to let you out."

"Truly?" Edeya's eyebrows shot up, and she squeezed Victor's arm even tighter. "Victor, we thought it was the end!"

"Yeah, well, unfortunately, the asshole had a champion, so he's still breathing, but if I get a good enough reason..." He trailed off with a glance toward Cora.

Lam scowled, eyeing the girl where she stood with her unruly hair blowing in the evening breeze, her back straight as a post as she continued to stare into the distance. "Who's this?"

"That's a...long story. I, uh—" A rattle sounded behind the closed manor gates, and then they began to swing open. When they'd parted enough for her to fit through, Trin, Volpuré's daughter, and the woman who'd talked his friends into entering the dungeon slipped through. Like Lam and Edeya, she was filthy with the accumulated dirt and dried blood from many days of fighting and no baths in between. Her face looked like she was hell-bent on committing murder. When she opened her mouth to speak, the gates crashed shut, startling her into silence.

With an angry glance over her shoulder at the imposing barrier, she tried again, "I've had it! I denounce my family!" Her filthy hands were balled into fists, and Victor had to admire the apparent conviction behind her angry words.

"Lady Trin—" Efanie stepped toward her, but Trin shoved her away.

"How could you? You knew what we were walking into!"

Victor raised his eyebrows; this was news to him. Efanie stammered, "I...Lady Trin, I didn't believe he'd leave you in there for so long. I had no knowledge of his schemes against Sir Victor. I tried to warn—"

“Warn me? Warn me? By saying it was dangerous and reminding me that my father could pull us out? How about a word of warning about storage containers? How about, ‘Trin, dear girl whom I profess to love, did you know you cannot leave that dungeon without completing it?’ Wouldn’t that have been nice?”

Efanie looked stricken by Trin’s rage, and she drew her fancy, basket-hilted rapier and held it on her palms, then knelt before her. “I failed you, Lady Trin. Please take my sword. My life is yours to claim.”

“Oh, stand up!” Trin seethed. She brushed past Efanie and stood beside Lam. “Can I come with you for now, Lam? My father has frozen my trust, and I’ll need to sell some belongings before I can afford—”

“You can come with us,” Victor chuckled and nodded to Efanie, “but she’s coming too.”

Efanie, her cheeks crimson, stood and sheathed her sword. “Are you certain you still want me, Victor? I’m more than disgraced. I failed Lady Trin when it mattered most.”

“You were under orders,” Trin huffed, kicking some gravel off the cobbles. She folded her arms over her chest and scowled at the elfin woman. “And you trusted my father not to be a filicidal maniac! I’m still terribly angry at you, however!”

“Understood.” Efanie slid her sword back into its scabbard. “Shall I arrange a carriage? I don’t think we can all fit on Victor’s mount—”

“I have one,” Trin sighed. “I’ll be sure to sell it before my father sends one of his stewards around to collect it.” She unclipped a metal ball on a chain from her belt and, with a small surge of Energy, tossed it toward the cobbled road. It paused in the air before striking the stones and hovered for a moment as pink steam billowed out of it. It reminded Victor of those little smoke bombs he used to buy in Arizona for the fourth of July—pretty much the only “fireworks” allowed in Tucson.

With a hiss and then the sudden, rapid clank of metal slapping together, the ball expanded to form a floating, round, silvery vessel with a row of windows that looked like portholes. In fact, the thing reminded Victor of an antique submarine. Trin walked around it, and the others followed. Victor bent to pick up Darren, cradling him in his arms and leaving the stretcher where it lay. On the far side of the “carriage,” he found a sizeable oval door standing open. “Here,” he grunted, hoisting Darren into the opening so Lam could pull him inside.

Before climbing in, Victor cast *Alter Self* and reduced his size as much as possible, bringing him down to about six feet—much easier to climb through the opening. He turned to Cora, standing alone on the side of the road, and said, “Come on, chica. I know you probably hate me, but we gotta try to make the best of a shitty situation.” She didn’t respond, and her eyes looked like they could

melt wax if she stared long enough, but she brushed past him to climb aboard. Victor followed.

The inside of the little vehicle matched its external aesthetic; a round, metallic bench lined the walls, but a single chair was built into a console before a front-facing porthole. Trin sat there, apparently intent on piloting the craft to Dar's lake house. Efanie narrowed her eyes at Victor as he turned to pull the door shut with a clang. "How are you so much smaller?"

Lam chuckled. "Don't bother trying to figure it out."

Victor shrugged as he sat down next to Edeya. "It's a titan thing." He found his titan bloodline an easy way to wave off questions he couldn't answer, and, in a way, he wasn't lying. Hadn't Tes told him that an advanced elder bloodline was necessary to handle the spell? In an effort to change the subject, he nodded toward Darren. "Hope he doesn't fill the carriage with that steam—kinda weird to think we're breathing Darren into our lungs."

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Trin made a comical gagging noise and touched something on her control panel. A moment later, the roof slid partially open, letting in the cool night air and the moonlight. "Better?"

"Much better!" Edeya sighed happily as she leaned back, resting her head on Victor's shoulder. "Sorry, Victor," she mumbled. "We didn't sleep much the last couple of nights."

"Nah, go ahead and rest. You earned it." Victor looked at Efanie and was glad to see that Cora had sat close to her. He wasn't sure what he'd do about the girl; the whole situation was awkward and, honestly, rather awful, but he couldn't just hand her a bag of Energy beads and send her on her way. He had to figure something out for her. He couldn't believe that a man like Loyle, someone who'd been around for centuries and likely amassed quite a fortune, didn't have a bunch of staff on retainer—a nanny or tutor or something for the girl. He wanted to question her, but he didn't want to force her to talk in front of a bunch of strangers with the guy who'd just killed her father. He had a vague hope that one of his friends or Valla could get some more information out of her.

"Is it true about Arcus?" Trin asked, looking over her shoulder at Victor.

"What did you hear?"

"That he died in the dungeon with you." She frowned and narrowed her eyes.

"Did you kill him?"

Victor almost told her the truth right then and there, but his promise to Ronkerz and, likewise, to Arcus stalled the words in his mouth. Instead, he just said, "I can promise you that I didn't kill him. In fact, I consider him a friend. He acted honorably in there."

Trin turned back to the front-facing porthole, and everyone was quiet for a minute or two before Efanie asked, “And Arona? Is she truly dead?”

“Yeah.” Victor sighed and folded his arms over his chest. “I saw it happen.”

“Hard to imagine—everyone thought she was destined to be one of the youngest veil walkers ever. Such talent!”

Victor nodded. “She was something else.” When everyone got quiet again, he reached into his storage ring and took out the Farscribe book he shared with Valla. He turned to the last page and saw a new note:

Victor,

What am I to make of this macabre letter you just sent me? The courier refused to say anything about where you were or what you were doing as he delivered a fistful of letters. Lesh says his note isn't anything so gloomy and morbid—no dwelling on death and spirits and the next life! Have you done something foolhardy? If I don't hear from you soon, I'll go mad with worry!

Victor raised an eyebrow and shook his head, scratching his rough, stubble-covered jawline. “Shit,” he mumbled. “Pendejo!” As he cursed himself, he summoned a pen and rapidly scrawled:

Valla – All is well. On my way home. See you soon.

-V

“Are you upset?” Lam asked quietly. When Victor heard her hushed tone, he looked around the carriage to see that Cora had also fallen asleep, her head resting on Efanie’s shoulder.

“I, uh, might have done something stupid again. I mean, with Valla.”

Lam chuckled. “You seem to do that a lot—find a way to anger the women in your life.”

“Is that fair?” Victor sighed, leaning back. “I mean, most of the people in my life seem to be women. Far too man—” Victor’s words were cut short by a grunt as Edeya surprised him with a jab in the ribs.

“You love it,” she murmured before adjusting her position to lean more fully against his side.

Lam smiled and leaned back, and Victor could see she also intended to nap. The metal bench wasn’t exactly built for comfort, though, and she grumbled something softly to herself, then summoned a pillow and blanket from a storage device and made herself a good deal more comfortable. Efanie watched her and took inspiration, conjuring a blanket and draping it over Cora. The girl partially awoke, but only long enough for Efanie to urge her to spread out on the bench and lay her head on her lap.

After a while, Efanie looked at Victor and whispered, “I’ve seen her around the manor, but she never spoke to anyone. Loyle kept her close; he was a very strange man.”

“Yeah, well, I’m hoping—” Victor stopped short as a lightbulb went off in his head. He dug around in his pocket for the four rings he’d stripped from Loyle’s dead fingers. The four rings were weighty, and Victor could see the gleam of rare materials in the moon’s dim light. Most were inset with precious gemstones, but one was a simple, thick, silvery band. It felt weighty in Victor’s palm, heavier than it should be even if it were made of gold, which it wasn’t. “Let’s see here,” with just a tiny trickle of inspiration-attuned Energy, he attempted to bond with the ring.

As soon as he did, his mind became aware of an enormous dimensional space, larger than all his current containers combined. Moreover, the space was sturdy, and he could feel the dense weaves of Energy holding it together even more strongly than the dimensional ring Dar had given him, which held a comparatively tiny space. Victor let his mind drift over the ring’s contents, and he found himself holding his breath as the treasures mounted in his awareness.

There were millions of Energy beads. He only knew that because they were kept in stacks of sturdy crates, each labeled with numerals that the System translated as 100,000. Victor counted more than fifty such crates. Beyond the beads, he found chests filled with precious gems, golden coins, and bars of rare metals. He found stacks of fine materials—from a dozen varieties of silk to refined leather to lengths of Energy-dense hardwood. Along with the riches were more mundane things—furniture, tapestries, rugs, and hundreds of finely tailored articles of clothing. Before he pulled his mind out of the space, feeling slightly overwhelmed, Victor saw two weapon racks, one lined with swords of all kinds and another with staves, rods, and wands.

He looked down at his hands. They were adorned with not one or two but five different dimensional rings. Grunting, he slid the new one over his left thumb, watching as it stretched to fit the massive digit. He figured it would be wise to sort through his other rings and pare down their number sometime soon. Looking up, he realized Efanie was staring, waiting for him to finish his sentence. He held up his fist of rings. “Hoping to find some kind of, I dunno, will or estate document.”

“He may have accounts with one of the banking houses. I could go into town tomorrow to learn what I can. If—if it helps.”

“Yeah. I’d appreciate that, thanks.” Victor lifted another ring between his thumb and forefinger, examining the deep blue stone set in a golden band. He sent some Energy into it and was awarded with a System message:

*****Ring of Safe Harbor: The wearer of this ring is shielded from most scrying attempts and made impossible to summon against their will, regardless of any power disparity between wearer and summoner.*****

Victor grunted softly and immediately jammed the ring onto his right-hand pinky. He felt a cool breeze tickle the hairs on his forearms briefly, but other than that, he couldn’t discern any difference. The next ring he inspected was also gold but was set with a black opal, or so he guessed. When he sent Energy into it, he received another System message:

*****Ring of Communion: The wearer of this ring can send mental images and messages to the wearer of its twin.*****

Victor looked up and peered over at Cora. The blanket covered her arms, but he leaned across the space and gently lifted the edge to reveal her hands where she held them tucked up near her chin. Sure enough, she had a similar but smaller ring on her right-hand ring finger. He put the larger one back into his pocket.

The final ring was made of a black, exceptionally light metal and was carved in whorls and loops with what looked like pearls set into them. He counted seven of the lustrous little orbs. As he sent some Energy into the ring, he hoped it would be mundane; the gaudy aspect wasn't his style. When he saw the System message, he almost groaned:

*****Ring of Recall: Two charges remaining. This ring will transport the wearer to their home System Stone. Beware, the effect requires several minutes to gather the requisite Energy.*****

Considering he was still a System "citizen" of the Free Marches, Victor reckoned that those two recalls could save him a fortune in visits back home. Of course, it was also nice to know he had a free teleport if he ever got stuck somewhere, and with Loyle's stash of Energy beads, he wasn't exactly hurting for money. He tucked the ring into his pocket, glad he didn't have to wear it all the time.

He zoned out for the rest of the coach ride, his mind drifting to topics that weighed heavily on him. He worried about Cora and his responsibility for the girl. It felt absurd to him that she'd been foisted onto him after he had killed her father. What kind of society condoned such a thing? Then there was Valla; he hoped she wasn't truly upset and that his note in the Farscribe book would put her at ease. He wondered how Dar would treat him; the master Spirit Caster hadn't seemed bothered when he'd saved Victor from the madness of his Volcanic Fury. Thinking of that reminded Victor of his fight, and he grinned stupidly, reliving the battle in the theater of his mind.

When Trin brought the carriage down to land outside Dar's house, Victor was the first to disembark, and he let Efanie and Lam push Darren out to him. Cradling the injured, unconscious man, he said, "Lam, will you show Efanie and Cora around? Ask Mr. Ruln to find beds for them, please."

"Yes, I can do that. Then I'm going to bathe for a month."

"I'll be doing the same," Edeya sighed, hopping out of the coach with a flutter of her sapphire wings. Victor grunted and turned to the house, only to find Lesh and Valla coming outside. Almost happy to have Darren as a shield against the world, he started forward, trying to keep his face pleasant and relaxed.

"Victor!" Valla called before he'd managed a few steps. She ran toward him, her wings fluttering with the breeze of her rushing progress, and, for a moment, Victor thought she'd slam into him, regardless of his burden. She slowed, though, and when she came close enough, she grasped his shoulders and leaned down to kiss him softly. "I was worried!" Victor looked up at her,

confused, then laughed; he'd forgotten to relax his Alter Self spell. She was nearly a foot taller than he.

“Sorry to worry you,” he sighed as the mirth died down. “I wanted to write you a note and figured I'd make use of the scribe the asshole I challenged sent to me —”

“Asshole? Challenge?”

Victor hefted Darren. “I had to get them out of a dungeon against the, uh, owner's wishes.” He gestured with Darren's body toward the house. “Come on, Valla. Let me put him down in his bed, and then we can talk. I'll tell you all about it. How long was I gone, by the way?” He threw the last question out in an attempt to shift the focus of their conversation away from the duel.

It worked, but he knew the reprieve would be short-lived. “More than two weeks. I know it wasn't as long for you, but I was beginning to grow desperate. Only Ranish Dar's confidence and assurances kept me from pulling my hair out!”

“He was confident, huh?” Victor smiled as Valla followed him toward the house.

“Very. He seems to be quite well-informed. He assured me you were still alive, even yesterday.” They came to the front door as she spoke, and Victor nodded to Lesh.

“Hey, man. Ready to get some serious training in?”

“Aye, Lord Victor. Welcome home. I was betting on your success.” The way he grinned and the glint in his eye told Victor he was being literal; he'd found a way to bet on him completing the Sojourn Council's quest. Laughing softly to himself, he carried Darren into the house.

He caught sight of one of the servants. “Hey, Wensa, can you get some clean bandages for Darren? I'm betting he'll be out of it for a day or two.”

“Right away!” As she scurried off, Victor looked at Valla. “Come on. Let's get him to his room. Shit, Valla, I've got some crazy stories to tell.”

Valla nodded, and Victor was relieved to see a genuine, relaxed smile on her face. He supposed he owed Dar for that—his mentor had kept his friends from panicking about his prolonged absence, which made him wonder how much Dar already knew; could he somehow scry Victor in the dungeon? Did he already know about Ronkerz? He supposed he'd find out soon enough, but he hoped not too soon; he wanted to spend some time with Valla. He was eager to tell her about his time in the dungeon and about the duel, but he wasn't so anxious to explain the fallout. How would she react when he told her about Cora?

Book 8: Chapter 48: Advice

“And this fellow, this 'Ronkerz,' made you fight his champions?”

Victor shrugged. “Well, only one.” He hadn’t said anything about Ronkerz being a veil walker or his champions being steel seekers, but it wasn’t because he was trying to be dishonest with Valla; he simply felt he had to honor his vow to Ronkerz not to talk about his strength with anyone other than Ranish Dar.

Valla nodded slowly. “So, they underestimated you. I suppose when your companions lost their fights, it only encouraged the prisoner king’s confidence.” She smiled and squeezed Victor’s wrist. They were sitting together in one of Dar’s smaller parlors, waiting for the lord of the house to summon Victor. As soon as he’d put Darren to bed, Dar’s steward, Mr. Ruln, had told him to wait there. “A mistake too many make, hmm, love?”

Victor chuckled, perhaps a little nervously. He felt like he was walking a fine line between truth and lie. “I don’t know about that. The Big One he chose for me put up quite a fight. I had to get creative to find a way to harm her.”

“What an odd name—‘Big Ones.’ It’s very strange to imagine a town inside a dungeon. What were the people who lived there like?”

“Um, for the most part, desperate and dirty. I think that’s part of Ronkerz’s thing—the whole ‘Big Ones’ act and naming the place ‘Rumble Town.’ I think the fighting and the showmanship all have to do with his attempt to keep people motivated for his cause.”

“And what is that? His cause, I mean.”

“Well,” Victor sighed, hating that he was hiding things from Valla, but if he were to take Dar’s warnings about karmic bonds seriously, shouldn’t his promise to Ronkerz have “rippled” through the universe? As Valla stared at him and a scowl began to mar her smooth complexion, he shook his head. “Listen, I don’t want to make shit up, but I promised Ronkerz I wouldn’t talk about his goals with anyone but Dar. He could have kept me in there, Valla. I made the promise so I wouldn’t be stuck.”

“So, you can tell Ranish Dar but not the woman you love? The woman who spends all her time with you?” The frown line between her eyes deepened, and she leaned back in her chair. “With whom do you fear I’ll share this secret?”

“No one! It’s not that I think I can’t trust you; it’s just that, shit, Valla, *I’ll* know I broke the promise. It’ll bother *me*. Dar’s been talking to me about karmic ties and debts and—”

“Oh, put it aside, Victor.” She folded her arms over her chest and looked through the window toward the night sky and the distant but very bright moon. After a moment of awkward silence, she asked, “Are you allowed to tell me what happened when you left? Can you tell me the story behind your duel and the situation with Lam and the others? Must I be the only one who has no knowledge of your dealings?”

“Don’t be like that. It’s a pretty straightforward story. Arcus told me that his father was holding Lam and the others inside his dungeon, so I went there to—”

“So, he made peace with you before he died?”

“Um, yeah.” Victor looked down and knew he’d made a mistake when Valla snorted and stood up.

“I don’t know why you’re being so duplicitous, but I can’t imagine this conversation will get any better. If I’m not wrong, the next thing you’re about to tell me is that you challenged Lord Volpuré to a duel, then fought his steel-seeker champion without first letting me know. Would it have been so hard to come here before flying off in a rage to the Volpuré estate? Would it have been hard for you to write me a plainly worded note in the Farscribe book? I suppose I should be thankful that you remembered me at all, what with that strange note that demonstrated your willingness to die in that duel—without seeing me!”

“Valla, they were in trouble in that dungeon! I had to hurry—”

“They’d been in there for more than a week. I think another hour or two—”

“Maybe not! Their next battle was imminent!”

“Did you know that?” She didn’t wait for an answer. She fled the room in a flutter of tinkling feathers, leaving Victor sitting, stunned, alone in the parlor. He didn’t know what to think of her sudden anger, but he knew he felt like the bad guy again, and he was getting damn tired of feeling like the bad guy. When one of the servants, a man whose name he hadn’t yet learned, cleared his throat from the doorway, Victor looked up, his growing anger and frustration instantly replaced by embarrassment.

“Terribly sorry, sir, but Lord Dar awaits you in the library.”

“Oh, um, thanks.” Victor stood and smoothed his shirt, then moved toward the doorway. As the servant stepped aside, he nodded and reached up to pat Victor’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything, but the act was definitely out of character for Dar’s staff. Victor wondered if his face looked so troubled that a veritable stranger thought he needed comfort. He made a conscious effort to unfurl his brow and offered the man a nod and an anemic smile.

As he walked through the hallways of Dar’s home, he fought to bring his mind back into focus, but a particular train of thought kept pushing its way to the forefront, and he couldn’t help feeling some despair at it. Looking objectively at his feelings, Victor realized he felt bad about hurting Valla’s feelings but was also annoyed and exhausted by the drama.

What was worse, he found his feelings of guilt weren’t any different from how he might feel if Lam or Lesh—the idea made him snort a short laugh—were hurt by his actions. Shouldn’t he feel despair in his heart at the thought of Valla being

pissed at him? She'd made a rather good point: shouldn't he have been desperate to see and hold her when he survived the dungeon? Shouldn't he have at least considered going to her before rushing off to the duel?

Altogether, the strange, conflicted feelings roiling through his mind as he walked to the library culminated in a series of questions he couldn't answer—did he love Valla, or did he only care about her? Was his attraction to her more physical than emotional? Was there any difference? Victor knew why he couldn't answer: he lacked experience, and, the more he thought about it, that was a problem, too. Groaning, shaking his head in frustration, he fought to push the unquiet thoughts from his mind as he approached the library doors.

He stepped into the dimly illuminated room and was greeted by the scent of woody incense and the unmistakable aroma of fresh coffee. Dar sat in one of the comfortable, high-backed chairs, wearing one of his usual, brightly colored pajama-like ensembles, this one an eye-popping electric blue. When he saw Victor, he smiled and leaned forward, pouring some steaming black liquid into the mugs on the small table before him. He nodded at one of the empty seats and rumbled, "Have a seat, Victor. We're past midnight, and I doubt you'll sleep tonight, so have some coffee with me."

Victor did as he asked, sitting down with a sigh. "Is it that late already?"

"It is." Dar pushed the coffee to him, then, without preamble, jumped into the thick of things. "As you no doubt recall, I witnessed your duel with Fak Loyle. I took my leave after cooling your fury, so give me the details of what I missed before and after the fight. You may as well begin by describing what happened inside the dungeon. I can feel the weight of a bargain on your spirit. Is that why you fled the Council Spire so rapidly? Were you avoiding Roil and his lackeys?"

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"You don't miss much, do you?" Victor picked up the little carafe of cream and poured a healthy splash into his cup. Dar only grunted, so Victor began to speak, pausing occasionally to sip the hot, soothing drink. "Well, first of all, that woman's bomb nearly killed me. Maybe pass along my thanks, though, because it blasted me right through one of the rune-covered pillars those ambushers were using to seal off the entrance area. Once I was out, I kicked their asses easily enough..."

Victor spoke for nearly an hour, going over the nature of his encounters in the prison dungeon and then talking about Ronkerz and how he'd made the three of them fight his "Big Ones." As he finished the tale, describing how Arcus revealed his father's plans for extortive vengeance, Dar chuckled and shook his head. "No wonder you raced out of the city. I'm quite pleased you didn't lose your temper before you managed to extricate yourself from the Council Spire."

Victor nodded, smiling ruefully. "It was a close thing for a minute, there. Before I go into the situation with Volpuré, can you tell me what you think of Ronkerz? Don't you think it's messed up that kids are being born in that dungeon?"

“Messed up?” Dar sighed and rubbed his temples between his two stony thumbs. “We’ll need to work on your vernacular before I send you to be a court champion on Ruhn. I suppose your description is apt, however. I never considered the idea that people would form rudimentary societies within a dungeon nor that the System would continue to grow the place to accommodate them. I’m not too surprised to hear about Ronkerz, nor am I surprised to learn that Roil has been hiding the true nature of the situation from the rest of us— Consul Rexa would likely force him to close the place down, regardless of the lost investment with the System.”

“Really? She could do that?”

“Rexa? She’s more powerful than any three of us combined. Should your path cross with hers, always be deferential.”

“Are you going to tell her—”

“I’ll need to weigh the consequences. It seems to me that Ronkerz has made a sort of overture in that he’s asked you to tell me and me alone about the situation in that dungeon.” He paused to sip his coffee, then shook his head. “Let me handle the politics, Victor. You’ll soon have your own schemes to manage. For now, be content knowing that I won’t allow children to languish long in that dungeon. As for your debt to the council, it’s clearly been paid, and now they’ll need to supply a promised bonus. I take it you still wish for me to request a cultivation item for your friend’s breath Core?”

Victor nodded. “Yeah, I owe him.”

“Very well. I’ll meet with the council in the morning and extract what’s due. Now, the duel. Were you not concerned that Bohn’s champion was a steel seeker?”

“I mean, I guess so, but Arcus told me everything about the guy.” Victor thought about his battle and shook his head. “Almost everything. It seemed he had one trick up his sleeve that he hadn’t ever used before.”

“His invasion of your blood?”

“Yeah. I forgot you watched the fight.”

“Blood Mages are dangerous, and Loyle fought so much with his nature affinity that people often overlooked the true danger of his secondary aspect. I’m pleased you thought of burning the blood from your system with your magma-attuned Energy. I suspect your elder bloodline helped buy you time to think of it. Didn’t you tell me that you have a feat that makes you naturally resistant to poisons?”

Like a lightbulb, the thought illuminated Victor's mind, and he nodded. "Yeah! I didn't think of that. I suppose someone else's blood in my veins could be considered a kind of poison."

"So, in the end, your victory was partly due to Loyle's affinities meeting very hard counters with your own. No doubt, a man of Loyle's power was able to read a good deal from your Core despite your aura veiling. It was his folly to underestimate the strength of your breath Core. I suppose he couldn't know that your Volcanic Fury increases the potency of the magma—on the surface, your breath Core is less than impressive." Dar chuckled. "Not for long, if I were to wager."

"Heh, yeah. After the fight, I was thinking about how badly I need to cultivate my breath Core. I'll work on it before I leave." The idea of leaving brought some questions to Victor's mind, but before he could ask them, Dar cleared his throat and brought up a new topic of his own.

"I noted that I have new house guests."

Victor blew out an explosive breath, then leaned back in his chair. He'd almost let Cora slip his mind, and the reminder, combined with his stress about Valla, was enough to make him reach up and vigorously scratch the short hair above his ear. "I could use your advice about that."

Dar chuckled. "So, the duelist's child was foisted upon you? I'm surprised Volpuré didn't insist on caring for the girl if only to save some face." He sipped at his second cup of coffee, then shrugged. "It was wise of you to steal away the other woman—the fae-blood. A familiar face will do wonders to ease the girl's transition. I assume Loyle had some riches in his dimensional containers?"

"Oh yeah. Millions of beads and plenty of precious metals and gems."

"Good. You were eager to visit your home, yes? I suggest you do so. Take a week—bring the child and your new employee to your estate there; ensure her education is well-funded and she has a place to call home. I will prepare your course of study while you're gone and when you return, you will devote yourself to preparing for the trials and tribulations that await you on Ruhn. I've contacted my granddaughter—she expects you in one hundred and nineteen System-standard days."

"Seriously? Um, yeah, actually, that sounds great. I could introduce her to Thayla and her little girl. I could—"

"Yes, yes." Dar held up a hand, forestalling more of Victor's mentions of people and places he didn't know. "I suggest this not because I'm trying to be kind—I am, but that's not why. I want your head clear, and having that girl here will only distract you. Now, while I'm on the subject of distractions, do you have something else weighing on you?"

Victor frowned, feeling some heat entering his pathways. Was Dar admitting to eavesdropping on his conversation with Valla? Inhaling deeply, he pushed out the rage that had begun to trickle into

his pathways and, instead, consciously pulled inspiration-attuned Energy out. With a clear mind, he said, “I suppose our conversation wasn’t exactly quiet or private, huh? The door was open.”

“Even if I hadn’t heard a word, I’d know you were troubled. Victor, I know I’m not your peer, and I often express how valuable my time is, but I want you to know that you’re beginning to be...important to me. Don’t let that go to your head, but understand that I am here if you need advice. My long life has been lived in... phases, for lack of a better word—sometimes alone, sometimes with companionship. Though I may not seem it, I’ve had many romantic liaisons and many long and devoted relationships. I’ve also been party to many failed loves. I’ve witnessed and analyzed those losses, and I might have a word of wisdom for you if you but ask.”

Victor nodded, slowly coming to grips with the idea that Dar had just indicated that their relationship was no longer simply contractual. He didn’t want to help Victor just because he wanted to use him—he cared. Of course, Victor knew he might be manipulating him, but his words felt genuine, and he wanted to think Dar was sincere. As he spoke, Victor slowly began to nod, and tried to gather his thoughts, tried to think of a way to express his feelings. Finally, he leaned forward and tried to voice his fears:

“I guess it boils down to passion. When I thought about Valla before my duel, I thought about what I ‘should’ do, not what I wanted to do. I wanted to fight, but I wrote Valla a note because it felt like the right thing to do. If I really loved her, I mean loved her, would I have wanted to go to her more than I wanted to fight? Wouldn’t I have wanted to feel her lips on mine?” Victor remembered who he was speaking to, and his face flushed with embarrassment. Still, he pushed ahead, “I mean, when I think about passion—” He shook his head, trying to find the words, afraid to say the ones on the tip of his tongue.

“Go on, Victor. What are you passionate about?”

“I don’t fucking know, Dar.” Victor sighed. “I love Deyni, and Thayla, and Chandri, and Edeya, and yeah, Valla fits in there, but shouldn’t I feel something a lot more for her?”

“Putting people aside, Victor, what ignites your passion?”

“You know,” Victor sighed, shrugging helplessly. “Fighting, winning—the rush of battle. I don’t even know what your granddaughter is like—what her country stands for, but I’m excited to fight for her. Is there something wrong with me?”

“Not wrong. You are what you are. You don’t pick fights, but you certainly love to win them. I can admire that trait, Victor. Perhaps love isn’t something you should concern yourself with in this stage of your life—”

“But I do love, Dar! I feel it so deeply, so hard, sometimes that I can’t think of anything else. If I love to fight, half the time, it’s because I think I’m protecting someone I love! But...yeah, I’m not sure how to reconcile the idea that I feel just as strongly about protecting and caring for other people in my life as I do for Valla.” Victor sighed, feeling empty and defeated and utterly unresolved.

Dar chuckled. “Love is a funny thing. It can be hot and fiery or warm and comforting. It can bring tears of joy or sorrow; it can make a man or break him. I’ll tell you this: time apart from one’s love can clarify things. If your heart begins to ache and you desperately want to be with your love more and more, then you might realize your love is more important than your desire to fight and your hunt for glory. If, however, you don’t find yourself lying awake at night, thinking of your distant love, perhaps it might be time to be more honest with yourself and your lady.”

“So, wait and see? Shit, thanks for the help, Dar.” Victor laughed, and Dar chuckled.

“Yes, I began to curse myself the moment I offered advice. It’s not an easy thing to figure out—the heart. Talk to Valla. Be honest. That’s the best counsel I can offer. Perhaps she’ll have more insight.” Dar shifted in his chair, and Victor saw he was ready to be done with the subject.

“Right. I’ll do that. Thank you, Dar.”

“Take your week. Leave as soon as you can and bring her with you. It will be good.” Dar looked ready to dismiss him, but he held up a hand and added, “On the topic of my granddaughter, you should rest assured that she is no despot. She rules with kindness, and her citizens are guaranteed certain rights and freedoms. I believe you should be proud to defend her—many nations on Ruhn are not so egalitarian.”

Victor nodded. “Well, that’s good to know. Yeah, I think, despite my earlier words, I would have had trouble standing up for her if she turned out to be a tyrant.” He stood and smiled, and surprisingly, the expression came a lot more easily than he’d expected. Despite the lack of a resolution to his problems, he felt better having confided in someone. It was good to know he wasn’t the only person in the universe feeling the way he did. “Thank you, Dar.”

His mentor stood and clapped one of his stony hands against Victor’s shoulder. “My pleasure. Make haste now. The sooner you’re gone and back, the sooner your training can begin.” His eyes opened wide, and he snapped his fingers with a crack. He leaned close and, in a much quieter voice, said, “I do have some advice for you! Dig through Loyle’s belongings for something very beautiful, rare, and expensive, and give it to Valla. I think it might make her more receptive to your further confession.”

“Confession?”

“Well, you’ve yet to tell her about your young ward, correct?”

“Oh, shit,” Victor groaned.

Book 8: Chapter 49: Hearts and Bones

Victor wasn't sure where to go when he walked out of the library. He wanted to find Valla and talk to her, but at the same time, he wanted some space to think—to breathe. With that impulse taking control, he meandered back to the main parlor, dark and quiet at that hour, and then slipped out the door to the rear deck. That close to the lake, the night air was always a little chilly. Victor hadn't been there long enough to know if that changed with the seasons or if there even were seasons on Sojourn, but he supposed it didn't matter; he was never cold, and conversely, no amount of heat in the air seemed to make his hot blood uncomfortable.

He stepped toward the railing, found he had too much anxious energy to stand and think, and turned to walk along the house to the side deck. He caught a glimpse of Dar through a window, still sitting in the library, writing into a book on his lap. It felt strange to peer into the room after wandering through the house, like he was purposefully being sneaky or something, so he hurriedly looked away and hustled down the steps to the pathway that wound through Dar's manicured gardens. Nightbirds chirped and sang, and the breeze through the trees rustled the leaves in a melancholy whisper, making it easy for Victor's mind to wander and drift.

After a while, he'd passed by the “sparring ring” and entered a part of the garden he hadn't explored. Night blossoms bloomed, and the cloying scent of orange and cherry filled the air. It was peaceful and relaxing, and Victor found his earlier irritation melting away. What did he have to be upset about? A woman who loved him was angry—it wasn't the end of the world. He'd accomplished something tremendous earlier that day. He, a middling iron ranker, had conquered a steel seeker! Victor grinned and, spying a small bench on the hillside, sat down to look out over the terraced gardens to the starlit lake below.

It was a beautiful view, and to his heart's relief, he found himself wishing Valla were there beside him. A tree to his left rustled, and Victor looked up to see a black feathered bird with a long, fanning tail perched on one of the lower branches. A shock of bright yellow plumage atop its head drew Victor's eye, and when it felt Victor's gaze, it spread broad wings and fluttered away into the night. As it went, it uttered a trilling cry that sounded like a stuttered question, “Wha-why, wha-why?” Victor chuckled at the funny sound, then, as he turned back to the big tree with its drooping branches and pale, birch-like bark, he remembered Arona's bone.

He reached into the storage ring Dar had given him and pulled out the thing. It was heavy and felt colder than before. Seeing it reminded Victor of when Arona had passed it to him in a cave even darker than the night where he now sat. Glancing at the moon, Victor chuckled. To his eyes, it wasn't all that dark; things were still shaded in terms of moonlight and shadow, but he could see the leaves in the trees, the tiny night creatures rustling through the undergrowth, and even the gentle waves lapping on the distant lake shore.

He rubbed his thumb along the silvery runes in the bone, noting how they shimmered, and he wondered if they'd been like that before. Had they been so bright with Energy? Arona had said her undead creature needed rest, that he wasn't "ready" for another fight. Had he recovered? "Guess we'll never know, eh, hermano?" Victor chuckled as he carried the bone over to the tree. "You're going to sleep until another Necromancer finds you, I guess." He thought about that word. "Is a Death Caster the same as a Necromancer?" He shook his head, smirking at his mumbled rambling, and knelt on soft turf, summoning a knife from one of his other rings.

He'd just stabbed the blade into the grass when a cold shiver ran down his spine, and a raspy voice whispered, "It would be accurate to say a Necromancer is a type of Death Caster." He recognized the voice, so he didn't respond violently, but Victor whirled around, all the same, scrabbling backward so his back rested against the tree trunk. A ghostly, luminescent version of Arona hovered in the darkness near where he'd been kneeling. "You returned more quickly than I feared. I'm pleased you survived your battle, Victor." Her lips didn't move, but she seemed to sway with the words as they hissed through the night air to him.

"The hell? Are you a ghost now?"

"I suppose so. More precisely, I'm a disembodied spirit bound to that bone—my first phylactery. I prepared it as we lay in that cave 'sleeping.' Thank you for bringing it here and for not mentioning it to anyone. You didn't, did you?"

Victor shook his head. "Nah, I only just remembered it. I wouldn't have, though. I promised you."

The spirit wavered, shifting oddly in the moonlight. "You don't seem very surprised to see me."

"You're not the first Death Caster I've messed around with, and this isn't the first phylactery I've held. I should've probably guessed what you were up to. I take it you didn't explain your plan because you didn't want Ronkerz to overhear?"

"That's right. I was afraid he'd force you to give him the phylactery so that, even in death, he could bind me to his service."

Victor nodded as he grunted, climbing to his feet. He held the bone out toward the glowing, faintly translucent figure. "Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad you aren't, like, totally dead. Uh, what do you want me to do with this thing?"

"Thank you, Victor!" The spirit drifted back from the bone, and Victor felt a sinking sensation as he anticipated her next words. "I have another favor to ask—well, perhaps several favors." When Victor sighed and lowered the bone, a faint smile flickered over her ghostly features, and then her disembodied voice came to him again, "I asked you to bury that bone here, in Dar's gardens, because I knew that once you removed it from your storage device, my spirit would be drawn to it."

“Yeah?” Victor was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Yes. However, I’m still quite helpless and at the mercy of your willingness to aid me.” When Victor only frowned, she continued, “I told you in the dungeon that I wasn’t undead yet. That wasn’t a lie. My master, whom I shall not name in the air of the world where he walks, had tried for years to get me to complete the process, to create a phylactery and perfect my undead vessel, becoming a lich like so many powerful Death Casters do. I...resisted because I hate him, Victor. I hate him and every other Death Caster I’ve ever studied under.”

Victor moved over to the bench and sat down. When Arona’s spirit drifted closer, he motioned for her to continue. “But?”

“Yes, well, when I saw that Ronkerz would make us fight and I knew there was a chance I wouldn’t win, I devised a scheme to escape both Ronkerz and my master. Again, please don’t say his name; I don’t want to draw his attention.” She paused, and her ghostly black eyes stared until Victor nodded. “When a Death Caster typically becomes a lich, they must spend time preparing their phylactery, then, after they’ve voluntarily forfeited their mortal life, an ally prepares their body to accept the undead spirit and death-attuned Energy, completing the process.”

“Your body isn’t exactly in one piece or, you know, here.”

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“Yes, which brings me to the favor I would beg of you. I cannot seek aid on Sojourn; my master is too well-known, and he’d likely get wind of my efforts. I beg you, Victor, will you bring me to the next world you visit? The ring where you stored my phylactery is sufficiently advanced to hold my spirit without making me mad. Once I’m free of Sojourn, if we could find a Death Caster to aid us—”

“We? Us? Arona, I’m not so sure I’m up for all that. I’m not exactly fond of Death Casters—”

“Victor! I beg you!” Her spirit flickered as she shifted to a kneeling position while still somehow seeming to float in the air. “I’m at your mercy! I beg you not to think of me as a Death Caster but as a friend. I didn’t want this, but I saw it as the only way I might free myself. My master has lived for thousands of years, and I owed him centuries of servitude. He is not

a pleasant man.”

“Well? Why did you owe him?”

“My family sold me to him when I was young. On my homeworld, my father is a king, and a Death Caster to boot. He bargained with...the man I seek to flee, and I had no say in the matter!”

Victor sighed, then gestured to the bone. “So, what? You get into the bone, I put the bone in my storage ring—the good one—and then you just ride there quietly until I take you out again?”

“Precisely! Once we’re in a different world, I can help guide you to a Death Caster who may be able to help me construct a fitting vessel—”

Victor groaned and set the bone on the bench beside him. “You mean a body, right? You’re going to need a body, aren’t you?”

“Yes—but, Victor, people die all the time! We needn’t kill anyone.”

“I’m not excited by the idea, Arona, but I did think of you as a friend, and as long as you don’t ask me to do anything messed-up, I’m willing to help you out.”

“Hear my vow, Victor: I will never act in a manner you find vile or wrong, and, as soon as I have a vessel with which to turn the pages of texts, I will search for a way to rid myself of this death-attuned Energy! I hate it!”

Victor watched the specter floating before him, still in a kneeling position. The ghostly version of Arona looked very much like she had in life, only washed out and gray-tinted with faint luminescence behind her flesh that made her seem transparent. It was a trick of the light on the eye, though—when he tried to see through her, he couldn’t. Curiosity got the better of him, and Victor reached out to touch her sleeve, only to find his fingers passing through what felt like cold water. When he pulled back, he found no residue on his fingertips. “Why do you hate your master?”

Arona shivered, her ghostly figure flickering with the motion. “As I said, he’s vile. He counts his apprentices as his property, and he knows no boundaries of the flesh. His hands grasp and touch where he wills, and to defy him is to face confinement for years, bereft of all but the slightest trickle of Energy—a harsh lesson to mold an unruly student’s behavior. Of course, his nature isn’t so plain when he courts a new apprentice, and the contracts are cleverly worded. My father wouldn’t have cared what it said, in any case. He convinced me, the first of his seven daughters, with lies and promises, to go along with...my master, to sign the document with blood and seal it with Energy. Too late did I learn...”

As she continued, detailing the cruel practices of Vesavo Bonewhisper, Victor could hear the emotion in her voice, and it touched a nerve. He wanted to help her, but more than that, he wanted to remove a potentially potent Death Caster from the universe. If he could help her to find a way to convert her Core from Death Energy once she’d recovered, what sort of precedent might that set? Were there other Death Casters trapped by cruel masters? What about Dark Ember? If he went there, intent on freeing the humans of that world, wouldn’t whatever he learned in his quest to aid Arona help with that goal? He realized she’d grown quiet, and he’d utterly missed half of her tale, so lost had he been in his own thoughts. “All right, Arona. I, um, I agree; it sounds like you got a raw

deal. I'll be traveling away from this world in a few months. Can you manage to wait that long?" Victor meant his trip to Ruhn—there was no way he'd unleash a tier-nine Death Caster on Fanwath.

"I can! I wandered the Spirit Plane until I felt my phylactery's pull, but, within that bone, I have a rudimentary home; I surreptitiously transferred many of my belongings into it before I passed it off to you. Moreover, I can pass the time by improving it as I await your summons."

"How? Wouldn't that require Energy? Can you draw Energy while in a dimensional container?"

"The ring you stored the bone in allows the flow of Energy, Victor—how else could you store powerful, conscious objects within it?"

Victor realized she was right as his mind flickered to the fear geist he had stored in that ring. Did that mean he could, theoretically, put Lifedrinker in there? He slowly began to nod, then locked his eyes on Arona's. As he stared into those depthless pools, he had a shiver of doubt. With a slight scowl, he demanded, "Swear to me again. Swear that you'll never betray me. Swear it on your spirit because I swear, Arona, if you're somehow scheming against me, I'll rip apart what's left of you and scatter the pieces all over the Spirit Plane—I'll feed it to the angry spirits I find dwelling there!"

"I swear it, Victor! I swear that if you're true to me, I will always be true to you. I already owe you a great debt, and know I ask much."

Victor nodded, then held up the bone. "In you go, then. I should get back to the house."

"One more thing, Victor. Please don't mention this to anyone! If Ve—my master were to learn of my continued existence—"

"I won't tell any—" Victor started to say, but then he remembered Valla and the secrets he'd already kept from her. "I'll only tell Valla. I have too many secrets from her already." Arona began to object, but he shook his head. "You have to trust me that she'll keep your secret. I won't help you otherwise."

After a long, silent second, as her ghostly figure wavered and flickered oddly in the moonlight, Arona's raspy voice came to him again, "I agree, Victor. Thank you." With that, her image seemed to burst apart into mist and pale light that streamed directly into the bone. Victor watched the last of it disappear into the vessel. The silvery runes flared briefly, and he was sure the bone felt even heavier and colder than before. Sighing, he returned it to the storage ring with his other valuable possessions.

He sat in the resulting quiet for a few minutes, determined to find the peace and relaxation he'd felt before Arona's spirit had made her surprise appearance. After a while, as the moon dipped lower

and the eastern sky began to lighten from midnight black to deep blue-gray, he felt his stomach gurgle. Victor knew he didn't have to eat—he could go weeks without food—but he liked to do it, and the idea of some breakfast sounded good. He wasn't too sure he felt up to going into the house, however. There were a lot of early risers staying in the lake house, and Victor didn't feel like talking.

As he contemplated the dwindling food supplies in his storage containers, Victor felt his mind's eye drawn toward the heart he'd pulled from Loyle. Rather than feeling repulsed by the raw, bloody organ, he felt his mouth begin to salivate. As his hunger quickened, Victor chuckled at the dominance of his savage Quinametzin greed. He withdrew the heart and held it in the palm of his large hand. "Why not?"

Victor canceled his Alter Self spell, expanding to his natural size, but he didn't cast Iron Berserk; the heart wasn't overly large. In fact, in his broad palm, it looked more like a turkey heart than something that had come out of a man. Victor lifted it to his nose and, as the coppery scent of blood generated more saliva, plopped the entire thing into his mouth. His eyes had almost been bigger than his mouth—he had to tilt his head back as he chewed to avoid juices sluicing out, and his gluttony made him laugh, further disrupting his attempts to masticate the tough meat.

Even so, Victor found the taste and texture intoxicating, and the euphoria of the Energy escaping the flesh as he began to swallow the chunks of meat his teeth tore from the organ made the morsel all the sweeter. There really wasn't anything like it—no other food, as far as Victor's Quinametzin palate was concerned, could compare to the heart of an enemy. When he swallowed the lion's share of the organ and heaved in a deep, cleansing breath, he felt the fire roiling in his belly—something was happening.

Energy, hot and roiling, spread from his stomach into his body. When he closed his eyes, he could imagine his body had been frozen, and he'd swallowed an ember that slowly thawed his flesh. Of course, that wasn't anywhere close to the situation at hand—his body was hot already, so the heat rushing through him, from his gut to his fingertips, toes, and the top of his scalp, was something different. It was alive, tingling with Energy and purpose, and, unlike some other instances when Victor had consumed something potent, almost pleasant as it did whatever it was doing.

When the sensation had passed through his entire body, and he began to feel normal again, he received some System messages:

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new Feat: Blood Supremacy.*****

*****Blood Supremacy: Your blood, already potent with the might of an elder species, has gained the ability to carry your aura and will. Species and individuals with the ability to infect, consume, or subvert another's blood will have to contend with your innate willpower and the effects of your aura. Moreover, those who come into contact with your blood will feel its weight until it has been cleansed. This effect would be particularly daunting to any individual who consumed your blood.*****

As he read the message, Victor couldn't help imagining a vampire drinking his blood and suffering the effects of his new feat. He laughed, despite himself, especially when he pictured some of the vampyrs and wampyrs that had

invaded from Dark Ember, most notably the reaver baron, Eric Gore Lust. “Yeah,” he laughed, “try drinking this shit, pendejo!”

Book 8: Chapter 50: Changes

When Victor returned to the house, the sun was well up, and he could hear voices coming from the dining room. Peering in through the arched opening in the hallway that separated the room from the kitchen, he saw Valla sitting beside Lam, and across the table from them was Efanie. He looked further into the room, to the smaller table near the far windows, and, sure enough, there sat Cora, by herself, absently picking at a plate full of food. Part of Victor wanted to retreat, to face these people later and well after he’d had a chance to speak with Valla alone, but he forced himself to step into the room. “Hey, good to see you’re getting acquainted.”

Valla looked at him, arching a silver-teal eyebrow. “I’m sure you were going to introduce us, but I couldn’t sleep, and we ran into each other.”

Victor nodded and moved to sit down. He was still his natural size, so he selected one of the larger, Dar-sized chairs, which put him beside Efanie. He saw the food on everyone’s plates—bacon, eggs, grilled veggies, and thick hunks of buttery toast—and his stomach instantly began to grumble. Efanie chuckled and pushed her plate toward him; it was largely untouched.

“I’m not all that hungry—too much going on, and my nerves are shot.” Hearing those words was like a splash of cold water to Victor, reminding him that he wasn’t the center of the universe, regardless of how it seemed most of the time.

“Yeah, I guess last night’s events kind of turned your world upside down, huh?”

Efanie nodded and gestured with her thumb toward Cora over by the windows. “Mine and Cora’s both. Still,” she nodded to Valla and Lam, “we’ve been treated very kindly here, and I think we’re both hopeful.”

Victor nodded, trying to show understanding, but, if he were totally honest with himself, he was glad Cora wasn’t at the same table. How would she feel sitting in the presence of the man who’d killed her father? It was enough to make him want to get up and leave. It wasn’t enough to stifle his appetite, however, so he covered his discomfort by stuffing a large hunk of buttered, honey-dipped bread into his mouth.

Valla nudged him under the table with her boot. “I was just telling Efanie how cruel life could be.” She lowered her voice and continued, “I spoke with Cora briefly, Victor. She told me that she understood that our friends’ lives were on the line and that her father made his living by fighting another man’s battles. A very mature outlook for a girl who’s just recently seen her twelfth birthday, don’t you think?”

Victor swallowed—too soon—and had to fight to clear his throat before speaking. Efanie took the opportunity to voice her opinion on the matter. “She doesn’t hate you, Sir Victor. She’s cross but more at life and circumstances—at her father—than at you. I think I was able to make her understand that you fought for a righteous cause.”

“Well—” Victor began to say, but it seemed Efanie wasn’t finished.

“I hope you know that I don’t expect you and your lady to be the girl’s new parents. Neither does she. If you’ll just give us a small allowance, enough to furnish a home and pay for a tutor, I think we’d be more than happy to move out from underfoot.”

She took a breath and might have continued, but Victor was through being steamrolled. He locked eyes with Efanie and shook his head. “I’ll be doing more than that. I’ve taken responsibility for her, and that means something to me.” He nodded to Valla. “I’d like us all to take a trip back to our homeworld. I have a sizable estate there, and I think it would be a good place for her to grow up.”

“Fanwath?” Valla’s eyes almost sparkled as she said the word, and Victor was reminded of all the times he’d stared into those orbs, lost in their colorful depths.

“Yeah.” Victor smiled, then turned back to Efanie. “It’s a lower-tier world than this, but the nation Valla and I helped to found is growing rapidly, and many opportunities abound. I have influential friends there who can see to Cora’s safety and education, so if you have something binding you to Sojourn—”

“N-no! No, Victor, I would be most pleased to visit your home. What was it?” She glanced at Valla. “Fanwath?”

Valla nodded. “That’s right. Victor is lord to quite an estate there, though we haven’t seen his manor yet. It was just breaking ground when we came to Sojourn. You see, we’d just conquered an invasion in what was considered untamed lands.”

“Ah.” Efanie nodded, then turned to Victor. “Are you certain it’s a good place for a young woman to come of age?”

“Yeah. As I said, it’s growing quickly, and I have people there I trust and think of as family. I think it would be good for Cora to be away from this city and the...” Victor trailed off, wanting to say, ‘memory of her father,’ but was too worried the girl could hear what they were talking about. With that in mind, he asked, “Would you talk to her about it?”

Lam cleared her throat and leaned forward, breaking her silence in a hushed voice, “I think you need to sit down with her, Victor. She must know that she wasn’t given over to a monster.”

Valla nodded and reached across the table to grasp Victor’s wrist. “I agree. As harsh as it may seem, this is her new reality. The longer you avoid confronting the facts, the longer she’ll build up whatever monstrous version of you is living in her head.” Victor looked at her, a little surprised by how pleasant and supportive she was being despite their last conversation. He supposed it had something to do with the seriousness of the situation—Cora was a young girl going through a hell of a lot more than a couple’s disagreement.

He glanced around the table, from Valla to Lam to Efanie, and quietly asked, “Now?”

Lam nodded, Valla squeezed his wrist again, and Efanie leaned close and whispered, “She understands your situation. Just be kind.”

With a sigh and grunt, Victor pushed himself away from his plate of food and stood. As he approached Cora, he cast *Alter Self*, straining to get the most out of the spell. When he sat across from her, she glanced up but then quickly back down at her food—hardly touched. To his horror, Victor found himself channeling every dopey adult he'd ever spoken to as a child. "You've got to eat to keep up your strength."

She picked up a piece of potato and tucked it into her mouth. "As you say, milord."

"Ah, forget I said that—pretty stupid." Suddenly, Victor was stricken with the urge simply to be honest. "Look, I don't know what I'm doing here. I think this whole situation sucks. I know I said that before—kind of—outside Volpuré's estate, but it's true. I understand you're in a bad place right now. You're probably mad, sad, and everything in between, right? You've got every right to be. I'm sorry about your dad, but you understand I was fighting for my life, for my friends' lives, right?"

"I understand, milord." She still hadn't looked up, and all Victor could see of her face was her pale forehead beneath unruly, thick, curly brown hair.

Victor decided to try a different approach. "Do you like Sojourn? Do you have friends here?"

"I—" For the first time, she glanced up, and her chocolate eyes touched his for just a second before she looked back down. "I've spent most of my time at the Volpuré estate with my father. I don't have friends."

"Um, I know this is probably not a fun topic, but can you tell me a little about that? Why did your dad keep you so close? I know they told me he was your only family, but do you, um, know about your mom at all?" Her head shook from side to side, bouncing her thick curls, but she didn't speak. "All right. Well, I have an idea I'd like to run by you: I have a lot of property on another world where some very good friends live. I'd like to take you there—get you away from this place. There are children who live on my lands and people who can look after you and give you the kind of attention you deserve. I think you'll like it there." She didn't speak or look up, so Victor asked more bluntly, "What do you say?"

When she looked up this time, she stared into his eyes and didn't look away. "Do I have a choice?"

"Um," Victor frowned, unsure of how to proceed. Finally, he settled on what he'd want to hear if he were in her shoes. "I want you to come with me and see the place. I want you to meet some of the people who live there. After that, you can decide if you want to stay or come back to Sojourn."

She glanced at the other, larger table. "Will Efanie come?"

Victor nodded. "Yeah. She's eager to go; I don't think she loves Sojourn." Cora stared at him for a moment longer, and Victor saw much in the depths of those dark eyes, but she didn't speak, only nodded, then turned back to her food, scooping up a large bite of scrambled eggs. Victor felt like he'd been dismissed, so he went with it. He stood and pushed his chair in. "When I said we're

going, I meant, like, today. Efanie will help you get ready.” With that, he walked back over to the large table.

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“Well?” Lam asked.

“She’s open to the idea.” Victor looked from Efanie to Valla. “I want to leave today. I know it’s short notice, but Dar’s only given me a week, so I want to make the most of it.” They both inhaled and looked ready to ask him questions, but he turned to Lam. “I can probably afford it if you and the others want to come.”

“I think—” Lam stopped and frowned, shaking her head. “I think I’ll wait. I don’t want to return until I’ve regained more of my former strength. Edeya is with Trin, watching over Darren, but I’ll ask her what she thinks. I doubt Darren will wake in time to join you.”

Victor nodded, once again reminded that other people had important things going on and considerations of their own. “What level are you now?”

She grinned and thumped the table with her palm. “All of us are closing in on tier two. Say one thing about that deathtrap of a dungeon—it provided quite a growth opportunity.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind. Tell Edeya we’ll be leaving in a couple of hours if she’s interested.”

Efanie pushed her chair back. “So soon?”

“Yeah. I was serious about wanting to get this going. I’ve got a lot I want to do and only a week to squeeze it all in.”

“Understood. I—” She glanced over at Cora. “I should take Cora into town for a little shopping. I have a few loose ends I’d like to tie up around here. Despite Bohn’s awful nature, there are many in the Volpuré household I’d like to part with on good terms. I think a few gifts and letters sent via courier should do the trick. Would it be all right if the two of us meet you at the World Hall?”

“Yeah.” Victor rubbed his chin while he thought. “I think I’m being unreasonable. Two hours isn’t enough time—meet us at the ticket counter at noon. Is that fair?”

“More than fair!” She stood and started toward Cora, but Valla cleared her throat.

“Wait, Efanie!” Valla looked at Victor. “If she’s going to buy things for Cora to travel with, shouldn’t you give her some funds?”

“Oh, I—” Efanie started, but Victor laughed, shaking his head in chagrin.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll need to get used to this.” He hadn’t sorted the massive crates of beads in Loyle’s ring into more convenient containers, so he lifted out a sack from his previous stash. It held nearly ten thousand beads in value—most were double or triple-attuned. He handed it to Efanie. “That should do for now. I guess you can consider anything left over as a retainer; we can negotiate a contract for you when we get to Fanwath, all right?”

“That’s fair. Thank you, Sir—”

“Just Victor, Efanie.”

She smiled, then curtly tilted her head and waved to the table, including Lam and Valla in the gesture. “See you soon.” As she strode toward Cora’s table, her voice became strident, “Up you get, young lady. We’ve much to do and little time in which to do it!”

Lam glanced at Victor and then Valla and pushed her chair back. “Why don’t you sit back down and finish Efanie’s breakfast, Victor? I’m going to go check in on Edeya and tell her what you said about returning to Fanwath.”

“Um, yeah. Not a bad idea.” Victor sat down again, well aware that Lam was trying to give him a chance to speak with Valla. It made him wonder if Valla had been venting, but he supposed he couldn’t blame her if she had been. As she left, Lam walked behind Valla. Catching Victor’s eye, she nodded and winked.

“About as subtle as a thunderak in a jewelry store,” Valla chuckled.

Victor shrugged. “She’s trying to help me out. Don’t you agree I could use it?”

Valla sighed. “Oh, Victor! I know I wasn’t exactly rational earlier, but you must admit that you don’t make it easy for me. I’ve spent some hours thinking and a bit of time chatting with Lam, and, honestly, I don’t know what to say other than that. I think I need more time to think about things. Don’t you?”

“I...” Victor frowned as he let his impulsive objection die on his tongue. Did he need more time to think? Was he sure about everything? Or, failing that, was he at least as sure as he used to be? He supposed the answer was no—there had been some changes in his feelings that bore further thought. “I guess some time to think would be nice.”

“Exactly! Some time away from Sojourn is exactly what we need. Some time away from all the high stakes, the life-or-death battles, the schemes, and future plots. Let’s make a promise—no talking about any of our...problems until the night before our scheduled return. I want to enjoy a small vacation with you and forget about all of our worries for a few days. Let’s give our minds and hearts time to breathe and think. Can you agree with that?”

Victor held his hand, palm up, across the table, and Valla eagerly took it in her slender, cool fingers. “Yeah, I can agree, Valla. Honestly, it sounds great.”

#

When Darren opened his eyes, he was swept away with almost nauseating disorientation. He saw wooden rafters overhead, but they seemed curved, like he was looking at them through a fish-eye lens. He blinked his eyes and tried to focus, but then his world was blotted out by wood grains, splinters, and a nail head the size of a dinner plate. “Ungh,” he grunted, feeling even more queasy. He closed his eyes and, as the world faded to peaceful black, began to recall strange, vivid dreams of flying through clouds, basking in the cold air of the heights and the warmth of the sun. How long had he slept?

With the question came a surge of other memories—waves of monsters, Lam and Edeya and Trin, all fighting for their lives, an axe blade cleaving his clavicle and slicing deep into his chest, and worried whispers and the taste of something incomprehensibly sweet and good as it was stuffed into his mouth. He opened his eyes again, hoping to see one of his friends, but this time, instead of just the wooden ceiling, he saw a bird’s head. No, he corrected himself, an avian woman’s head. Black feathers adorned her crown, and a dark yellow beak sat beneath giant, yellow, and brown-banded irises that narrowed in contemplation as he continued to blink.

“Try to relax and let nature do its work. Your eyes are much stronger than they used to be, Darren. My name is Brimi, and I’m here because your friends were worried about you.”

“Worried?” Darren asked, but his voice was strange in his ears, and it sounded garbled, more like, “Ooried?”

“That’s right, love, you’ve been out for a few days. Try to lie still and take in everything I’ve got to say. It seems you ate a racial advancement cake, and it woke something up—a bloodline.”

“Uhdline?” he asked, his voice rising toward a squawk as he tried to form the word with his strange-feeling mouth.

“An avian bloodline. That’s why I’m here. I can help you to figure out how to manage the things that have changed about you.”

“Aieeen?” Darren tried to say ‘avian,’ but, again, it sounded more like a squawk. His heart had begun to hammer, and despite Brimi’s protestations, he struggled to his feet, pleased that his arms, hands, and legs were responding normally. He looked around, frowning at the strange perspective. Was he taller than before? The avian woman held out her arms, trying to steady or restrain him; he couldn’t tell. She was much shorter than he, and as he looked around, his vision kept zooming in on every little detail.

He almost fell several times as he stumbled to his bathroom and finally managed to fight his way through the door to peer at himself in the mirror. “What the hell?” he cried, though, again, it came out like, “Aaah-kah-ell!” Darren had, indeed, changed. He was easily a foot taller than before, looming over the sink, stark naked, save for a pair of tight underwear.

His body didn't look all that different, but there were a few disturbing changes: his head was covered in lustrous brown, mottled feathers, his eyes were enormous, angular things like you might see on an eagle, the irises golden and beautiful, and his nose and mouth had been replaced by a long, hooked beak.

Darren, too stressed and, frankly, panicked to speak, turned to look at his back and saw faint lumps along his spine just beneath his shoulder blades. "No wings?" he tried to ask, too distracted to worry about what the words came out sounding like.

"You've just barely awoken your bloodline, but, as is usual when something like this occurs, the first changes are to your sensory organs—your eyes, mouth, nose, and ears. As you advance your bloodline..." She kept speaking, but Darren couldn't hear her over the pounding of his heart, the roaring of his thoughts. He mentally called up his status sheet and scanned what he saw:

Status

Name:

Darren Whitehorse

Race:

Human - Base 5 - Thunderbird Bloodline

Class:

Chaos Sorcerer - Advanced

Level:

18

Core:

Wildarc Class - Base 2

Energy Affinity:

Lightning 8, Chaos 7.4, Unattuned 6.1

Energy:

1445/1445

Strength:

6

Vitality:

72

Dexterity:

45

Agility:

5

Intelligence:

57

Will:

68

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

-

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Wildarc Cultivation Drill

Basic

Staff Mastery

Basic

Sense Chaos

Basic

Spells:

Arclight Wisp

Basic

Shocking Arms

Basic

Fractured Reality

Basic

Chaos Storm

Basic

“Ut thah uuuuck!” he screeched, clapping his hands to his head.

“Hush, Darren! Really!” Brimi scolded. “You should be thrilled. You realize that if you keep advancing your bloodline, you’ll be able to fly, yes? A predator avian,

too! What handsome eyes you have! And those feathers! Goodness, but you're going to be something, given time. Now, regarding your attempts at speaking—Darren, you must try to form the words further back in your throat. We intelligent avian species have a very advanced syrinx in our throats. It takes a little practice, but you'll soon learn to enunciate properly..."

She continued to babble on, but Darren couldn't focus on her. He was staring at the backs of his hands where fine, downy feathers seemed to have replaced the hair that used to grow there. He looked at the tips of his fingers and saw that his nails were dark black, pointed, and hard as iron. Frowning, he looked at his status sheet and, with enormous concentration, tried to form the word in the back of his throat, "Thunderbird."