

Victor BK9: Ch11

Book 9: Chapter 11: Faith

As Victor's words rang out in the hushed anticipation that hung heavy in the throne room, Queen Kynna's eyes flew wide at their implication—a promise far beyond simply defending her beleaguered borders. The room was silent for several heartbeats—the assembled nobles seemed to be holding their breath—and then it erupted in a buzz of excited whispers, though Victor's ears detected a good amount of grumbling. When Kynna stood, the room grew silent again. Victor looked up at her, his golden-brown eyes peering up from beneath his heavy brow, his arms steady though the muscles strained to hold the dense spear in its awkward position.

The queen stepped down from her throne's dais, looming over him as she ran her gaze from one end of the great spear to the other. Victor could smell her perfume—something floral that tickled a memory he couldn't quite grasp. Her deep blue gown glittered like a million stars were woven into the fabric, and, as she reached out a long, slender arm to touch the weapon, lightly grazing it with her fingertips, Victor couldn't help noting the many glittering jewels adorning her fingers and wrist. "You come, warrior, to stand as my champion?"

"I do."

"And what of dear, brave, loyal Foster?" At her words, Victor heard boots click on the marble, and he knew Kynna's champion had stepped forward. He didn't look at him, though; he kept his eyes trained upward at Kynna's face beneath the wild tangle of her curly black hair and the high, glittering spires of her crystal crown.

"Let him rest." Victor knew the question was for show, a way for Foster Green to save face and be acknowledged.

"What say you, Champion?" Queen Kynna asked. Victor, still looking up, saw her chin turn to the right.

"I am ever ready to serve, My Queen, but it has been many long years since I rested." Foster's voice was gravelly and deep, and Victor could hear deep emotion behind the words. He hadn't really considered that—how it might feel to be asked to step down after a lifetime of service. Dar had made it seem that Foster would be relieved, knowing he wouldn't be asked to fight the battles he and his queen had been avoiding—knowing he wouldn't win. Still, it had to sting his pride a little, being pushed aside by a young stranger.

"You have earned your rest, Foster, but make it short; my close council has room for another chair." As she spoke, Victor heard dozens of murmured conversations pick up. He caught words and phrases here and there, primarily people speculating about the implications of another seat on Kynna's council. He also heard a few exclamations of disbelief—how could she take on an untested stranger when wolves were at the gates?

Kynna looked down, her bright eyes finally falling on Victor's face as she traced the spear with her fingertips. For a moment, he wondered if she'd grasp it and try to lift it, but she withdrew her hand. "I accept your gift, Victor, disciple of Ranish Dar. Though I must insist you hold this weapon ready until such time that you no longer need it to fight Gloria's battles." She lifted her hand and rested her fingertips on Victor's forehead. They were cool to his hot flesh, but he could feel the thrum of some kind of potent Energy in them; he wondered what affinity or affinities she had. "Rise, Champion of Gloria."

Victor did so, straightening in a fluid motion, snapping the spear around in a half twirl, thudding the feather-adorned butt against the marble. He'd gained much understanding of the weapon over the last few months of practice—not only his own experience but the knowledge the System granted him when he broke through into the "advanced" stages of mastery. He knew he had a long road to walk before he attained epic-tier mastery of the weapon, but he felt good with it in his hands. His guilty conscience was quick to remind him that Lifedrinker would be better, but he pushed the feeling down, knowing she'd come out when the time was right.

The crowd lining the sides of the throne room began to clap—not a raucous applause or boisterous cheer but a gentle, polite patter of fingers against palms. Victor frowned, glancing side to side for the first time, taking in the assembled nobility. They were, like their queen, austere in posture and expression. The women and many men wore makeup, darkening the skin around their eyes and brightening the red of their cheeks and lips. Their clothes were fine—silks and satins, capes and capelets, jewels on necks, fingers, and brows, and not a single one of them looked like they'd missed a meal or suffered during the years-long siege of their nation.

Victor's burgeoning disdain was interrupted by the queen's words. Her words were directed at him as she spoke, but she projected them, ensuring all could hear. "My ancestor's most recent missive indicated a man named Victor would be coming. He didn't say how soon, though, and I'd honestly begun to lose hope."

Victor had become distracted in his study of the nobles, and, as she spoke, his eyes fell on the man who had to be Foster Green; he was tall, swarthy, lean, and had steel-gray hair, cut short in much the style that Victor preferred. He was the only person in the room who looked like a fighter without the armor and livery of the queen's guard. When their eyes locked, Kynna was just finishing her statement, and Victor exchanged a solemn, knowing nod with the old fighter. He turned to regard the queen, pressing his lips together to avoid frowning as he replied. "Ranish Dar is a man of his word—I am here."

"My people suffer, though you wouldn't know it looking around this room, Victor." Her eyes flared briefly, and Victor wondered if she'd read more in his expression than he'd intended. "How soon will you be ready to accept a challenge?"

Victor, perhaps a foot taller than Kynna, took a step back off the dais to more easily look her in the eyes. He nodded slowly and then turned to more deliberately regard the assembled nobility again. This time, he allowed some of his scowl to enter his expression as he locked eyes with any who dared to meet his gaze; only a few did so. When he finished his more obvious perusal, he turned back to the queen. "I'll be ready after a bit of rest. The journey was arduous." Finally, some of the gathered nobles reacted with more than whispers, titters, and tepid clapping.

He heard exclamations of relief and, unsurprisingly, fear. One man called out, “My Queen! I beg your caution! Should he lose, we all will suffer!”

“Be still, Rannick,” Kynna snapped. “Did you not hear what was said? Lord Ranish Dar has sent this man! He is here to elevate us, not to sit and fawn while we slowly wither! While our children

starve!” Looking at the man in his finery, Victor had a feeling his children weren’t lacking food. He had a feeling these nobles had storage devices holding years and years’ worth of sustenance for the people they loved.

His scowling gaze didn’t quiet the murmurs. In fact, they grew louder, and a woman from the other side of the room cried out, “Have you no eyes? No senses? I can read this man’s Core like a child’s! I’d wager most of us out-rank him!” Her words were almost enough to get a reaction from Victor. He wanted to unleash his tightly held aura, he wanted to swell his pathways with rage-attuned Energy and expand to his true, titanic form, but he didn’t.

Dar had instructed him well on his strategy; he was to play all of his cards close to his chest, including the strength and weight of his aura. He might be able to hide his Core from most of these folks, but there were, indeed, many people on Ruhn in the high iron ranks. Even if he wanted to block them from viewing his Core and guessing his tier, it wasn’t a battle he should fight. Their guesses were immaterial; whatever they thought they knew was only that—a guess. Dar’s strategy involved people underestimating him, and letting them see his Core was part of that plan.

He glared at the woman who’d spoken and growled, “Is that a challenge?” A sudden silence fell over the room. Nearly everyone ceased even breathing, and Victor was sure he could hear the quick, nervous pants of the woman he focused his scowling countenance upon.

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As Victor continued to stare, she held a hand to her silk-covered bosom, glancing around nervously and stammering, “N-no! I’m not a fighter!”

“Outrageous!” someone muttered loudly enough to draw Victor’s gaze. As he stared toward the voice, inviting the speaker to elaborate on his outrage, everyone grew very still. The tension grew thick as Victor’s heart thudded slowly and steadily in his chest.

“Well,” Queen Kynna gracefully returned to her throne, “if no one would like to challenge Victor for his new position as my champion, perhaps you all should leave. He and I have much to discuss.”

“You heard Her Majesty! Clear the throne room!” Chamberlain Thorn bellowed, still standing near the doors. Victor sent his spear into a storage container and stood, arms folded, watching the nobles clear out. The musicians, who’d long ago stopped playing, gathered their equipment and scurried out a side door, which drew his eye to a row of servants holding trays of drinks and hors-d’oeuvre vying for the same exit.

“I see your nobles don’t deprive themselves.” He nodded toward the last of the servants who hastily rushed through the door.

“I...must find a balance between currying favor among the nobility and succumbing to my desire to throw every last scrap of food we all have to the masses. You must understand that the palace storehouse would only feed the city for a day or two, no? Many nobles are opening their personal stores; our people will not starve today or tomorrow. No, they’ll last months and maybe years, though the discomfort on the children’s faces will bring daily shame to those of us who feast mostly on the ambient Energy. For that reason, many nobles will shun the populace, hiding away behind these walls or in their own keeps.”

Victor regarded her, pleased that she was so open about the subject. Though her skin was smooth and flawless, she struck him as being experienced; she didn’t seem young. “You have to curry favor?”

“There are many among my kin with ties in our neighboring kingdoms—family members bonded through marriage, for instance. If I push them too far out of their comfort, their disloyalty might move beyond simple spying and missives regarding the state of our capital and into true treachery. Gloria would have fallen years ago if I hadn’t been working to appease the nobility.”

Victor nodded. His arms were still folded over his chest, and he lifted a foot, resting it on the edge of the queen’s dais. “Well, that ends today. Schedule the first duel. We’ll get one of your enemies off your back, and then, with a little breathing room, we’ll start eliminating the nobles who aren’t cut out for the struggle to come.”

“Excuse me, sirrah?” the queen arched an eyebrow, tapping one of her blue-polished nails on the arm of her crystal throne. The sound it made was almost musical—ting, ting, ting. “I appreciate your confidence, but Embry wasn’t wrong; you seem to lack the weight of a high iron ranker. You certainly are no steel seeker!”

“Listen, My, uh, Queen: Ranish Dar has given me a strategy to follow. Do you trust your ancestor?”

“I don’t...” She frowned and sighed. “I don’t know, Victor. When I first wrote to him, it felt very strange; imagine praying to a long-dead ancestor, and you’ll know what I mean.”

“Yeah, you’d be surprised.” Victor chuckled and added, “Anyway, Dar ain’t dead.” He frowned as he caught his tongue running away, forgetting all the lessons on etiquette Dar and Mr. Ruln had put him through.

Kynna leaned forward, her black crystal crown tilting precariously. Something must have held it in place—magic or something mundane like clips attached to her thick, curly black hair. “He may as well be for all the interest he’s shown in our plight!”

Victor smiled grimly. “I know, but I’m here now. What do we need to do to arrange a duel?”

“The challenge was issued; I’ve been avoiding it. It shouldn’t be difficult to get Vennar or Groff to agree to terms.”

“Good. The sooner, the better, Queen Kynna. Now, is there someone who can show me around this place?”

“We have much to discuss, Victor. There’s more to your role than fighting duels.” She shook her head, forcing an almost delicate smile. “I’m sorry. You must be exhausted from your journey. I’m sure Foster stayed near at hand; I’ll have him introduce you to the staff and show you the palace grounds and your quarters.”

Victor rubbed his chin. “Is he going to be...” He let his words trail off, leaving Kynna to make assumptions about his meaning.

“He’s eager to retire, Victor. He only stayed on to avoid one of my cousins trying to claim the throne. I have many asps and adders in my court, as I’m sure you’ll soon learn.” She touched something on the side of her throne, and the large double doors opened almost immediately. One of the helmeted guards stepped into the opening, staring intently at Victor and the throne. “Fetch Chamberlain Thorn and Foster Green.”

Victor was tempted to say he wasn’t tired at all and that they could chat for a while, but he had an image to uphold; being exhausted from travel was natural for a “champion” out of his depth. “I hope you don’t mind me taking some time to get my feet under me, Your Majesty.”

“No, I understand. It’s only...” She frowned, an expression that made her look like an angry goddess come down from Olympus. “Are you sure you’re up for this? Are you certain we should schedule the duel? I’m sure Ranish Dar told you that if you lose, my throne is forfeit.”

“Just like you, My Queen,” Victor grinned, enjoying the roleplay, “I must put my faith in Ranish Dar. He said I was ready, so I must assume he is correct.” Part of him wanted to reassure her and display some of his strength, but another part was profoundly enjoying the game he played. He knew she had advisors and that she’d speak to them. If any were disloyal—and Victor believed that was likely—then word of her concern would travel, making it easier to schedule the duels. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to blow all his cards in the first fight.

Bootheels clicking on marble signaled the arrival of Foster and Thorn, and Victor turned to regard them as they approached. Foster moved like a dancer, and Victor figured he was a formidable fighter. The fact that he was avoiding the challenges from Gloria’s neighbors was a little worrying, but Victor had to remind himself that Foster wasn’t hiding anything. The people here knew him. If

Victor were enraged, with his aura flowing freely and his axe in his hand, he didn't think Foster would be very intimidating.

"Goodman, Foster," the queen said, gesturing to Victor. "Would you kindly show my new champion around the palace? Put him in the purple rooms."

"I could vacate my suite—"

The queen chopped her hand in the air, cutting him off. "I'll not hear of it! You'll stay at the palace until we've won free of this siege and your family is home safe."

"As you say, My Queen." Foster bowed deeply. Seeing his excellent etiquette reminded Victor of his manners, and he turned to face the throne again.

"I'll await your call, My Queen. Will it be early?"

"I am an early riser. Will two hours past dawn suit you?"

Victor rubbed his chin—freshly shaven—and slowly nodded. "I think I can be ready by then." He inwardly sniggered, wondering what they all thought of his need for rest. Fighting to hide his grin, he bowed low, holding it until the queen dismissed him.

"Very good, Victor. You may take your leave."

"Until tomorrow." Victor slowly straightened, then turned and descended the steps, nodding to Foster, who turned on his heel and guided him out.

He heard the queen say, "Stay a moment, Thorn. I've a matter or two to discuss—" The doors clicking shut cut her voice off, utterly masking any sound from within the throne room.

Foster turned to look over his shoulder and nodded briefly. "This way, Victor. We'll start with a tour of the grounds..."

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Kynna looked down her nose at Thorn, her oldest confidant—the only man her father ever trusted. "Are you absolutely certain of his signet's authenticity?"

"It is genuine. I'm certain. My Truth Sense is infallible. His confidence is also true. He believes he will win the duels, and when he says he intends to bring Gloria to a place of prominence, he means it. Now, whether he's a deluded fool..." Thorn shrugged, putting on a face that said, "I wish I knew."

"Would Ranish send me a lunatic? Would he send a man to his doom, thereby dooming us?"

"I have only the records of your great ancestor's time here to go by, and I fear there are more than a few accounts of Ranish Dar acting impulsively and without logic. He was young, then, or so the story goes, so much might have changed in the interceding millennia. Was his letter not reassuring?"

“He hardly spoke of Victor! He said his name and said he was a man of high potential with a courageous heart! When I described Foster Green, I thought that Ranish would at least send us someone sturdier than that good man!”

“He did seem rather...” Kynna saw Thorn struggle to find the right words. His eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips. Finally, with an explosive sigh, he blurted, “Mundane! His attire, his appearance, his demeanor—I’ve seen Obert fight, My Queen, and his presence sends shudders down a man’s spine! This man, this Victor—he’s tall, he’s strong-looking, but I don’t sense any weight behind him. Embry wasn’t wrong, either. Did you sense his Core? He can’t be much beyond tier seven. How will he face a tier-nine champion? If he truly means to elevate Gloria, he’ll face much worse than that!”

Kynna nodded, tapping her nails on the crystal of her throne. As they chimed melodically, she thought about the plight of her people, about the children in the city and the feeble trickle of her nation’s economy. Thorn stood still, patiently waiting, knowing she was weighing matters. She ran through the many risks of trusting Victor, and she weighed them against the scant few options at her disposal. After a time, she looked up. “We could test him.”

“A challenger?”

“Someone to question his strength. Someone to cast doubt on his claims.” Kynna didn’t like the idea, and it showed. Her frown felt like it might become permanent as the corners of her mouth twisted down and her brows narrowed.

“And if he takes the insult and fights? If he’s not boasting a strength beyond his means? Whose life would we throw away to make that test?” Thorn stepped close and hissed, “My Queen, you wrote to Ranish Dar! Victor arrived with his signet, just as your progenitor said he would. When does faith come into play?”

Kynna snorted, shaking her head in disbelief. “My dear, Thorn, did you just counsel me to have faith? I’m stunned!” Thorn started to sputter a response, but she held up her hand. “No, don’t be chagrined. I’m rather pleased by your advice; I grow weary of this gilded cage. I grow weary of seeing my father’s great kingdom brought low. Our borders have shrunk for a dozen generations. Our coffers have shrunk along with them. We once boasted the greatest champion on the Western continent! I rather like the idea of ‘faith,’ my dear, loyal chamberlain. Let’s put Victor into play and see what fate has brought us. Arrange the first duel.”

Book 9: Chapter 12: Terms

Victor stood behind Queen Kynna’s high-backed, hand-tooled, gold-filigreed chair and listened to her and King Vennar hash out the terms of the duel. The king sat in a similar chair on the opposite side of an equally ornate table. It was Victor’s job to appear imposing, and he did his best. Still, with his aura tightly in check, his armor all stowed away, and his Core locked down like a bank vault the day before payday, he didn’t think he was imposing anyone, least of all Vennar or his champion, Obert.

Obert, on the other hand, was putting on a show of deadly force and barely restrained potential for destruction. He was an eleven-foot-tall man built like a ballet dancer. He walked more gracefully than a panther and projected a ferocity that would make a tiger seem cuddly. His long, lithe limbs were corded with hard muscle, his skin was tan and glistened as though oiled, and he wore armor consisting of a shiny breastplate, an eagle-visored helm, shiny bracers, and rune-inscribed greaves. Victor considered it “shiny,” but the armor was more than that. It shone with the inner light of dense enchantments and radiated with a lustrous greenish-blue tint.

Victor forced his face into an unimpressed, almost lackadaisical expression as he regarded him. Still, inwardly, he was impressed, especially by the man’s eight-foot longsword that hung from a scabbard on his back. Victor could only see the hilt and pommel—a glowing tiger’s eye gemstone—but the thing had a presence he couldn’t deny. Still, Victor didn’t react. He didn’t smile or glower. He didn’t let his gaze linger. He constantly surveyed the room, the table, the monarchs, and even the motes of dust gently drifting through the beam of sunlight streaming through the high window.

He could tell his inattention was bothering Obert. The man stared at him as though he could melt Victor’s heart with his gaze. Victor almost smirked at the thought—maybe he could! He let his eyes drift past Kynna’s crown to King Vennar, a very different sort of man. Short—for a Ruhnian, with very dark, nearly black skin and eyes that glowed much the same way as Kynna’s and Dar’s. Was he a distant relation? His flesh certainly reminded Victor of Dar’s. It wasn’t quite the same—it didn’t look exactly like stone, but it had a porous, uneven quality that made it difficult to imagine how it would feel.

The king’s voice was certainly far smoother than Dar’s. “I understand you feel backed into a corner, Kynna—may I use your given name?”

“We’re both monarchs here, Wil. I won’t complain if you don’t.”

“Very good. First, let me thank you for responding to me before King Groff. I assure you, Frostmarch will offer better terms than Xan.” He glanced at Victor and ran his eyes up and down his figure, from his well-polished boots to his freshly cut hair. Victor thought he saw a smirk hiding behind his bright eyes. “I’m pleased you’ve found yourself a young champion willing to stand for you. I’d heard rumors but hadn’t let myself fully believe them.” His lips curled into a more pleasant smile, and he leaned closer to Kynna over the table. “I’m not ashamed to admit that I loathed the idea of a great old warhound like Foster dying to save a lost cause. Will your new man take the knee, as Foster never would?”

“Oh no. You mistake me, Wil. I’m not here to negotiate a surrender. Today, we will agree to the terms of the duel.”

Chamberlain Thorn and his counterpart—a small woman Victor hadn’t caught the name of—sat at the left-hand sides of their monarchs, and it was the woman who reacted first to Queen Kynna’s

words. She audibly choked and had to hold the back of her hand to her mouth and look down, coughing softly to clear her windpipe. Everyone ignored her as the king once again looked at Victor.

“You’re serious?”

“Quite so. Shall we begin?” Victor couldn’t see Kynna’s face, but she sounded very prim.

King Vennar, still staring at Victor and attempting to make eye contact while Victor continued to study the empty space in the air between himself and the far wall, could barely contain the lascivious expression on his face—a dog eyeing a child’s abandoned hamburger. He slowly nodded, cleared his throat, and elbowed the woman beside him. “Certainly. Let’s discuss terms.”

Kynna inclined her head slightly, her tall, crystalline crown glittering in the light as it dipped forward. “Have you any thoughts about sovereign succession?”

King Vennar brushed the back of his hand over his lips, almost like he had to physically push away the hungry grin. “I see no reason to be overly harsh. I would think banishment will suffice.”

“Of only the monarch or their entire lineage?”

“Oh, I would think the entire lineage.” He tsked and, again, leaned forward with an earnest expression. “You could avoid that if you’ll just have your new champion take the knee. I’d keep you on as a Duchess.”

“No, King Vennar, I believe we should do this properly. I have my ancestor’s reputation to manage.”

“Ah yes, the great Ranish Dar.” Vennar smirked, shaking his head. “So. Are we agreed then? Banishment for the ruling family?”

Kynna nodded. “I believe that will suffice. No need for a grisly display of beheadings.” At her words, both chamberlains began to write on the documents before them. She tapped one of her hard nails on the table—click, click, click. “And the Oaths of Submission?”

“One hundred years,” Vennar spoke firmly, and Victor saw Obert shift in the corner of his eye, but he refused to look at the other champion to see his expression. Instead, he continued to let his eyes wander around the room, staring at the art, the furniture, and even the tiles along the far wall.

Kynna glanced to her left, looking at something Thorn had written, then nodded. “Very well. All nobility, minor and major, shall swear peace and allegiance to the victor for a term of no less than one hundred years. We’re in agreement?”

Vennar nodded. “We are. Tribute and Taxation?”

Again, Kynna looked to Thorn. “What is our proposal, Chamberlain Thorn?”

Thorn cleared his throat and lifted his notebook, speaking clearly, almost like he was presenting to a room full of people, not just the three at the table with him. “We propose the following: The vanquished shall be bound to deliver tribute unto the victor in the form of wealth, crops, and provisions. The amount paid shall be no less than thirteen percent of each season’s surplus, verified by the Crown’s agents, who shall be given full access to all records upon request.”

Vennar frowned, looking at his chamberlain. She didn’t speak but tapped something in her notes as she nodded. Vennar looked back to Kynna. “I agree.”

“This has been painless, Will!” Kynna sounded borderline patronizing, but Victor couldn’t see her face, so he couldn’t be sure. Vennar didn’t look angry, though; in fact, he looked like he’d just been given a gift. “There’s just the matter of the Right of the Chosen Blade.”

Vennar barked a short, harsh laugh. “Forgive me, Kynna, but do you even have a cadre? I’d thought Foster was your last champion until...” He glanced at Victor again, this time doing nothing to hide the smirk on his face. “Recently. Still, I’ll bite. How many champions should the victor claim?”

Kynna stiffened her back, squaring her shoulders. Victor imagined she was putting on a show of indignation at Vennar’s dismissive attitude. Even so, she spoke very precisely with perfect decorum, “I would think a single choice will suffice.”

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Vennar leaned back in his chair, pushing away from the table as he waved a dismissive hand. “Very well.” He looked to his chamberlain. “Is there aught else?”

“Just secondary terms, Your Majesty—things like hostage exchange, judicial authority, cultural exchange—”

Vennar sighed. “You can handle this with goodman Thorn here, yes?”

Kynna spoke before the diminutive woman could reply, “I’m in agreement. These lesser matters can be handled by our people. However, we have one final matter to discuss. I’m assuming the duel will be held here, at the ring at Westhome. Have you looked at the schedule?”

Vennar nodded, reaching up to adjust his golden, diamond-studded crown. It wasn’t a bulky crown, but it gleamed and sparkled impressively. “It’s clear for months. Not many duels these days.”

Kynna’s response was immediate. “Sunrise, then?”

“So eager?” Vennar chuckled, glancing over his shoulder at Obert. “What say you, Champion? Will you be ready at dawn?”

“To slay this whelp?” Victor could feel the heat of his stare and the sloppy, or perhaps deliberate, slip of his aura that felt like iron and blood and somehow made Victor think of burning flesh. Even so, he refused to look at him and kept his face fixed in his simple, almost idiotic half-smile. “Aye, I’ll be ready,” the champion growled.

Vennar nodded and pushed his chair back. “We’re agreed, then?”

Kynna also stood. "We are."

"So witnessed," Thorn and the other chamberlain said in near unison. For the first time, Victor let his eyes drift over to Obert's face, and he locked his gaze with the fierce, golden eyes behind his eagle-beak visor. He didn't do anything more than smile, a genuine, eager grin that exposed his bright, straight teeth. Still, Obert took a step back, perhaps caught off guard by the idiocy suddenly fleeing his opponent's gaze. Or, Victor reasoned, maybe Obert saw something in his eyes that was at odds with his display of weakness. Victor continued to stare and grin as the man turned on his heel and led the king and chamberlain out of the room.

"You did well, Victor," Kynna said as soon as the door clicked shut. "Assuming your intentions had anything to do with your...less than significant bearing. If King Vennar thought there was any chance he'd lose, he would have bargained much more viciously."

Chamberlain Thorn gathered up his papers and nodded. "Yes! These terms are wonderful." He looked at Victor and inclined his head. "Ahem, assuming you win, sir. Do excuse me, Your Majesty; I'll need to catch up with Lady Foi to finish the negotiation."

Kynna nodded. "Go on then." She watched him exit, then turned to Victor. "If you fail, you realize my entire family, from my son to my fifth cousin, thrice removed, will be forced to leave Ruhn, yes?"

Victor shrugged. "Well, My Queen, if I fail, I'll be dead."

Kynna's face, never exactly cheerful, fell into such a dour expression that Victor instinctively wanted to proclaim his innocence, though he'd done nothing wrong. "You're awfully flippant about this whole ordeal. You saw Obert! I'm sure you felt him, too. Tell me this now, Victor, is there more to you or not?" She gestured to him in exasperation, indicating his current state, no doubt—dressed in the same clothes he'd worn the day before, only this time he'd tweaked the colors of his attire to be more complementary to Gloria's heraldry; his shirt was pale yellow, his pants and leather pieces black.

"I am what I am, My Queen." When Victor saw her irritation fall away, only to be replaced by something closer to despair, he almost confessed his game. He settled on a compromise, saying, "Maybe you fear that your ancestor has sent me here to fail, maybe to teach you a lesson or to play a cruel game. Maybe you're wondering if he wants your family to be forced to leave Ruhn—that he has some sort of plan for you beyond this world." Kynna took a breath to speak, but Victor rushed to finish his statement, "You should know that he's a prideful man, and he wouldn't enjoy seeing his descendants chased off their homeworld. I also don't think I've done anything to deserve being sent to my doom." He finished with another shrug. "Try to stay confident, Kynna."

“Your enigmatic nature is rather maddening, Victor.” She sighed and pointed to the door from which they’d entered. “Our portal awaits. By the way, I’ll put aside your lack of propriety for now, but do remember to address me properly in the future.” With that, she turned and marched to the door, and Victor followed, trying to replay his words in his mind. When had he addressed her inappropriately? It took him a minute, and by then, he was already through the door and marching down the hall to the portal chamber, flanked by four of Kynna’s guards. “Ah!” he said, as he recalled calling her simply “Kynna” after telling her to be confident.

She turned to regard him as they walked. “Something amiss?”

“No. My apologies, Your Majesty.” He turned to the guard on his left, meaning to grin or wink, but thought better of it when he saw her stern eyes through the slit in her helmet’s visor. When they entered the portal chamber, the magical gateway was already active, glowing with deep blue Energy that hummed and buzzed as it crackled faintly. It would take them straight back to Gloria; the two delegations had met on neutral ground—a city called Westhome, which was the seat of the Ruhnric Empire on the Western Continent. Victor had seen it on a map and knew it was close to two thousand miles south and east of Gloria.

Part of him wondered if the place would still be neutral after he began to enact Dar’s plan—pushing Kynna into kicking off a succession war. There were many rules, laws, and customs he had yet to master in this strange, new world, but so far, he was rather enjoying himself. Kynna interrupted his thoughts by striding through the portal without hesitation. Victor hurried to follow her, cringing slightly as he anticipated the portal’s hot, shocking embrace. When he stepped out on the other side, Kynna stood facing him.

“You’ve only about twelve hours before you’ll be fighting for your life. Is there anything you need to prepare? Anything you’d like to put in order?”

Victor rubbed his chin as he looked around the dim, circular chamber. The portal crackled behind him as the guards followed them through. And then it sizzled and disappeared, throwing the room into deeper shadows. “I’ll take some time to myself, I suppose. Do you mind if I go to my chambers to write some correspondence?”

“By all means.” She stepped closer and spoke in a less imperious tone than usual, “I am worried, and it makes me unpleasant. I understand you’re putting your life on the line tomorrow, and while the consequences would be dire for me and my loved ones should you lose, I want you to know that I understand the point you made earlier. You may die tomorrow. It’s not a small thing you do for me, and—”

“Um, My Queen?” Victor grinned at the wide-eyed disbelief on her face after he interrupted her out-of-character attempt at sympathy. “I certainly don’t mind

helping you, but there's no need for any guilt. I'm not doing this for you." He grinned wickedly and winked at her. "I'm doing this for the glory."

Kynna scowled and pressed her blue-painted lips into a thin line as she glanced at the nearby guards. Victor wondered what was running through her mind. How ruthless could she be? Would she banish these soldiers because they'd witnessed him interrupting her? He didn't believe she was a tyrant, but it was kind of fun to test her. If he wanted to gauge her response, he was left disappointed because she just nodded and turned to stride out of the chamber, followed by three of the four guards. "Well," he muttered several seconds after the door had clicked closed, "I guess, technically, not responding is a response."

The remaining guard didn't comment. Victor looked at her, standing at attention just behind him. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Bryn, sir."

"You're the same guard who was waiting for me at my chambers this morning, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Assigned to me permanently?"

"Until you die or leave, I suppose."

Victor laughed. "I like you, Bryn."

"Thank you, Lord Champion. May I speak freely?" Her voice echoed from inside her helm—stern, husky, and confident.

"I'd be angry if you didn't."

"I don't reciprocate your feelings. I think you're awfully rude. I think Queen Kynna ought to have your tongue stabbed through with a hot poker, and I think you're probably going to die tomorrow."

"As my auntie would say, 'qué encanto!' Hah! Did that translate? I can never tell what the System's going to make sound like English—er, Rhunish?"

"You said I'm charming," Bryn replied in a tone that made the words wonderfully ironic.

"Perfecto!" Victor laughed and started for the door. "I'll need your help finding my way back to my chambers. This is a big palace."

"Take a right after the door."

Victor grinned, pleased that he'd scored a blunt-speaking, no-nonsense escort. As they walked, he slowed and gestured for her to hurry beside him. "Tell me about Obert. You ever seen him fight?"

"I have. He's a devil with that long sword of his. Most people agree he's deep into the epic tier of mastery."

"Mmhmm. And what sorts of affinities does he have? Any spells that stand out?"

"I don't know how true it is, but I've heard his strongest affinity is for momentum, but I've also heard he has a touch of the void. I don't know much about his abilities, sir, but I'll say this much: the longer you fight him, the more deadly he becomes."

"Hmm." Victor nodded, sighing as he pressed his hands into his lower back, stretching as they walked.

"You're not concerned?"

"Sure, but I figured he'd be good with that sword. I mean, it's no secret that he's dangerous. I guess, if anything, your words make me feel a little better. Now I've got the beginnings of a strategy: kill him quickly." As he spoke, his lack of sleep got to him, and Victor yawned hugely. "Sorry about that. I didn't sleep much last night."

"Nerves?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. I was reading. My mentor sent me with a huge list of topics to study."

"Your mentor?" For once, Bryn sounded respectful. "Do you mean Ranish Dar?"

"Yeah. I tried to get him to cut out some of the more boring-sounding stuff, but—"

"Boring? You have books from Ranish Dar, and he personally told you to read them? Boring?" Her voice rose stridently as she hurried to keep pace with him, so much so that a pair of housekeeping staff looked up from the cabinet they were dusting, staring after them with wide eyes.

"Easy, Bryn. You're going to get me a bad reputation around here."

Bryn scoffed. "Too late to worry about that!"

Victor smiled again, genuinely enjoying her acerbic nature. "Yeah? People are talking?"

"Do you want the truth, or do you want me to be 'easy'?"

"The truth, but don't yell about it!" Victor recognized the stairway down a long gallery of stately portraits to his right, so he turned that way.

"Well, most everyone thinks you're a madman or a criminal paying penance to the great Ranish Dar. People are getting their affairs in order and packing their

belongings. Most agree that we'll be released when Her Majesty, Queen Kynna—long shall she reign—is ousted and banished. Not many are happy with you for forcing the duel; there was some hope that another neighboring kingdom would put pressure on one or both of Gloria's enemies, thereby granting us a reprieve. That hope is dashed now that—"

"All right, all right. I get it. Listen," Victor pointed down the hallway toward the purple-black pair of doors at the end, "there's my room. I'm going to go in there and write some letters to people who don't hate me. Then I'm going to try to get a little sleep. Can you make sure I don't—"

"Oversleep?" Bryn slammed a fist against her shiny, silvery breastplate. "It'll be my pleasure, Lord Champion."

"Jesus, chica," Victor laughed, "Do you have to make it sound like an insult?"

"Win tomorrow, and then maybe I'll change my tune."

"Hah! Right on. Say it like it is! You know I like it." Victor turned to face her more squarely, then stood to attention as though he was back in the Free Marches preparing to address his troops. He slammed his fist to his chest in salute, stared into her eye slit soberly for a moment, and then smartly turned on his heel and strode to his room. He had a lot of letters to write.

Book 9: Chapter 13: Playing the Fool

Victor sat on a stone bench, one of several in the ready room of the arena at Westhome. He'd only caught glimpses of the city as they traveled from the portal hall, but he'd been rather impressed by its austere beauty. The streets were wide and cobbled with smooth stones laid so closely together that the carriage had hardly rumbled as it rolled through the city. The buildings were spaced apart from each other, and they all had matching marble facades; it was like riding through his imagined version of an ancient Greek or Roman capital. Everything was clean, gardens and parks abounded, and, most striking of all, he only saw a handful of citizens; the place was a ghost town.

Kynna had explained the lack of populace as a byproduct of every kingdom having portals to the true imperial capital on the eastern continent. This city existed as a formality, a foothold for the empire on the western continent where parades, ceremonies, and celebrations could be held for the nearby population. She'd indicated that duels between champions were one such ceremony.

Victor wondered if he'd see any representative from the Ruhnic Empire attending his duel. Surely, they were interested in such a thing. There may be nearly a hundred kingdoms in the empire, but it wasn't every day that a war was settled. "Damn," he sighed, squeezing his spear in his hands. He was nervous and desperately wanted to talk to someone he could trust.

He'd been true to his word the night before, crafting letters to most of his loved ones. He didn't want people to worry, however, so he hadn't exactly confided in them. What he wanted was to talk to Valla. He wanted to hold her and have her stroke his hair and tell him he would be fine, that he hadn't overdone his

playacting, and that he'd be able to beat this champion without showing all his cards. She wasn't there, though, and he had to accept that. He'd been trying. He'd written to her half a dozen times in his journal; he just didn't have the guts to put any of those words into the Farscribe book they shared. "If I win," he promised no one in particular.

He looked at the fancy bronze clock ticking away on the wall near the portcullis that would let him into the arena. "Twenty minutes." Victor stood and began to rehearse his battle plan. He thrust with his spear, parried an invisible sword, dodged, and even rolled on the hard marble floor, trying to build up a sweat. When he looked at the clock and saw it said five minutes, he stood before the gilded iron bars and went through some calisthenics, keeping his heart rate up as he waited.

He did that for several minutes before a crystal mounted near the clock glowed orange, and a man's voice resonated from it, "Champion of Gloria?"

Victor stopped moving. "Yes?"

"Apologies, but the Grand Judicator has requested a late start. Please remain ready; the duel will begin in half an hour."

Victor sighed heavily and turned back to his bench. "Okay."

"Thank you. Do you require anything?"

He waved a hand in the air dismissively. "No." The crystal stopped glowing as he sat, and he was once again alone. He scanned the room, ensuring no other crystals were mounted on the walls, and then he summoned Arona's phylactery bone from his storage ring. As soon as it was in his hand, her ghostly, ethereal form began to coalesce in the air, raising goosebumps on his arms as the temperature near him plummeted.

"Victor! We're no longer on Sojourn!"

"Yep!" He smiled and shifted his spear so it leaned on his shoulder. "We're on Ruhn. I haven't got any news for you, but I have a few minutes to kill and thought maybe you could stand a little company."

"I'm happy to be out of that bone for a while!" She turned in a small circle, observing the room, her gaze lingering on the portcullis. "I'd ask if you were imprisoned, but you're armed."

"It's a ready room. My first duel is coming up."

He might have thought she paled at the words if her face wasn't already ghostly and near-translucent. Her eyes widened, though, and she drifted closer. "Are you worried?"

"Honestly? Maybe a little. If I'm going to pull off Dar's strategy, I have to hold back most of my abilities, and this pendejo

seems pretty tough."

“Strategy?”

“I have to come off as kind of a dipshit for a while, I guess.” Victor shrugged. “It’ll make it easier for the queen to get people to agree to duels and then to get the terms she wants out of them. Dar wants her to have ‘momentum’ before people realize I’ve been sleeping on my skills.”

Arona frowned. “What do you mean ‘sleeping on’—” Her lips curled into a smile as understanding lit up her eyes. “You mean downplaying.”

“Right. And this pinché asshole seems like he’s going to be a real bastard. Rumor has it that his main affinity is momentum. I was told that he gets stronger the longer he fights, so it seems like my strategy of bleeding him out, bit by bit, might be problematic.”

“Well, you know I’m not a martial expert, but I’ve seen many physical contests. Might I suggest something?”

“It’s why I summoned you, chica. I’ve got ideas, but, at this point, I’m kind of just planning to go with the flow and see how things shake out.”

Arona nodded. “Well, if you’ve already been playing the fool, why not lean into it? Struggle. Barely escape his deadly blows but let some others through. Fumble your attacks; fail to show any rhythm or grace. Let him build his confidence and goad him into trying to humiliate you. When he thinks he’s won, when he’s so cocksure that he lets his guard down, destroy him.”

Victor chuckled. “Just let him carve me up for a while, huh? Easy for you to say! You haven’t seen his damn sword.”

Arona nodded. “True. I doubt I could perform such a strategy, even if I were inclined to fight with my hands.”

“Yeah, well...I’m sure there are some things you can do that I wouldn’t even think of trying.”

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She smiled, drifting toward the gate and then back. “I’d like to see what this world looks like. Is it large?”

“Yeah, I can show you a map sometime. There’s a detailed one in Kynna’s palace. There are four continents. Something about the way it orbits the sun makes the southern continent a harsh desert, and the northern one is mostly ice. The two in the middle are broken up into almost a hundred kingdoms.”

“Are there mountains? Forests?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a big damn world. Bigger than Fanwath, from what I can gather. When I get done here and get back to the palace, I’ll show you the vista from my balcony. It’s pretty great.”

“I’d like that.” She drifted over to the bench and sat beside him, though she didn’t actually touch the surface. “I don’t suppose you’ve had time to look into my...situation?”

“No. Believe it or not, I’ve only been here two days. Things are moving kind of fast, but I’m not surprised; the queen’s people are suffering, and she’s trying to get this blockade situation resolved.”

“Yes, understandable.”

“I’ll ask around, though. Assuming I pull this fight off, I think people around the palace will be a little friendlier to me. I mean, some are already kind of...strange; it’s weird as hell, but I think they kind of worship Dar. Some of them, I mean—plenty others think of him as kind of an asshole.”

“And your lady? Valla? Is she getting along well?”

The question felt so far out of left field that Victor felt his heart lurch into his throat—like he’d been caught doing something wrong. “Um, huh? No, Valla’s not here. Didn’t I tell you that? I came alone.” When Arona raised an eyebrow, he clicked his tongue and added, “Almost alone.”

“Well, you must be missing her.”

Victor didn’t have to pretend when he replied, “Yeah, actually, I miss her a lot.” When he’d summoned Arona, the last thing he’d wanted to do was talk about Valla, so he cleared his throat and stood up. “Anyway, I should get ready—fight starts soon. Thanks for your advice.”

“Good luck, Victor. I know you’ll win.” Her voice, strangely hollow and slightly delayed from the movement of her lips, echoed oddly in the room as she broke up into mist and streamed back into the bone. Victor put it in his storage ring and then, as before, stood before the gate, trying to keep warm and limber.

It wasn’t long before the crystal lit up again, and the same voice said, “Champion of Gloria, please proceed into the central arena. Stay within the black section of sand. If you cross to the red before the Grand Judicator gives his approval to the fight, then you will forfeit, and your nation will lose the duel. Do you understand?”

Victor gripped his spear and nodded. “Yes.” At the sound of his voice, the portcullis slid noiselessly upward, and Victor stepped into the well-lit, very clean passage. After just a dozen steps or so, he noticed black sand under his feet, and another dozen steps brought him to the arena. His breath caught in his chest when he saw what awaited him.

The city’s empty streets hadn’t prepared him for the size of the place—it was like a college football stadium back on Earth, only crafted of white marble and gleaming metal. The arena floor was round

and had to be seventy-five yards in diameter. One half—Victor's—was covered in black sand, the other half with red. The walls around the perimeter were probably fifty feet high, and rather than plain marble, they were reinforced with straps of gleaming metal. Above those walls rose maybe a hundred rows of stadium seats, and they were filled with people.

The rumble of the crowd felt distant, like subdued thunder in the background, but when he stepped onto the sand, the noise grew to a steady roar as he realized most of the people in his half of the arena were cheering, and most of the people on the other half were booing. So many people being so vociferous was a sound he'd never experienced. He'd come close, sure, in the Coloss arena, but this place was ten times the size! He figured there were fifty thousand people or more up there, and as the noise got to him, he felt himself swelling. Victor straightened his shoulders, lifted his heavy spear over his head, and walked back and forth on the black sand.

He saw, on the top edge of the wall, at the very center of the arena, two boxes, one on his left and one on his right. They were like miniature stages with a railing, and Victor recognized the two monarchs and their retinues. Queen Kynna sat on his left, and King Vennar on the right. Victor moved toward the center, wondering where his opponent was.

He'd just formed the question in his mind when he saw him striding out of a gate on the red side of the arena. He looked just as Victor had seen him at the meeting between monarchs—clad in his shiny breastplate, eagle helm, bracers, and vambraces. The only difference was that his enormous longsword was naked, held in both hands before him.

Obert's sword flickered with pale, white flames as he held it in the air, and the blade gleamed like liquid silver as it shifted in the light of the sun. It was a beautiful weapon. However, Victor had tested his spear against the edges of many powerful weapons, and he felt confident it would hold up against Obert's. If Dovalion Boarheart couldn't chip the dense wood, surely Obert couldn't cleave through it.

Obert played up the crowd, raising his sword high and turning to glare into the stands. If Victor had thought they were loud before, he learned his mistake. The ground shook, and the sand danced like it was layered atop a snare drum.

Victor wanted to summon his banner and go berserk. He wanted to summon Lifedrinker and wave her massive axe head through the air with great whooshing cleaves. He didn't, though; it was still time to 'play the fool,' as Arona had said. He waved up at Queen Kynna, Chamberlain Thorn, a little boy he'd yet to meet, two other nobles he recognized but didn't know the names of, and the guards arrayed around them. He thought he recognized Bryn among them; she had a certain judgmental posture that was hard to mistake despite the visored helmet.

"Citizens!" a voice boomed out, and Victor looked up to see a disc of perfectly clear glass or crystal floating in the air above. A man rode the disc like a surfer on a board as it swooped around the arena. He was tall, with flowing silvery hair and a robe that shimmered like spun silver as it fluttered in the breeze behind

him. "I am Grand Judicator Lohanse, and I am here to ensure all rules of law are abided by, that the agreed-upon terms are upheld, and that no outside interference mars the sanctity of this most venerated ritual of succession. Do any dare challenge my authority in this place?"

A hush fell over the arena, and Victor lowered his arm as he recognized the man for what he was—a veil walker. He'd assumed the "Grand Judicator" would be a representative from the empire, but he'd apparently underestimated the level of participation the veil walkers of Ruhn took in the political affairs of the empire. He supposed it made sense; there were a lot of rules and ceremonies these people abided by, more so than seemed likely for people of great power. The only thing he'd ever known to control men and women like the kings and queens of the Ruhn Empire was fear. He chuckled softly to himself. "Always a bigger fish."

"I have read the terms of this duel of succession. Queen Kynna of Gloria, do you agree to abide by them?"

"I do!" Victor was surprised by how Kynna's voice rang out. Was the veil walker amplifying it? Was she? He shrugged. For all he knew, it was just a function of the box seats.

"King Vennar of Frostmarch, do you agree?"

"I do!" the dark, stony man boomed.

"Champions! You will not be permitted to access storage devices or use potions, tinctures, salves, or other consumable aids during this duel. Are you each equipped to your satisfaction?" He swooped down close to Obert. "Champion of Frostmarch?"

"I am ready!" Obert howled, hefting his massive sword.

The Judicator circled him once, examining him closely with his bright, pale eyes, and then he swooped over to Victor. "Champion of Gloria?"

"Um, one moment, sir." Victor held up a finger and shrugged sheepishly as he looked up at Queen Kynna's box. "Bryn!"

One of the soldiers jerked her head down toward him, and despite the distance and the narrow gap in her helmet, Victor imagined he could see the mortification in her gaze. She turned to Queen Kynna. When the queen nodded, shielding her eyes, perhaps embarrassed, Bryn leaned over the railing and called down, "Yes?"

"Can I borrow your, um, bracer? The left one." Again, Bryn looked to the queen, and again, Kynna nodded; this time, she shrank down in her seat as the crowd began to murmur.

"What's the meaning of this?" the Judicator boomed, swooping toward Victor. He was a very tall, very imposing man. His skin glowed with inner light, and his hair

flowed in a mystical breeze that only it could feel. Victor felt himself being weighed and dismissed behind that severe gaze.

Victor set his spear down, leaning it against his shoulder, and slapped his wrist with his open palm. "I saw that guy's sword and figured I should have something to block with."

The Judicator looked from Victor to Bryn and then back again, narrowing his eyes. In a voice pitched so that Victor was fairly certain only he could hear, the man growled, "Don't make a mockery of this ritual, titan."

Victor replied in a normal voice, figuring the veil walker would mask it if he didn't want others to hear. "The only person I'll be mocking is myself, sir." He glanced at Obert and added, "And I guess that cocky pendejo."

"I recognize your game. It's within the bounds." He nodded solemnly, then drifted up to the box seats where Bryn still stood, staring uncertainly, gripping her silver bracer. The Judicator took it from her and then tossed it to Victor.

Victor grinned and held it up. "Thank you, Bryn!" While the crowd began to murmur, laugh, and even applaud, he snapped the bracer around his wrist. It wouldn't resize, thanks to likely being bonded to Bryn, but he shoved it on, bending the metal so it clung to his forearm like an oversized bracelet, not the heavy length of armor it was intended to be. He nodded to the Judicator. "Ready, sir!"

Victor gripped his spear, stepped to the middle of the arena, facing Obert, and readied himself. He lowered his center of gravity, renewed Sovereign Will to boost his agility and vitality, and then cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. It was a potent spell, but not a flashy one. Only Obert would experience its effects and only second-hand as it boosted Victor. Even if he survived, he wouldn't be able to explain it. The world became a little brighter, Victor felt lighter on his feet, and Obert didn't seem so intimidating—he was just a man—a man with a deadly sword, an unknown number of magical abilities, and a hunger for Victor's blood, but still, just a man.

The Judicator swooped high into the sky, and his voice reverberated through the enormous arena: "Fight!"

Book 9: Chapter 14: First Duel

Obert moved through the sand like an adder. He kicked up sand with each step, weaving and feinting, but Victor just stood still, aiming the point of his enormous spear at the man, bracing himself. In a fight between equals, minus the interference of Energy abilities, Victor didn't doubt that a competent fighter with a spear could kill a master swordsman. It was simply a matter of reach. The problem was that this wasn't a match between equals, and energy was a factor. Obert didn't try to dart past Victor's spearpoint; he surged with hot, tingly Energy and then exploded with speed.

He ripped through the sand, throwing it up in a red wake, and darted to Victor's flank. Victor was no slouch, and he spun, tracking the man's movement, but Obert didn't try to close further; he hacked

his sword through the air, and, again, hot Energy flared, and a blade of cutting, brilliant light tore away from his sword and straight at Victor.

Victor figured he could dodge it; it wasn't that fast. He also figured he could knock it aside with his heavy, sturdy spear. He didn't, however. He stepped to the left, just enough to avoid most of the blade, then he feigned a stumble and cried out as the hot Energy sliced into his ribs and over his back, biting deeply into the thick muscles beneath his shirt.

Hot blood sheeted down his side and back, and he made a show of rolling over his shoulder and wincing as he scurried to avoid a follow-up cleave. He'd taken a risk with his armor; he wasn't wearing his disguised clothing for the battle. He'd put on a simple yellow shirt with short sleeves and a pair of soft, pale gray trousers. He fully intended for them to be red with blood before long.

The cut on his back was a good start; it was a real gusher and took several seconds to close despite his enormous vitality and inherent regeneration. Obert wore a grin as he watched the blood soak the fabric, circling him. Victor grinned back, but he did it in a lopsided, idiotic manner.

"What a fool." Obert closed with him again, driving forward with big sweeping cuts that batted aside his spear. Victor could have pulled the spear back, avoided the cuts, and then thrust into the man, breaking up his momentum, but he couldn't appear too competent. Instead, he widened his eyes and took far too long correcting his spear's guard as Obert fought his way in and, quick as a wink, thrust his blade into Victor's chest, just beneath his right shoulder.

Victor saw the blow coming and stepped back just enough so the sword didn't impale him more than a couple of inches. Still, he cried out and scurried away, whipping his spear around to prevent Obert from following up. A new sheet of blood ran down the front of his shirt. "Come on, pendejo," Victor hissed. "You can't hit harder than that?"

He wasn't sure if he'd wanted Obert to hear him, but the man did, and fury ignited in the golden eyes within that eagle-mask helm. Obert went wild, surging with Energy, blurring as his momentum began to mount, and he pounded great flaming hacks into Victor's spear as he kept him at bay, but just barely.

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"This is the end, isn't it?" Kynna hissed. She looked away from her beleaguered champion and locked eyes with Thorn. "Get Tomorran away from here. I don't want him to—"

"I'll not leave, mother!" Tom jumped up, dodging her attempt to snatch his wrist. "If this is the end of our house, I'll see it with my own eyes!"

Kynna stared at him for a moment, listening as the crowd gasped, cheered, and jeered as the sounds of weapons colliding rang through the arena, accompanied by Obert's fierce grunts and Victor's belabored breathing. Finally, she nodded.

“Very well. You should bear witness. You’ll be a man soon enough.” She looked back to the arena floor and her blood-drenched champion. Had he delivered a single injury to Obert? “Dead Gods! How much blood can he have? If the sand weren’t red and black, we’d see the path of his progress.”

No one responded to her words. The mood in the box was grim, and why shouldn’t it be? Most of the staff—the guards, the soldiers, the bureaucrats—would be dismissed. She and her kin would be shipped off-world. Would they get a say in their destination? She’d failed to look into that detail. Thorn would know— A hoarse scream from below jerked her thoughts back to the debacle of Victor’s battle, and she saw him rolling away, cradling his right arm. “What happened?”

“Obert near took his arm off, Your Majesty,” Bryn, the one who’d given her “champion” a bracer, replied.

“It’s over then. He could barely stand against him with two good arms.”

Thorn nervously clenched his hands together. “Don’t lose hope, My Queen.” Even he sounded unconvinced. Kynna watched Victor, saw the pain and fear in his eyes as he crouched, his spear loosely gripped in his right hand, while his left hand seemed to be holding his gushing right arm together. Obert stalked toward him, a hungry smile on his face.

Kynna groaned. “He’s going to finish him. Watch, then, Tom. Watch and see our nation crumble.” Kynna followed her own advice, sending Energy into the pattern for Clear Sight and filling her vision with a view of Victor as though she stood but a stride away. His chest heaved for breath, his face was drenched with bloody sweat, and his clothes—his clothes were shreds of crimson-stained cloth. She looked to where blood gushed between the fingers of his right hand as he held his ruined arm together. Kynna stared and frowned. Something wasn’t right.

Nothing gushed between those fingers, and she was sure she could see the biceps beneath his shredded shirt flexing as his hand adjusted itself on the spear. Even so, he still crouched there, his footing all wrong for a man in a deadly battle. He looked defeated, but—

Thorn gasped as Obert surged with Energy and streaked over the sand. His passage was difficult to track as he wove left and right, leaping and redirecting himself. He flanked Victor, streaked up, into the air, and then down, like a fisher eagle going for a carp in the Cray River. In Kynna’s heart, she knew it was over. Obert was about to impale Victor, about to cleave his mighty sword, Brightfire, through his body, spilling his insides out onto the sand—clang! The sound rang out, and blood fountained into the air.

Kynna’s eyes struggled to make sense of the scene. She stared at Victor, trying to see where Obert’s sword had cut him, but the image didn’t match what she knew she should see. Victor stood tall. His spear was thrust into the air, and dangling from the blade was Obert’s lifeless body—his head fully impaled on the spearpoint. Victor had driven the spear under his chin and out through the top of his

skull! Brightfire lay in the sand, her flames flickering faintly, and Victor slowly turned in a circle, displaying Obert's corpse to the suddenly silent crowd like a grisly banner.

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"Dead Gods!" Thorn cried, leaping to his feet. "He did it!"

Kynna couldn't believe what she was seeing. She'd utterly missed it. How had that dolt moved so quickly? How had he moved so perfectly? What was the clang she'd heard? Staring at Victor, looking to where his muscles bunched on his shoulders as he held Obert's tall corpse in the air on that heavy, ugly spear, she saw what she'd missed: Bryn's bracer was bent nearly in half, barely hanging onto Victor's wrist. He'd blocked the killing blow and driven the spear up—a perfect kill with Obert helpless in the air, descending to put his hapless foe out of his misery. "Maybe not so hapless," she whispered, earning herself several glances from the celebrating members of her delegation.

Celebrating! Kynna felt her lips spread in a smile as she listened to the crowd's roar. Everyone liked a good upset. Everyone wanted to see an underdog come up from behind and take the win. Victor's flawless blow was a reminder that, no matter how powerful and proud you were, this life was not guaranteed. Anyone could die in an instant. Kynna stood and moved to stand beside Tomorran, resting her hand on his shoulder. He looked up with wide, bright blue eyes—he'd failed to inherit the fire eyes of his Igniant ancestry.

"He did it! Our house won't fall today!" His voice was bright with excitement, and Kynna nodded, smiling as she stroked his hair. She turned her gaze to the other side of the arena where King Vennar stood. He was pacing and fuming; she could see his mouth moving as he jerked his hands this way and that. No doubt, he was struggling to believe what just happened. Soon enough, he could struggle in another world.

"What world?" she asked, glancing at Thorn.

"Hmm? 'What world,' My Queen?"

"Where will they send Vennar and his kin?"

"It's at the discretion of the Grand Judicator. Speaking of whom..." Thorn pointed as the Judicator's sky sled drifted down.

His voice boomed out. "Champion of Gloria. Release the corpse of your tormentor."

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Victor heard the judicator's words and realized he might be going a little too far. He lowered his fourteen-foot spear and, with it, Obert's dangling corpse, letting it fall into the sand. The Judicator's floating disc descended to the arena floor, and he stared hard at Obert's body for several seconds.

He then turned to Victor. “I pronounce the Queendom of Gloria victorious!” Everyone had grown quiet when the judicator first spoke to Victor, but they erupted in cheers again.

His pronouncement wasn’t necessary; Obert’s corpse began to glow as thick orbs of rainbow-hued Energy coalesced around it. They rapidly multiplied, flowed together, and streamed into Victor as the crowd roared. He held his arms wide, grinning, soaking in the euphoria of the thick rush. His lingering wounds closed, his Core flooded with Energy, and a sense of well-being entered his mind as he tingled from his head to his spine to the heels of his feet. He could hear the Judicator speaking but couldn’t make out the words.

As soon as it started, it was over, and Victor fell to his feet, dazed as System messages filled his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 70 Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath and gained 12 strength, 17 vitality, and 12 will.*****

*****Level 70 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Quinametzin Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 80. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.*****

He pumped his fist in the air, excited by his message, and the crowd reacted, roaring in response. Victor’s glory-attuned Core flared, and he wanted to let it loose. Again, he yearned to summon his banner and pump his fists in the air, but he simply turned to Queen Kynna’s box seats and bowed. “Champion.” The judicator stepped into his line of sight. “You may claim a prize from your foe. The rest of his belongings will go to his heirs.”

Victor looked long and hard at the sword, flickering in the sand, but ultimately decided not to take it. It wasn’t a matter of impulse; he thought hard about it. When he considered holding that sword, though, he imagined someone who killed him holding Lifedrinker. She wouldn’t like it. More than that, Victor wasn’t skilled with the sword; he could learn, true, and it was a fine weapon, but he didn’t need it. Instead, he stomped over to Obert’s corpse, grasped his thick, shiny breastplate, and pulled until the strap broke and he could hold it out of the way. Then, Victor summoned a sharp blade, drove it into Obert’s corpse, and—

A hand like a metal vise gripped his wrist. “What are you doing?” the judicator asked.

“I’m claiming his heart.”

“You’d take that over the conscious weapon in the sand, there?”

Victor nodded. “Wouldn’t his heir be served better by that sword than this lump of flesh?”

“Very well.” The judicator let go of his wrist, and Victor plunged his hand into the still-hot chest cavity, wrapping his thick, strong fingers around the organ. He pulled it out with several wet, visceral pops, and then he stood, holding it aloft. The judicator’s voice rang out above the crowd’s hysteria, “The champion of Gloria claims his opponent’s heart!”

Again, the crowd erupted, but this time, there was a mixture of sounds—some cheering, sure, but also gasps, laughter, screeches, and outraged curses. There were too many sounds for Victor to discern them all; to him, it was just a crowd roaring, and that made him smile.

“Leave the arena, Champion. I must see to the house Vennar and their removal from this world.” With that, the Judicator climbed atop his flying disc and whisked through the air to Vennar’s boxed seating section. It was vacant. Victor glanced over to Kynna’s section, and it, too, was empty. He shrugged, waved the heart through the air one more time, basking in the noise from the enormous crowd, and then stomped over to the tunnel that would lead him to his ready room.

When he stepped out of the sun and the crowd’s noise, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief and sent the heart into his storage container. He flexed his shoulders, rolled his neck, and looked at his arm. “That sun of a gun almost cut you off!” It had been a close thing; Victor had misjudged a glancing blow and caught almost the full brunt of Obert’s magical sword strike. If not for his hard-as-rocks titan bones—

“Victor!”

He looked up to see Kynna and his usual escort, Bryn, standing in the ready room. “Oh, hello, My Queen.” He bowed low, his shredded shirt hanging in bloody tatters, dripping on the ground.

“Stand, Champion.” When Victor complied, she folded her arms over her chest. She was dressed in a lovely yellow gown that really made the deep blue crystals of her crown pop with color. “Tell me now, was it luck? Did the grace of a sleeping god touch you? How did you win when all was so dire?”

“Oh, hmmm.” Victor frowned and rubbed his chin. “I guess it was mostly luck—”

“Hah!” Bryn cried, striding forward to yank her bent bracer from his arm. “I suppose you ‘accidentally’ blocked his killing blow with my bracer?” She put it on her arm, and the metal smoothly reformed to its original shape.

“Guard Bryn!” Kynna’s voice was sharp, and Bryn whirled to face the queen, falling into a bow that nearly had her on the floor. “I’m so sorry, My Queen! He frustrates me so—”

“Be still.” The queen stepped past her to confront Victor. “I’ll not have you play games with my family, Victor—my house. Was it a lucky accident or not? If you say yes, I’ll remove you from your position and put in the champion I earned today—my pick from Vennar’s cadre.”

Victor sighed and shook his head. He looked from the queen to Bryn, still on her knees. “Do I need to worry about my words leaving this room?”

The queen glared down at Bryn and flicked her fingers to the door. “Leave us.” Bryn scrambled to her feet and hurried out, joining a small group of people waiting in the hall. When the door clicked shut, Victor said, in a low voice, “No accident. I wasn’t going to lose, but did you want me to

trounce that guy? Do you want the negotiation with Xan to go well? If I didn't look like a lucky idiot, King Groff wouldn't negotiate so easily—"

"You..." Her eyebrows rose, and she regarded his shredded, bloody clothing. "You went through that torture for...for easier negotiations?"

Victor lifted his sleeve and rubbed the dried blood covering his shoulder and biceps. "I heal fast. See?"

"But it must hurt..." She stepped back and ran her eyes up and down his figure.

"I mean, in the middle of a fight, all pumped up with adrenaline—it's not that bad."

"What...how..." She clenched her fists and took another step back. "Who are you, Victor? What are you hiding? Obert was tier-nine. Don't tell me you're so high." She tapped her temple behind her right eye. "I can see your Core's Energy levels."

"My Queen," Victor sighed, stepping toward the door. "There are many factors to a person's strength. You must know that. It's not all about level." He turned to her and grinned. "Besides, I don't think I'm that far below some of these guys." In his mind, he chuckled at the idea that he had a heart to eat and a Class refinement to go through. "Now, Your Majesty, if you wouldn't mind, I could use a bath, some clean clothes, and a quiet place to reflect on the strange customs in this world."

Kynna's crown glittered and twinkled in the light as she shook her head, pressing her dark, blue-stained lips together. "Our customs are strange? I feel I should ask what you intend to do with that man's heart, but...I don't want to know. Come, then, Champion. Let us return to Gloria; we have much to celebrate. The entire city will feast tonight."

Book 9: Chapter 15: All is Well

Victor sat alone in his quarters at Queen Kynna's palace. He was tired—tired from the stress leading up to his duel with Obert, tired from the fight, and tired from the aftermath. When he'd gotten back to the palace, it had felt like a blanket of dread had been lifted off the city, and everyone had been given leave to live and celebrate—something they'd been denied for, apparently, years. Of course, Victor had been expected to attend the Queen's celebratory banquet. He'd had to stand at the high table and tell a story to entertain the guests—another reason for his current mental exhaustion.

The dinner had gone fine, of course. He hadn't had any trouble coming up with a story to tell; he had a thousand fights he could describe, but feeling alone among all those strangers, he'd chosen a story about the Great Bone Mine and how he'd first seen Lam fly, descending among a horde of mad beetles to save him and the other delvers. The feat itself wasn't impressive to the nobles gathered around Kynna's table, but the way Victor described his awe and how the event became the key to unlocking his inspiration-attuned Energy had kept their rapt attention.

The dinner had taken hours and hours, and, as far as Victor knew, the feast was still ongoing; Kynna had proclaimed a week-long national holiday. He'd finally begged off, claiming exhaustion, and though his many new fans among the nobility had protested, Kynna excused him, and now he sat alone. His chair was comfortable; the little parlor in his suite was luxurious with fine, high-grade leather furniture that fit his frame like a glove. His little bar was stocked with potent liquors, and his view was incredible.

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, he could see over the city's rooftops below and beyond to the rolling green countryside. Great forests covered much of Gloria, and to Victor sitting there, the expanse of tree-covered hills looked almost primeval, so unmarred was their wild majesty. He could see the road leading away from the city, but in just a few miles, it was swallowed by the forests. From there, he saw nothing but green all the way to the distant, towering purple mountain ranges. For someone who grew up in Arizona, Victor found himself easily enthralled by a view like that.

Still, his mind wandered, and he found himself wishing he had someone to talk to, someone familiar. He was half tempted to summon Arona from her phylactery again, but she wasn't the voice he wanted. He knew Bryn was standing guard outside his door, and the thought of making her take a drink with him and suffer through some teasing was an amusing proposition that he toyed with for a while but ultimately set aside. It was bad enough that the poor woman had to stand guard and watch over him; he shouldn't torment her to boot.

No, he had to admit, the truth was, he missed his friends, and, most of all, he missed Valla. When he'd sat down with a glass of something called "Turnback Rye," he'd intended to go through his Class refinement, but his mind kept returning to the simple promise he'd made before the duel: if he won, he'd write to Valla. So, with a troubled heart and a not-insignificant buzz, he took out his Farscribe book and turned to the latest message she'd sent him:

Victor,

I wish you'd write to me, but I know you need time. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. In any case, I have something I wanted to share with you. I'm leaving for a new world tomorrow—an ocean world populated by aquatic people who live on islands and swim and breathe freely under the water. It's called Crydagh, and there are rumored to be creatures living in those waters that rival dragons! Fantastic beasts called Booraghi roam the oceans, unafraid of anything—even your mentor, Ranish Dar, would think twice about crossing one of them. If treated with respect, they're peaceful, though, and will sometimes speak to lesser beings who visit them. I'm going to seek one out; rumors have it that they'll grant boons to visitors they take a fancy to. Even if they refuse to speak to me, which I'm told happens often, I believe the trip will be worthwhile. Wouldn't seeing such a creature be a reward in itself?

Despite my excitement, I'm sorry to leave Fanwath. Uvu found his way home shortly after you left, and I've been spending time with him daily. He's gotten a bit feral, though; I think he has a mate out in the wild, so he'll likely be fine when I leave again. Of course, I'll miss Rellia, but she's so busy governing that I doubt she'll remember I'm gone most of the time.

Please write soon,

Love,

Valla

Victor had received the message nearly a week ago, and, reading it again, he felt a surge of guilt for putting a response off. He knew he'd feel worse if he went back and read through the other four messages she'd sent him. With a resigned sigh, he took up a pen, and, mustering courage on par with what it took him to face the lord of the dungeon near Great Bone Mine, he began to write:

Valla,

I'm sorry I've taken so long to write to you. It's not right, I know. You probably know from Lam or Edeya that I've left Sojourn, but—

Victor groaned and put the pen down. He didn't know how to do this. Grimacing, he returned to the note, skipping a line:

Look, I'm not going to sit here and write a bunch of bullshit about how nice the world is, or how the people here are all giants, or that we had a big feast after I won my first duel. None of that really matters for shit. The truth is that I'm still raw as hell on the inside. I think about you all the time. Before my duel, I wanted to talk to you. When I saw my quarters, I thought about how much you'd like how everything was in shades of blue and purple—the sheets, the wallpaper, the vases, even the upholstery and carpet. When I was training back on Sojourn, I couldn't sleep in the bed 'cause I kept picturing you in it. I couldn't enjoy the lake 'cause I kept seeing you soaring over it.

I don't know if I'll ever get over you and the missing piece of my heart that you took with you, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try to remember that no matter what, I love you, and I don't want you to be gone from my life. So, yeah, I'll try to be better about writing, but I can't do it every day, every week, or even every month. I have to give myself room to breathe, to experience life without you, 'cause that's what you wanted, and it's too hard to let you go if I'm constantly reminding myself about how much I miss you.

It sounds like an amazing place you're going to, and I hope you really enjoy it. I hope you'll write to me about it after you're done, but let's wait until then, all right? In the meantime, I'll try to live my life and experience something worth sharing, too.

-Victor

Victor closed the book with a heavy sigh and a feeling of finality that he wasn't sure he liked. "Well, it's done." He could go back in and cross out the words, but there wasn't any guarantee Valla hadn't already read them. Even if he ripped the page out, it would still be there in her book. "Doesn't matter, anyway. I meant it all." He tucked the book back into storage, sat back in his chair, and downed his glass of, if he were honest, extremely potent whiskey.

He wanted to keep talking to himself, but he felt strange doing so without his usual crutch, so he reached into his high-quality storage ring and summoned Lifedrinker, allowing her massive, incredibly heavy axe-head to rest on the carpet before him while tilting the handle so he could grasp it as he reclined. "Hey, chica."

Is it time, at last? Will you carry me into battle again?

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

“Sorry, not yet.” Victor chuckled at how his tongue felt thick in his mouth. Whatever else you said about Ruhn, they made good booze. “I still have to fight with that pinché spear for a while. It’s a tough weapon, but nothing like you. I’m saving you for when the fights get hard.”

I yearn to feel your hands as I smash bones, spill blood, and drink the Energy of your foes.

Victor arched an eyebrow as he looked down at the enormous axe. Her dark blade was like glass with its depthless, black, mirrored sheen, but as he stared, he saw the thousands of tiny motes of light deep in those unknown depths, almost like he was looking through a window into space. It was mesmerizing, and he nearly forgot what he was going to say. As her handle vibrated with impatience in his hand, he startled out of his reverie, chuckling and reaching for the bottle of whiskey to refill his glass. “I miss fighting with you too. It’ll be soon, though. Things are going to keep getting crazier and crazier around here.”

She was quiet after that, and Victor enjoyed the simple comfort of her presence for a while. He sipped his whiskey, watched the view outside, and after a while, he opened his status sheet and selected the Class refinement option, looking over his new options:

*****Class refinement option 1: Warlord - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Prior Class levels in Battlemaster, Martial Sage, or Combat Savant. 2. Sufficiently advanced bloodline. 3. Sufficiently advanced weapon skills. 4. Sufficiently advanced attributes. 5. A sufficiently advanced Core with appropriate affinities. 6. A history of leading followers into large-scale conflicts and achieving victory. Class attributes: Vitality, Intelligence.*****

*****Class refinement option 2: Colossal Spirit Champion – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Titan, giantkin, leviathan, behemoth, or colossus bloodline. 2. A significant portion of your total Energy earned from solo combat. 3. An affinity for glory, valor, justice, or honor. 4. Sufficiently advanced will attribute. 5. Sufficiently advanced Spirit Core. Through your many victories against difficult odds, you’ve gained the favor of your ancestors, and they see you as a living champion of their ideals. You embody titanic power, standing for glory, justice, and honor. Through your Spirit Core, your ancestors will unleash their fury on those who defy the might of their bloodline. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Intelligence.*****

*****Class refinement option 3: Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Epic-tier bloodline with a storied history of warriors or berserkers. 2. Rage, fury, or related affinity. 3. A significant portion of your total Energy earned from combat with heavy melee weapons. 4. Berserk or berserk-like ability. 5. Sufficiently advanced strength and vitality attributes. So long as you hold this Class, your strength, speed, and resilience will be fueled by combat. Every wound you take, and every blow you strike will drive your battle lust to new heights. The enhancements of this “battle momentum” will stack with traditional berserk-type abilities, but so will the madness. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Agility, Dexterity.*****

*****Class refinement option 4: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.*****

“Damn, chica, three legendary options.” Lifedrinker pulsed under his hand, and Victor took that to mean she was listening. He read the options aloud, and though he could feel Lifedrinker’s presence and attention, she didn’t speak. It didn’t bother him; she was an axe of few words, and her company was enough for him.

Part of Victor wanted to seek out advice. He wanted to write to Dar or Kethelket. He wanted to break out the ancestor shard and speak to Khul Bach. Still, another part of him rebelled at the idea. He was alone on a massive world, about to embark on a series of brutal single combats. He’d be tested physically and mentally as he struggled to navigate the murky waters of negotiations, subtle deceit, and overt hostility. Wasn’t it time he began making decisions for himself? He chuckled, shaking his head. No one ever made him choose a Class, but he’d certainly always felt like he had to hear other peoples’ opinions.

So, determined to figure out the best choice on his own, he thought about each option, beginning with number four—should he keep his current Class? It was something he’d never done before. He didn’t even know what would happen; would he gain further Class abilities if he kept it beyond the requisite ten levels? The question reminded him of the veritable library he had in his storage ring, so Victor perused his books, looking for a title that might give him the answer.

He found several promising candidates, spent another hour skimming through the pages, and came up with a resounding “maybe.” Sometimes, when kept beyond the first ten levels, a Class would grant more Class-specific abilities, but sometimes, it wouldn’t. That same book took Victor down a rabbit hole, reading about how difficult it was to predict what unfamiliar Classes would grant in terms of skills, spells, passive abilities, and even titles.

There were some well-documented Classes, like the basic “fighter.” He read the account of a man named Goh, who took sixty levels as a fighter, always foregoing a Class change. He gained a few skills in the first ten levels but didn’t begin seeing new ones until he’d reached his forty-second level as a fighter when the System granted him something called “martial mastery,” which boosted every single one of his weapon abilities by an entire tier. As he closed the book, Victor told Lifedrinker about what he’d read. “So, that would be cool, but I’m not sure I want to stick with the same Class for that long. I couldn’t, really—I have to start building my own at level one hundred.”

Class this, and Class that—all you need is me.

Victor snorted, choking on a sip of whiskey. She had a point. After he’d cleared his airway, he looked back to the Class refinement screen. It seemed the System wasn’t done offering him Warlord. It was tempting, but considering his current situation, he didn’t feel it was the best option; he wouldn’t be fighting many—or any—large-scale conflicts. If he was reading them correctly, the other two, newer options, were both geared toward the kind of fighting he’d be doing.

“Well, my first instinct is that the Colossal Spirit Champion is the smart move here. I think the Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum is another rage-based Class, I think, and I’ve been working to keep my head during fights. Do I want a passive ability that will force me to build up to a berserk state? If I need to cast

Iron Berserk or Volcanic Fury on top of that, how insane would I get? I can't even imagine being more crazy than Volcanic Fury already makes me."

Lifedrinker remained reticent, and since no one was there to do it for him, Victor voiced the contrary opinion, "But that passive 'battle momentum' sounds damn nice when you think about a duel. When you think about the fact that I don't want to be using many abilities until I have to, wouldn't it be nice to have one that just sort of made me stronger and faster the longer I fought? What would it look like to other people? Would they think I went berserk, or would they just think I was getting pissed off?" He supposed it wouldn't matter; if they thought he was berserk, they'd have a big surprise coming when he actually did.

In the end, the fact that he was level seventy helped him make the decision. He'd learned from Arona and Arcus that levels got progressively slower and, specifically, that gaining levels in the seventh tier took a fraction of the Energy for levels in the ninth. If he was going to experiment with a dangerous-seeming Class choice, it was probably now or never. The thought of that battle momentum in a one-on-one fight was too tempting, and Victor reasoned that if he hated it, he only had to make it to level eighty to change it out.

So, perhaps a little impulsively and perhaps a little too loose of inhibition, thanks to the strong whiskey he continued to sip, he selected the option he had initially dismissed.

*****Congratulations! You have refined your class: Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum.*****

*****Congratulations! You have earned a Class Feat: Furious Battle Momentum.*****

*****Furious Battle Momentum: Every wound you take and every blow you strike will drive your battle lust to new heights. Your strength, vitality, and speed will increase with your lust for battle, as will your fury and hunger for violence. These enhancements will stack with traditional berserk-type abilities, but so will the madness. Unless altered or improved, this feat will be removed if your Class changes.*****

For the first time, Victor felt his Class change as it occurred. He felt something inside him changing, burning from his Core out through his body. It was almost painful, but he could feel the euphoria of Energy masking the pain, twisting it into an almost pleasurable experience. Looking inward to see what was happening, he saw a slender pathway running parallel to his thick, well-developed Energy pathways. Intuitively, he knew what it was; it was meant to carry his rage into his body without interfering with his other spells and abilities. It was meant to feed his "Furious Battle Momentum."

When he tried to push Energy into the new pathway, he couldn't, driving home the point that this "ability" wouldn't be something he could control. "Shit, chica. I hope I didn't just mess up."

Can you still wield me?

Victor downed the last of the “Turnback Rye” and laughed. “Hell yeah, I can.”

Then all is well.

Book 9: Chapter 16: - Help for a Friend

Victor slept until nearly noon the next day, and when he opened his eyes, blinking in the diffuse light coming through the partially closed curtains, he was surprised by the silence and the fact that nobody had felt the need to wake him. With his head propped up on his plush feather pillows, he yawned and stretched, enjoying his room's calming, purple-blue color palette. Even the gauzy curtains were tinted a soft blue, which, in turn, tinted the light coming in. He enjoyed it and found it a nice change from the reds and burgundies of his quarters at Dar's lake house.

He took his time bathing and grooming himself, dressed in his usual disguised-armor clothes, and then prepared to leave, intent on finding some breakfast. He paused near the door and, thinking it over, decided to return to his suite's little parlor, where he'd spent the night drinking and making impulsive choices about his Class. He sat in front of the little coffee table where his empty bottle of whisky and dirty glass awaited—evidence of his crimes. A blue crystal bowl also occupied the table, piled with various fruits.

Victor scooped the plums, apples, and pears out of the bowl, setting them on the table, and then he reached into his storage ring and pulled out the heart he'd taken from Obert. Thanks to the magic of his dimensional container, it was still warm in his hand, the blood tacky and damp. Victor set it in the crystal bowl and stared. His body's physiological reaction to the raw hunk of, if not human, then at least humanoid flesh, was a stark reminder of how much he'd changed. He wasn't just Victor Sandoval from Tucson anymore. He was a Quinametzin titan, and his mouth filled with saliva at the thought of chomping down on a person's raw heart.

Worse, Victor didn't feel ashamed or dirty or even bothered by the idea. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that if he presented Victor, the teenage wrestler, with this heart and told him to eat it, there was no way it would happen—not without a fight. “Well,” Victor chuckled, “I guess some shit's different.” He summoned one of his cooking knives, a very sharp, narrow-bladed one meant for deboning a piece of meat but that he used far more universally; he liked how it cut, and it was sharper than most of his proper “chef's” knives.

Fighting to contain his eager hunger at the sight of the bloody organ, Victor sliced it into bite-sized cubes. Then, one by one, he speared the hunks of flesh and chewed them down. He could feel the Energy in the meat, and it was potent, but it wasn't anything like the hearts of the great beasts he'd claimed. The wyrm and the gargantuopod, for instance, had overwhelmed him with their potency. This heart felt more like the giant spiders he'd slaughtered on Zaafor. It infused him with Energy, and he could feel his Core swelling, climbing toward the next rank. He also knew the Energy was infusing his flesh, inching him closer to level seventy-one.

Victor wouldn't deny a bit of disappointment; he'd believed the rumors that Obert had a “momentum” affinity, and he'd thought it too much a coincidence that his new Class featured a type of battle momentum—surely the fates or karma or just the System had conspired to grant him a boon. He was embarrassed to admit that he'd begun to believe that Obert's heart would infuse him

with some sort of momentum Energy and help his new feat to improve in some way. Unfortunately, when the waves of euphoria faded and he looked inward, all he was sure of was that his Core was heavier and denser, scraping the surface of the next rank.

Victor carried the bowl into his bathroom and rinsed it before returning it to the table. He felt good—well-rested, energized, and eager to see what lay next for him. Even if he tried, he couldn't be disappointed in the heart; an ordinary cultivator would have to work day after day for weeks or months to advance their Core by a single rank in the epic tier. Victor had nearly just skipped an entire rank by having a delicious snack.

So, it was with a grin on his face that he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Bryn was there, her face, as always, obscured by her helmet, but he could see her eyes, and they looked stormy. "Something the matter?" The act of speaking triggered a yawn and a stretch, and Victor almost laughed as Bryn's dark brows furrowed behind the slit in her visor.

"Why would you ask that, milord?"

"Oh," Victor shrugged, "no reason." He looked down the empty hallway, admiring how the high windows reflected on the polished marble floor. "Is anyone waiting for me?"

"Sir, I do not have your appointment book."

"Well, Bryn, while you were standing watch here, did anyone come calling?"

"No, milord."

"Has there been any talk of the next duel?"

"I believe an emissary from Xan arrived last night."

Victor smiled, chuckling at her reticence. "But no one's been looking for me?"

"No..."

"Okay, well, I'd like to have a look around the city. Can you direct me to—"

"Milord, I don't think that would be wise." After a moment's pause and perhaps in response to Victor's arched eyebrow, she added, "I apologize for interrupting, sir."

"Why wouldn't it be wise?"

"There are factions in the city who worship Ranish Dar, and there are factions who view you as the harbinger of an apocalypse. Were you to wander the streets, I fear it would be akin to pouring water on a grease fire."

"Well, we'll need to ensure people don't recognize me, then." Victor grinned as an idea came to him. "You're going to have to lose that armor."

"Sir, I'll need to report our outing to my captain, and I think—"

“Bryn, do I, technically, outrank your captain?”

“As the crown’s champion, sir, you hold the highest military office in the nation.”

“In that case, we’ll keep this outing between us. Now, can you go ahead and change into something less conspicuous?”

Bryn looked around, then nodded. “I’ll go to my quarters and return after—”

“Nah.” Victor opened his door and held it for her. “Go ahead and use my room. I’ll wait here.”

Her helmet inclined briefly, and then she stepped through. Victor pulled the door shut and looked through his storage rings for a hooded cloak. He had a few, though he rarely wore them; thanks to the constant heat produced by his Quinametzin blood and his feats, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt chilly or even the need to protect himself from the elements.

When he pulled forth a dark gray cloak with silky, rust-colored lining, he remembered when Valla had given it to him and felt a surge of melancholy that threatened to send him back to his room to curl up on the bed. He shook it off, though, and was just slinging the cloak over his shoulders, pulling the hood up, when Bryn emerged from his room. She’d changed out of her gleaming armor and wore a simple blue tunic over black leggings tucked into sturdy-looking boots. Of course, her belt sported not one but two heavy-looking swords, one a little shorter than the other.

As Victor fastened the clasp, securing his cloak, she frowned, and Victor got his first good look at her face. He liked it immediately. She looked like an athlete who spent a lot of time messing around with sharp objects. Her jaw was strong, her nose was a little flat, her lips were thin, and her brow was heavy and dark. Altogether, she looked healthy, strong, and dependable, especially with all the tiny scars on her cheeks, chin, and forehead. He almost commented on them. He nearly said, “You like to practice without your armor, I see.” But he caught himself at the last minute, realizing not everyone might be proud of their scars.

Luckily, Bryn had her own acerbic comment, saving him from second-guessing himself, “I don’t think a cloak and hood will suffice to keep folks from noticing you.”

Victor held up a finger, grinning as he cast *Alter Self*, reducing his height to just around six feet. He was positively tiny by Ruhn’s standards. “How about now?” he asked from the depths of his cowl.

“Ah, well, um,” Bryn took a step back to look him up and down more easily. “I suppose folks will think you’re a traveler, but I don’t think they’ll suspect you’re the queen’s champion. You feel reduced in more ways than simply size. Have you hidden your power?”

Victor waited until the cloak’s resizing enchantment caught up to his smaller body, and then he nodded. “It’s part of the spell. Anyway, let’s go. I’ll follow you. Maybe avoid people who will ask us questions.”

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“Um, milord,” Bryn reached up to scratch at her very short, stiff brown hair, narrowing her perpetually scowling dark eyes. “Where are we going?”

“Oh, right! I need to speak to someone knowledgeable about magical...stuff. Someone who knows a thing or two about Death Casters and phylacteries, but hopefully a lot more.”

Bryn's scowl didn't relent. If anything, it deepened. “Is there something more about you that—”

“It's just some information I need, Bryn.” Victor chuckled, shaking his head within his deep cowl as he looked up at her. “I'm not planning to turn into a lich or anything—at least, not yet.” He laughed and reached up to clap her on the shoulder. It felt like slapping a brick wall.

Bryn continued frowning for a moment, and Victor thought she was angry or was trying to think of a response without cussing, but after a minute, he realized it was just her regular expression. Just when he thought he'd need to prompt her again, she nodded slowly. “I believe I know someone who might have the knowledge you seek.” With that, she turned and began striding down the hall. Victor had to double-time it to keep up with his much shorter legs.

They didn't encounter many palace denizens; the passages were broad and convoluted, and though they walked by several guard stations, Bryn just nodded at the men and women on duty, and they let them pass without a word. Victor chuckled at one point when he had the stray thought that maybe the other guards thought he was Bryn's kid. When she looked down at him with her usual stern expression, he couldn't help laughing. “I wonder if they think I'm your son.”

“Don't be ridiculous! You don't move like a child. My comrades simply know I can be trusted, so they don't ask questions.” After a minute, she looked down at him again, and this time, her thin, stern lips were curled into a smile. “Besides, I'd be too embarrassed to bring such a scrawny child to the palace!”

Victor's laugh renewed and, in high spirits, he and Bryn made quick time out a side entrance, then through the gate where, once again, the soldiers waved her through and Victor too after she jerked her thumb his way and said, “I'm escorting this one out.”

Things were different in the city. The palpable pall of despair was gone, and the evidence of the night's revelries was everywhere. Victor saw people passed out in parks, empty kegs, and tankards on nearly every garden wall, and the folks who were up and about cradled their heads and moved very slowly. Seeing those things, he had to bark another laugh as he attempted to jostle Bryn's shoulder—his small hand was rebuffed by the meat of her muscles. “I can see why no one came looking for me! I wasn't the only one sleeping in!”

“Yes, well, some of us have duties.”

“Was that a complaint?” Victor crowed. “My stoic guardian wanted to be partying last night?”

“I had a few drinks. You didn't know it, but one of my fellow guards relieved me for nearly four hours.”

“Four hours off? What did you do with all that time?”

“Hah, hah.” Bryn waved a hand dismissively, further improving Victor’s good mood. He was happy to be getting some personality out of her. She surprised him further by asking, “Why the heart?”

“Huh?”

“It’s one of the things everyone is asking me about. It’s no secret around the palace that I’m your escort, so people think I know things. Everyone wants to know why you took Obert’s heart.”

Victor thought about the question, and it reminded him that he didn’t really know Bryn. He was trusting her, in a way, because he had a—perhaps unhealthy—lack of fear when it came to people harming him. If he were being clever, he might have considered the fact that he’d just let a single individual lead him out into the city, unbeknownst to anyone. If Bryn were a traitor, she might be leading him into quite a trap, and no one would even know to look for him. No one would even know he was missing until, probably, the next day.

He shook his head as the paranoid thoughts began to spiral. “Why do you think I took it?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps to make you seem mad. Perhaps as a show of intimidation. Perhaps you have some sort of grisly ritual passed down by your primitive ancestors—”

Victor couldn’t help the growl in his voice as he snapped, “My ancestors would think you were the primitive.”

Bryn clamped her mouth shut and held up a hand. “I overstepped. I’m sorry, milord.”

Victor sighed, tamping down his Quinametzin pride with a frustrating effort of will. “Nah, don’t be like that. I’m sorry I bit your head off. My, uh, bloodline carries a lot of baggage—I have to fight the pride of my ancestors constantly.”

“Is your bloodline so potent?” She glanced at him as they walked, and he could see the confusion in her eyes.

He figured a half-truth wouldn’t hurt. “Yeah, my distant ancestors were great beings, and I don’t think they really exist on this plane any longer. I guess you could say that when I claim an opponent’s heart, it’s a way to honor the rituals of my ancestors and also my foe. When I take that piece of an enemy, it’s not about disrespect; it’s the opposite. I wouldn’t take the heart of an opponent I didn’t respect.”

Bryn’s scowl turned contemplative, and she sounded sincere when she said, “I see.” They walked quietly for a while longer, and Victor’s earlier paranoia kept him alert, watching for signs of ambush or betrayal. They traversed busy streets, though, not back alleys. Bryn stopped before a large building with a tavern and tailor on the ground floor and pointed to the upper level where a sign read, “Trobban’s Enchantments, Rare Books, and Artificing.”

Victor had a hard time imagining the shop could be a trap. “This is the place?”

“I hope so. Troban is well respected by many, at least among the guards.”

Victor started up the stout wooden stairs on the side of the building, chuckling at his own awkwardness as he stretched his legs between the wide steps. When he reached the top, he looked

down to see Bryn hadn't followed. "Not coming in?"

She shook her head and sat on the bottom step. "I'll await you here."

Victor shrugged and pulled the heavy door open. A chime sounded from within, and a voice called out, "Welcome in." The shop was neat, with a sitting area in one corner, a sales counter on the rear wall, and a workbench taking up the left half of the room. A giant-sized man stood at the workbench, deftly using a wood chisel to smooth the contours of something that looked a lot like a doll's head. "Come around the bench, will you? I can't look up right now; this is a critical step."

"Sure." Victor walked around the workbench, feeling kind of ridiculous with just his head and shoulders clearing the surface, but he'd chosen his disguise, and he meant to stick with it. He watched for a minute while the man worked. He had curly white hair and bushy white eyebrows, but his face looked young, and his golden eyes were very sharp as he scrutinized his work.

"What brings you in, stranger?"

"I'm trying to find some help for a friend of mine, but the nature of the information I'm seeking is kind of a specialized topic. I also think she'd appreciate it if I kept my inquiries discreet."

"Well, discreet I can be, especially if I don't know the topic." For just a fraction of a second, the man looked up and locked eyes with Victor despite his deep cowl. Victor felt like the man measured him with that brief look. When he broke the gaze and looked back to his work, he said, "I'm Trobban, by the way."

"I'm Victor."

"Ah, the name is familiar, though not your...stature."

"I told you: discretion is important to me."

"A disguise!" Trobban clicked his tongue. "Intriguing!" He carefully smoothed the wooden head—Victor had seen enough of its features to name it so—and nodded. "That'll do for now." He looked at Victor, smiling as he blew some wood dust from his fingers. "Now, what's the topic I can help you with?"

"Are you familiar with death-attuned magic? With phylacteries?"

"Certainly. How could a well-learned man not be? I've read a dozen books on the topic at least."

"That's encouraging." Victor wanted to lean on the table, but it was too tall for him. He settled for moving around to the end near the wall and leaned on that, folding his arms over his chest. "I have a friend who's a death caster. She had to flee into a hastily prepared phylactery because her body was...destroyed. Now she's kind of trapped in the phylactery with no vessel prepared to house her."

“Ah! Do you seek my help in preparing a vessel? I’ve read of several ways to do so. There are rituals from—”

“There’s more to it,” Victor interrupted, holding up a hand. “You see, my friend, she’s never loved death-attuned magic. She hates her former masters and loathes the idea of becoming like them. We’re hoping this transitory state she’s in might lead to something of a rebirth, a way to help her change her path, avoiding something she’d feared was inevitable.”

Trobban mimicked Victor’s posture, folding his arms over his chest. “Death Casters and their apprentices are a complicated subject. I’d hate to come between a master and his—”

“She’s free from her master. He believes she was destroyed.”

“Truly? And you have access to your friend’s phylactery? Her, um, master isn’t aware of it?”

“I can access it, yes. And no, her master isn’t aware. He’s not even on this world or even close to it.”

Trobban nodded, stroking his chin, picking at some flecks of sawdust he found in the stubble there. “In that case, there are some options we could explore. If I could speak with this friend of yours...” He trailed off, arching an eyebrow in question.

“I’ll need to run it by her. Listen, Trobban, it’s not convenient for me to wander the city. Do you think you could come by the palace?”

The crafter’s eyes widened, and he leaned across his worktable, staring hard at Victor. “I would be honored! I have a wagon constructed just for such a cause—a mobile workshop! Why, it would do wonders for business if people saw me driving it through the palace gates!”

Victor moved back around the side of the table, holding out a hand. “In that case, let me extend a formal invitation. Can you make it this evening?”

“Ah, but the revelries...” Trobban shook his head. “I think it would be safer in the morning hours, sir. I’d hate for my wagon to be caught up in the mayhem, not if it’s going to be anything like last night.”

“All right. Tomorrow morning, then. I’ll let the guard captain know.” Victor shook the man’s hand, then let himself out, and as he descended the steps, he called out, “Bryn, let’s grab some food! Aren’t you hungry?” Before she could respond, he added, “Also, there’s no trouble with me inviting this guy to the palace, is there?”

Bryn stood and squinted up the steps to him, shading her eyes from the sun. “Um—”

Victor hopped down the steps, stopping on the third from the bottom so he could look her in the eyes. “It’ll be fine, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure it will be, but you should check with Queen Kynna about your schedule. You may have term negotiations tomorrow.”

Victor nodded, frowning. “Yeah. Yeah, all right, Bryn. Let’s get some food, then it’s back to the palace for me.” He continued to the ground, gesturing to the people moving about on the street. “Looks like folks are waking up! I’m in the mood for soup. You know any place that’s good?”

After a bit more back and forth, Bryn settled on an idea for a restaurant, and Victor followed her through the streets. On the way, he thought about how he was using the poor woman, basically an employee who was forced to spend time with him, for company, and he decided it wasn’t probably healthy for either of them. He needed to make some friends in Gloria, and though he was working to help Arona escape her bodiless state, it probably wasn’t wise to put all his eggs in that basket. Still, it was something, and he was looking forward to telling her that help was on the way.

Book 9: Chapter 17: A Suitable Vessel

“...seems these terms are amenable.” King Groff folded his fingers together, peering at the document his chamberlain pushed before him. Behind the king, Qi Pot, the champion of Xan, stood. He wasn’t as feared for his martial prowess as Obert, but he looked competent enough to Victor. He was a wiry, lean fellow who wore a rapier that seemed to exude shadows. They drifted out of the tooled scabbard like smoke, obscuring the weapon’s hilt and darkening the air around him.

Qi Pot wasn’t particularly tall, but he had a way of leaning forward that emphasized his lean, predatory posture. He didn’t glower or try to intimidate Victor, which, if Victor was honest, was more intimidating than outright hostility. Still, the man’s seeming competence made it all the easier for Victor to look the fool. Queen Kynna had done her part to make that job easier, too.

It seemed that, during the celebratory feast, she’d “had too much to drink” and had gone on and on to anyone who’d listen about how she was eager to replace Victor with a new champion claimed from Frostmarch. Apparently, she wasn’t happy with his “lucky” victory. As one might expect, word of her disgruntled displeasure with Victor spread rather rapidly. So, Xan had come calling, offering favorable terms to move up the duel before Queen Kynna traveled to Frostmarch to claim a champion from the former king’s cadre.

As the delegation from Xan stood and departed, Queen Kynna dismissed Chamberlain Thorn and then turned to Victor. “That went very well.”

Victor nodded. “If I understood things correctly, you only stand to lose what you gained from Frostmarch? You’ll remain queen of Gloria even if I lose?”

“That’s correct. So, whether you win or lose, Victor, you’ve saved Gloria. At least for the immediate future.” Smiling, she tried to push her chair back, but it was heavy, and the feet were caught in the plush rug that ran the length of the table. Victor hurried forward and lifted the back, helping her to slide it out. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“No, not the chair. Thank you for risking your life to help my people.”

“Um,” Victor smiled, backing up a few steps as the Queen stood, “you’re welcome.”

“And the timeline is all right with you? You’ll be ready to fight tonight?”

Victor glanced at the big, ornate clock standing in the corner of the negotiation room. It was nearly noon. “I’ll be ready, My Queen, but a craftsman is waiting at the palace. Do you mind if we hurry back?”

“A craftsman? I’d hoped to have lunch with you. You’ve been here a handful of days, and we’ve hardly had a chance to talk.”

“Well, I mean, you were busy at the feast, and before that...” Victor shrugged—there was no need to recount all the hectic activity since his arrival. “Anyway, I’m sorry about missing lunch, but when I invited this guy to the palace, I didn’t realize we’d be meeting with Xan so soon. I guess I could reschedule—”

“No.” The queen waved her hand and walked to the door leading to the portal room. “We’ll have more time after this duel.” She paused to look at him again, her brows drawing down as her expression became more serious. “You will win, won’t you?”

Victor grinned. “That’s my plan.”

“Qi Pot is well-respected—not as feared as Obert, but that’s largely because he’s younger and has fought fewer duels.”

“I have a plan for him.” Victor tried to smile reassuringly, hoping the queen wouldn’t ask for details. He doubted she’d feel encouraged if she heard the outline of his strategy.

“Good. Very well, then, Victor. Go to your appointment. I’ll see you before the duel.”

Victor bowed. “Your Majesty.” Before she had time to second-guess his release, Victor hurried out, and a few moments later, he was stepping out of the portal, back at the palace in Gloria. Bryn awaited him, and he smiled and nodded when he recognized her posture and scowling eyes through the gap in her visor.

She saluted and stepped away from the other guards in the chamber. “Where to, sir?”

“Where’s my guest waiting?”

“The eastern parlor, sir.”

Victor nodded and looked at the group of four guards at their posts on either side of the door. “Can one of you fetch Artificer Trobban from the eastern parlor and bring him up to my suite?” They all saluted, but one junior member—Victor could tell because he only had one yellow rose embossed on the gorget of his breastplate—hurried through the door. Victor gestured toward the door. “Let’s go, Bryn.”

He followed her back to his quarters, though he probably could have led the way. He had a decent mental image of the palace layout, at least the parts he'd frequented over the last few days. Still, it was customary for his "escort" to take the lead, so he humored her. Along the way, she asked, her voice echoing hollowly from the inside of her helmet, "How did the negotiation go?"

"Pretty good, I think. The queen seemed happy. I have to fight at sundown."

Bryn's steps faltered, and she looked over her shoulder. "Are you prepared?"

"I better be!"

"Must you always jest?" A moment after speaking, she hastily added, "Sir."

"I'm not really joking. There's not a lot I can do between now and sundown. I came to this world to fight duels, so, yeah, I think it's fair to say I better be ready." Bryn was silent after that, and when they reached his quarters, she took up a guard position beside the door. "When's the last time you had a break?"

"During your negotiations, sir."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. So you're good?"

Her helmet inclined marginally, "I'm good."

"Let me know when Trobban gets here." Victor let himself into the room and smiled at the scent of fresh flowers and clean air; the housekeepers had flung the windows wide and tidied up while he was gone. The central room in the suite was dominated by a long, darkly stained wooden table, and he walked over to it, pulling out a chair that afforded him a clear view of the door. Then he rummaged through his storage ring, taking out Arona's phylactery.

Almost before he had time to set the dark, rune-etched bone on the table, a cold, blue mist began to gather in the shadows under the table. A moment later, they swirled up, coalescing into the shape of a slender woman in dark, layered robes. "Hello again, Victor." She looked around, squinting at the light streaming through the tall windows. "Your quarters are quite fine." She'd only seen the sitting room with the curtains drawn the night before.

"Yeah, I'm not complaining." Victor smiled, leaning back. "The artificer I told you about should be here in a minute or two."

"Wonderful! I'm excited to hear what he thinks of my predicament. And how are you? When we last spoke, you mentioned negotiations?"

"I'm good. Everything went fine—I have to fight tonight."

Arona's ghostly figure moved to hover near the chair on Victor's left. "Are you as nervous as the first time?"

Victor took the hint and pulled the chair out for her. "No. Partly because Kynna's negotiations went so well. Even if I lose, she and her people are going to come out all right. At least for a while."

Arona nodded, sliding her ethereal figure into the seat. “So you don’t feel the same pressure. That should help you relax and do what you do best.”

“I hope so. I’ll find out how effective my new Class refinement will be.”

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Her dark lips spread into a sly grin. “A new Class? Now that you hold my very existence in your hands, are you willing to tell me what tier you’ve reached? If I were guessing, I’d say the eighth.”

Victor chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “Really? Only level eighty?”

“Oh, am I so far off? Have you reached the ninth tier?”

Before Victor could answer, a knock sounded on the door, and Bryn called out, “Sir Victor, your guest has arrived.”

Victor looked into Arona’s dark, ethereal eyes. “Ready?” She nodded, and he called, “Send him in.” He watched as the door swung wide, and Trobban came through, dressed much the same as he’d been in his shop, though with a fancy red, silken cloak thrown over his shoulders. “Hello, Trobban.” Victor stood and gestured to the chair across from Arona. “Please sit down.”

Trobban approached, and when he saw Arona’s ghostly figure, he paused and retrieved some spectacles from his pocket. He put them on, adjusting a tiny dial next to the hexagonal, blue-tinted right lens. “My, my. Hello there, Champion Victor, and what should I call you, lovely lady?”

Arona smiled and waved a ghostly hand. “Flattering phrases won’t win you favors with me. Call me Arona, for I’ve no pride in my many titles and feats.”

“Very well. It’s my pleasure to meet you.” Trobban sat at the table, and his gaze drifted to the rune-etched bone. “Is this your work, Lady Arona?”

“It is, though I must confess I finished it in haste.”

Trobban stared at the bone through his strange spectacles, slowly nodding. “Hasty you may have been, but here you sit—a spirit whole, a mind intact. You’ve done fine work here.”

“Have you thought about Arona’s situation, Trobban?” Victor wasn’t in a big hurry, but he also didn’t want to sit and listen to Trobban flattering Arona all afternoon.

“First, I’d like to confirm a few things with your charge, Sir Victor.” Trobban focused his gaze on Arona. “Is it truly your wish to alter your primary Energy affinity?”

“It is.”

“Have you considered the potential for a loss in potency? I mean, should your Core be so fundamentally changed?”

Arona's ghostly hood moved up and down. "I've read about the topic at great length. There are records of people changing their Core and primary affinity without a significant loss of power. There are a handful of complimentary attunements and, if I could awaken one—"

Trobban nodded. "Awaken or gain. I've thought long on your situation. Are you set on inhabiting a vessel born by natural means?"

Victor frowned and interjected, "You mean a person's body?"

"Yes; typically, a lich will have a corpse prepared to receive their spirit. Usually, it would be a stronger vessel than they gave up. The process involves replacing certain organs and enriching the flesh with Energy, rituals, and artifacts.

Obviously, whatever caused the vessel's original death must be repaired, and—"

"I don't wish to be a lich, Artificer Trobban."

Trobban nodded. "There are other means of inhabiting a living vessel. There are ways to preserve the life of a body while the spirit is removed." He looked at Victor. "You should be familiar with that possibility, being a Spirit Caster. Once the spirit is out, we can—"

"I won't steal another person's body!" Arona's ghostly fists clenched.

"Then, we must consider my original question. Are you willing to look into vessels not born by natural means?"

Arona frowned. "A construct?"

Trobban nodded. "Just so."

"They're so limited, though. I'd never have the potential of a true Core or a proper bloodline. Racial advancement treasures wouldn't work, and—"

"Ah, pardon me, Lady Arona, but I believe your knowledge about constructs is lacking in some departments. There are ways to create vessels every bit as potent as an epic-tier natural species. It's all a matter of preparation, Energy infusion, and, of course, the acquisition of appropriately powerful artifacts—a heart, a mind, a Core, the materials for the flesh and bones, and other special organs like eyes, sexual—"

Arona's frown had fallen away as the man spoke, but she waved a hand, cutting him off. "To make a living construct equivalent to an epic-tier species would be an enormous undertaking with expenses rivaling even my former master's greatest projects. I refer to a man who is a veil walker and has been for thousands of years. I don't have access to those sorts of resources."

Victor frowned, contemplating everything he'd heard. He could offer to help, but he understood Arona's objection; he had a few million beads, but that likely wouldn't come close to scratching the surface of what Trobban was proposing. Before he could think of a comment that wouldn't sound inane, Trobban spoke again, "There are other options. There are ways to create living vessels that do not require the sacrifice of another soul. Certain trees have the potential—if we could graft a branch from the Er'va'leigh oak, I could encourage it to grow into an approximate replication of your former body—I'm assuming that's what your spiritual projection is based upon?"

Arona nodded. "It is. Will it be able to accept my full Energy level?"

"I believe so, though it may take some time to mature to that potential." Trobban frowned. "Speaking of growing, how do you feel about embryonic spiritual implantation?"

"You mean for me to inhabit the body of an unborn being?" She frowned. "My old master spoke of it. I'd have to supplant the nascent spirit of the being, and then I'd also be forced to grow at a natural pace. I don't relish the thought of another childhood."

"So, that brings us back 'round to the idea of a properly prepared undead vessel. With enough time and the right affinity, it's possible that you could spark life within such a body. If we could convert your death-attuned Energy into a new Core—"

"How much are we talking?" Victor interrupted. "I mean to build her a proper vessel from natural artifacts and whatnot."

Trobban smiled and shrugged. "Each treasure would be a monumental expense, and we'd need many."

Victor rubbed his chin, stroking the stubble along his jawline. "Trobban, will you please step out? I'd like to speak to Arona alone for a moment."

"Of course!" His chair scraped noisily on the tile as he slid it back. Arona stared at Victor as Trobban's heels clicked on the same tile, hurrying toward the door. "Shall I wait without?"

"Yeah, don't go far," Victor called.

When the door clicked shut, Arona said, "It's too great an expense. This is something a veil walker might attempt, someone who's gathered treasures for millennia."

"Listen, I didn't want to say this in front of Trobban because no one knows yet, but Dar didn't just send me here to fight off a couple of champions who are threatening Kynna. He wants me to help her conquer this world. We're talking nearly a hundred nations. I'll have to fight a shitload of champions, but there will also be many nations who won't want to fight, who will take a knee, offering tribute and swearing fealty to Kynna. I get a piece of all that tribute. I can demand certain things. It's customary."

"And you'd squander part of your well-earned treasure to help me build a body? I won't allow it. I'd rather create a proper undead vessel, and then I can seek my own solution." As Victor's countenance grew increasingly stormy, she asked, "Why, Victor? Why would you offer so much to someone who, really, hasn't done anything for you? To someone whom you hardly know?"

He shrugged and spoke his mind, tired of games and duplicity. “Mainly because I like you. I don’t know why, but every time we’ve been thrown together, I thought you were pretty cool. Then there’s the fact that I don’t like Death Casters, and I can’t stand the idea of you being forced to be one. Once you’re properly undead, tell me, do you think you’ll lose some of that yearning you feel to get away from death-attuned magic?”

Arona’s raspy voice grew quiet and small, and Victor could hear the fear in it. “I don’t know. It would change me, but I don’t know how much.”

“Right. Besides all that, you should know it’s worth a lot to me to hold up a middle finger to a guy like Vesavo. The guy gave me the creeps and reminded me of all the assholes I dealt with from Dark Ember, especially Hector. You know, there are a ton of high-tier assholes on that world, and I still feel like I need to pay them a visit. They treat humans like cattle there!” Victor growled and shook his head. “I’m getting off track, but my point is that if I can help you, a person I think of as a friend, escape the curse of being like those pinché mother—Eh, you get the idea. I want to do it.”

Arona stared at him for a long minute, but she slowly nodded. “If you can help me build an epic-tier vessel, and Trobban can convert my Death Core into something else in the process, then I will swear fealty to you, Victor. I will serve you until such time that we both feel I’ve earned what you’ve given me. I will go with you to crush the Death Casters on Dark Ember. With an epic-tier vessel, I can reach veil walker status! I can grow to be a proper companion to someone as mighty as you. I will dedicate my—”

“Easy!” Victor laughed. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, all right? First, we need to get all the shit together. Now, don’t mention the succession war to Trobban, all right?” When she nodded, he called out, “Trobban, get in here.”

The door opened, and Trobban veritably ran back to the table. He seemed eager, as though he had an idea of what Victor was about to tell him. “Yes, Sir Victor?”

“Sit down, please.” Trobban nodded and dropped into the chair, leaning an elbow on the table as he stared intently at Victor. “Okay, we’re going to do an epic-tier vessel. Are you capable of craft—”

“Yes! Yes! I can do it, Lord Victor! With the proper materials, we can create the perfect vessel for you, Lady Arona! Why, I can—”

“Hold on, man!” Victor chuckled. “Listen, you need to talk with Arona. You need to consider every possibility. It’s imperative that she comes out of this without losing any potency but also with a new Core and, at least, a new primary affinity. You should know that I have a potent Spirit Core, and if I can be of any help, I’ll be willing.”

“I will endeavor to meet your demands, milord.” He ducked his head, and Victor sighed. It wasn’t lost on him that the guy had gone from calling him “sir” to “lord”

now that he thought he was about to bankroll an extravagant project.

He thumped his thumbs on the table, thinking. After a moment, he nodded. “Listen, Trobban, it might take us some time to gather everything we need, but you need to make a list, and I’ll work on it. More importantly, you need to understand that you and I are the only people on this entire planet who know about Arona. If word gets out, I’ll know who to blame. Understood?”

“Absolutely, sir! My lips are sealed. I’ll do nothing to jeopardize a project like this; I stand to gain too much!”

Victor nodded. He hadn’t considered that. For an Artificer, crafting an epic-tier body for Arona would probably be the equivalent of... Victor couldn’t think of a proper comparison. Maybe it would be like killing a legendary beast, like a great ancient wyrm, all alone. “All right,” he said after a moment. “I’ll leave you two to talk and consider all the options. I have a duel to fight soon, and I’m damn hungry.”

Book 9: Chapter 18: Furious Momentum

Victor could feel the rage building. He could feel it streaming into the special pathways that ran parallel to the more robust ones he’d built up along with his Core. Each time Qi Pot struck a painful blow with that deadly, slippery, shadow-clad rapier, another surge of the potent heat rushed out of Victor’s Core and into his body. Despite his awareness of it, despite knowing how it affected him, Victor couldn’t keep the fury from creeping into his mind, clouding his vision with a red lust for vengeance and slaughter.

He gnashed his teeth and growled, grunting as he fought, jabbing his great, heavy spear more and more deftly. His defensive battle had slowly shifted to the offense as he cared less and less for his health and slowly stopped trying to avoid Qi Pot’s slashes and stabs. He’d known this would happen. He’d planned on it. When he first saw Qi Pot in the negotiation, taken in his lengthy, wiry fencer’s build and seen his long, slender rapier, Victor had known how this fight would go.

Qi Pot’s strategy was clear: he saw Victor as a brutish, barbaric berserker who relied on his overwhelming strength and ferocity to win fights. In that case, Qi Pot intended to wear him down much as a matador bleeds out the great bull, so much stronger and fiercer than himself. His speed and grace were remarkable; at the start of the fight, he’d deftly maneuvered around Victor’s spear, scoring gashes on his hands and arms, stabbing the tip of that lightning-fast weapon into his ribs, stomach, chest, and back. He stabbed it into his thighs, his glutes—everywhere.

Victor was crimson with his blood, and if the arena’s sands weren’t black and red, they’d be painted, too. Even so, the dark, wet streaks were plain for all to see. Victor had lost gallons of blood. The problem for Qi Pot was that Victor was more than enormously resilient. A man like Qi Pot could cope with resilience. Despite his great vitality and the durability of his Quinametzin flesh and bone, Victor bled, and if something could bleed, it would eventually grow weak and slow. With the accumulation of hundreds or thousands of wounds, Victor would be vanquished. Unfortunately, Victor was more than resilient.

Victor had the regenerative capabilities of a monstrous behemoth; as Qi Pot lashed that wickedly fast, wickedly sharp rapier in and out, Victor bled, his wound closed, and his body regenerated the lost blood. Before the rage began to overtake his mind, Victor wondered where his new blood and flesh came from. Was it manifested from Energy? Was it pulling molecules out of the air and

altering them? Was he somehow splitting and multiplying his cells? His mind didn't linger on the question long; each cut added to the other half of the equation that summed up Qi Pot's doom: his rage.

Victor's ability to heal and stay fresh despite his mounting wound tally was one thing, but every cut and stab also added to his "furious battle momentum." As rage filled Victor's extra pathway and began to infuse his flesh, he healed even more rapidly, and, worse for Qi Pot, he became stronger and faster. And so, after dragging the fight out for nearly twenty minutes—a short time in the grand scheme of things but a very long time in a life-and-death contest—Victor's fury became unbearable, and he lost all sense of strategy.

He lashed out with the spear, and the rage fueled his movements. The great, weighty weapon was like a feather in his hands, and it ripped the air with whistling shrieks as he stabbed and hacked the double-edged spear blade about. For the first time, he fought like he meant it, and despite his blind fury, he used the weapon's length to his advantage, bullying the rapier-wielding Qi Pot into a full-blown retreat.

Qi Pot wasn't just a fighter, though; he was a man who'd achieved great heights as a cultivator of Energy. He gathered shadows and fire, making himself momentarily ghostly, flickering with dark flames as he streaked around the arena, seeking to find Victor's flank again. Victor was so fast, so strong, so utterly dominant that Qi Pot had to burn more and more Energy to move outside the arc of the berserker's enormous reach. He became a specter of black flames, and his rapier thrusts shot forth like arcs of molten metallic fire that splashed against Victor, charring his bloody clothes but hardly marring the titanic warrior's flesh.

Victor began to laugh—a maniacal, madness-tinged sound that echoed hoarsely through the arena, silencing the crowd as they watched him glide over the sand, a predator closing in for the kill. His eyes blazed with molten fire, smoke drifted from his nostrils, and though Qi Pot continued to score magical blows, burning enormous torrents of Energy to stay ahead of Victor's lightning pursuit, he only empowered the berserker further.

The onlookers had been raucous at first, cheering for both warriors at the start of the fight. As Qi Pot bled Victor bit by bit, skillfully dancing in and out, leaving a bloody mark on Victor's flesh or plain yellow tunic with each attack, the crowd had cheered. They'd grown wild with adoration for Qi Pot's flourishes, and he'd put on quite a show for them, whipping his rapier through the air as he performed mocking bows, his face full of contempt. Now, though, Qi Pot's confident smile was gone; his movements were precise and lacked extraneous flourishes.

Victor couldn't savor the destruction of Qi Pot's morale. He was too busy fantasizing about dismembering him. Red visions of bloody destruction ran through his mind as he pursued the smaller man, and each time those dark, fiery shadows lashed out, the red filter on his vision grew darker, and his muscles surged with renewed strength and speed. He hacked his spear like a club or sword—or axe—and it shrieked through the air, never intended by its maker to be used in such a manner. Still, the force of those hacks was undeniable; the weapon's length and the absurd power behind the blows made it harder and harder for Qi Pot to avoid, even in his dark, shadowy, fire form. Eventually, it hit home.

The first hacking blow of Victor's spear caught Qi Pot at the knee and snipped through his flesh and bone like a cleaver through a carrot. The man could barely scream before a follow-up, backhanded, upward slash brought the side of the spear blade into Qi Pot's armpit, severing his rapier-wielding right arm. After that, Victor dropped the spear and pounced, preferring the feel of flesh and bone crunching under his knuckles, savoring the hot sprays of blood and the coppery taste of victory.

When the veil walker, Grand Judicator Lohanse, gripped his arm and tried to pull him off, Victor instinctively rolled his wrist, grappling with the man out of pure muscle memory. He wrapped his powerful fingers around the veil walker's wrist and, to the stunned gasps of thousands of spectators, threw Lohanse to the side so he could resume his bloody destruction of Qi Pot's corpse. Of course, Lohanse wasn't a child or a mere mortal to be so easily dismissed. He gathered his aura and let it loose indiscriminately, bringing most of the people in the stands to their knees.

Victor felt the aura. It was thick and hot like molten iron, with depthless chasms of pride and mountains of knowledge. It pulled and pressed on him like it might fold his molecules into each other and erase him from existence. Even so, a small part of Victor's mind, a tiny piece of his rational self, recognized that he'd felt worse. With that little kernel of thought in his barely lucid mind, he growled and stood up from the ruined corpse, his fists dripping blood as he looked with furious, bloodshot eyes into the stunned countenance of the veil walker.

"You will kneel!" the grand judicator growled and clenched his fist. Searing bands of lightning-charged Energy wrapped around Victor and hurled him face-first onto the sand. Even influenced by his furious battle momentum, he couldn't move his arms inside those straps of burning Energy, and as the lightning crackled, he felt the veil walker's probing Energy in his pathways, grasping the rage-attuned Energy there and ripping it out. As the fury left Victor, his tense, rigid body relaxed, and Lohanse released his bonds of electrical force.

Victor struggled to his hands and knees and was acutely aware of the quiet. The only sounds coming down to him from the stands were those of people groaning and grumbling as they returned to their seats and recovered from the veil walker's show of force. Murmurs turned into hushed whispers as they looked down to the sands where Victor knelt beside the ruined corpse of Qi Pot with Lohanse standing tall over him, arms folded.

To Victor's relief, it seemed the veil walker wasn't one to hold a grudge. "Stand up then, warrior. You've won." With a grunt, Victor clambered to his feet. Lohanse raised his voice, holding his arms outstretched. "I give you Victor, Champion of Gloria, the winner of today's contest!" The crowd's reaction at first was tepid—some cheers and claps sounded from the stands near Queen Kynna's boxed section. After a few seconds, though, people began to feel encouraged, and fear of the veil walker's wrath subsided.

More and more cheers resounded, and then Lohanse spoke to Victor, his voice easy to hear despite the din. "Well? What prize will you claim?" He glanced at the bloody mass of flesh and bone that used to be Qi Pot soaking into the sands. Victor frowned, suddenly unwilling to claim the heart of his demolished foe. His anger was gone, and, it seemed, much of his pride and lust for glory were, too. Glancing inward, he saw that this Core was dim. Lohanse had relieved him of more than his rage. Still, he was Quinametzin, and he'd not be so easily cowed.

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“I will have my enemy’s heart.”

Lohanse sighed, tsking. “As you wish.” He raised an arm and announced, his voice booming through the arena, “As his prize, Victor will claim the heart of his foe.” To Victor’s surprise, the crowd’s cheers surged with the announcement, and he felt the adulation tickling his Core, lifting his levels of glory-attuned Energy. He laughed and raised his hands, making bloody fists as he turned in a slow circle. He saw Kynna leaning forward in her throne-like chair, her hands grasping the arms. Her eyes were bright, and when those eyes locked on Victor’s, she inclined her head slightly, dipping her tall crystal crown.

That was when the Energy hit him. As he’d been basking in the roars of the crowd, it had gathered around Qi Pot’s corpse, and the System didn’t care if he was ready or not. It struck him like a poleaxe, knocking the sense from his mind and lifting him off the sands as it poured into his pathways, refilling his Core and then spilling into his flesh as it pushed him toward the next level. It felt like a lot, and Victor wasn’t disappointed when he opened his eyes to a System message:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 71 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.*****

“Claim your grisly trophy, warrior,” Lohanse said. “I’ve the nobility of Xan to deal with, but I’d rather you were clear of my arena before I left.”

“I’m okay now, Grand Judicator.” Victor glanced at him and quickly added, “Thanks for helping me cool off.” He knelt by the body of his former adversary, summoning a knife from his ring.

“You aren’t the first rage-attuned fighter I’ve dealt with. Even so, I’ll wait for you to finish. You’re quite impressive, Victor, and I can see you play a long game with these fools, hopefully with the good of Gloria in mind. Even so, don’t become so enamored with yourself that you fail to realize you aren’t the only special fig on the tree. As your queen works to negotiate further duels, your contests will become more difficult. Have you fought a steel seeker yet?”

He waited until Victor yanked the heart out of the body and looked up to nod before continuing, “I suspected as much. Your will is powerful, and for an iron-ranker, your aura is prodigious. You’ll be formidable when you break through to the steel ranks, but only if you live that long. There are those who will recognize the threat you pose. I’m sure many already have. This window, when you are still fighting your way up to the first ceiling—this is when they’ll strike. Be wary of ‘new’ champions in your coming battles.”

Victor peered up from where he knelt, locking eyes with the enigmatic veil walker, but the man only nodded once, and then he was gone, like ashes in a stiff breeze. Victor stood, held his bloody prize aloft, smiling fiercely as the crowd roared their approval, and then he walked out of the arena, his

mind more troubled by the veil walker's words than he'd like to admit. He'd gone further than he'd wanted during the fight; no one would see the way he absolutely dominated Qi Pot and think he wasn't a threat. Worse, he'd stood up to a veil walker, brushing off his aura like it was a minor discomfort.

"Pinché rage," he sighed as he stepped into the ready room and found Bryn already waiting.

"You lost control of your affinity?"

"Did it seem that way?"

"I could only imagine that was the case. Why else would you risk death with the judicator?" She chuckled. "Besides, I just heard you cursing your rage."

"True," Victor laughed. "Was Kynna angry?"

"Queen Kynna was pleased to have her aggressors dealt with! She asked me to see that you are 'well treated' this evening so that you're 'fresh and relaxed' for tomorrow's award ceremony." Her inflection made it clear that she was quoting Queen Kynna.

"Award ceremony? I didn't have one for the first duel."

"She's aware and asked me to thank you for your patience. Between the celebratory feast and the rapid acceptance of Xan's duel, there wasn't time."

Victor frowned, looking toward the closed door behind Bryn. "She sent my escort to tell me all this? I feel a little snubbed if I'm being honest."

Bryn stared at him for a long moment, then reached up and lifted her helmet off, cradling it in the crook of her left elbow. To Victor's horror, she fell to her knees and bowed her head. "My apologies, Lord Champion. I have failed to convey our nation's gratitude properly. I did my best, but surely Chamberlain Thorn or Queen Kynna, her exalted self, would have been better suited to deliver you home to the palace. I will convey news of my failure to my superior officer, Guard Captain Wash."

"Damn, Bryn!" Victor chuckled nervously. "Will you please get up? I didn't mean that—I was just curious why they sent you alone this time."

"In truth, milord," Bryn said, head still bowed, "the Queen was eager to hurry back to the palace ahead of you. She has much to prepare for your celebration tomorrow, which will be difficult to orchestrate considering the city is in the midst of a week-long, debauchery-laced festival. When news of this victory reaches the populace, it will be difficult to get anything done." She cleared her throat and glanced up at him. "And, with a plea for your discretion, I will venture to say that Chamberlain Thorn was afraid to come here after seeing your performance in the arena."

“All right, all right. Get up, will you?” Victor walked over to the counter where refreshments were on display and used the wash basin there to clean the blood from his hands and arms. Bryn approached and, while he was scrubbing, poured a glass of chilled wine.

“You must be parched.”

“Yeah. Have a glass. We’ll head out after I wash my face.”

“I was going to suggest that; it’s caked with dried blood.”

“I can feel it.” Victor stoppered the drain and let the ornate faucet, cast in the shape of a swan neck, fill it with cool water. While the water ran, he said, “So, what’s on the agenda tonight? How will you see that I’m, uh, what was it? ‘Fresh and relaxed’ tomorrow?” He glanced at Bryn and saw that his attempt at humor had struck a little too close to home; her cheeks were flushed, and she was trying not to look at him. Hastily, he said, “I think a big dinner and some good booze will suit me just fine. Maybe you could invite the old champion. What was his name? Foster? I wouldn’t mind having someone to shoot the breeze with before I hit the sack.”

Bryn’s relief was palpable. Victor could only imagine what she feared he’d ask for. “I think that should be easy enough to arrange! I thought perhaps you’d enjoy a bath and massage—we have a very skilled Elemental Therapist at the palace. I was awarded a session when I was promoted, and it was the most wonderful experience I’ve ever had.”

“Sec.” Victor dunked his head in the basin and scrubbed his hair and face vigorously for several seconds before lifting it out. The water was deep red. “I think a bath would be great, and, shit, yes, I’d like a massage.” He grabbed a towel, dried his face, and gestured to the door. “Shall we?”

“Yes!” Bryn lifted her helmet to her head, then led the way down the corridor to the portal room. “I enjoyed watching your fight tonight, Victor. I could tell some of the others were worried at the start, but I could see you weren’t bothered much by the wounds Qi Pot delivered. He chose the wrong sort of weapon to face one such as you.”

“Yeah.” Victor looked sideways at her. “What kind of weapon do you think would be better?”

“Ideally? Something that would be harder to heal from. A projectile weapon, perhaps. A powerful bow—an artifact that could generate its ammunition, for instance. If the bolts or arrows were driven deeply and difficult to remove, surely they’d take a toll, even against someone with your constitution.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I don’t love arrows. What other ideas do you have?”

“Anything other than a dagger or rapier!” She snorted. “Perhaps a great blade, though everyone saw how you dealt with Obert’s sword. If not a weapon, then perhaps devastating Energy attacks. I think you’d need to take great damage quickly—I can’t see how anyone could win by trying to wear you down inch-by-inch.” She sounded excited to be given leave to discuss strategy, and Victor nodded, encouraging her. “Can you tell me, Victor, how you could bleed so much and still fight? Is it your bloodline?”

“I’ll share some secrets with you, Bryn, but not yet. Let’s get through the next couple of days, find out who I’m fighting next, and then maybe we can talk strategy. Would you like that?”

“Very much, sir! I think you’ll like Foster, too. He knows a great deal about the empire and the many men and women who fight as champions.”

Victor clapped her shoulder as they entered the portal room. “That’s great, Bryn. You’ll join us, of course. Bring a friend, if you want. I mean, you can put that together while I’m getting that massage, yeah?”

She stared at him with wide eyes. “I, um, of course, I’ll be on duty, sir. I’ll be glad to watch over you during your dinner with—”

“Nah, I’ll protect myself tonight, Bryn. Seriously, bring a friend or two. Heck, are you married? Bring your, uh, significant other—whoever you want. We’ll have the meal in my quarters, then sit around and talk about fighting. Yeah, I guess whoever you invite should be interested in that.” Victor nodded, gave her shoulder another slap, then stepped through the portal.

She joined him on the other side of the portal and, as though they hadn’t just traveled thousands of miles, said, “I’ll have the Elemental Therapist sent to your rooms, sir. In the meantime, I’ll begin making the arrangements for the dinner.” After a moment, she added, “Thank you for the invitation.”

Victor smiled, ignoring the other guards in the chamber as he regarded her. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Go ahead and get started on all that. I can make it to my quarters.” She bowed, and Victor left, grinning stupidly. In a way, he was messing with her; he had a good time putting people off balance, and he thought Bryn was kind of funny when she got flustered. Still, he wanted to make some new friends, and he thought she was pretty cool.

As he strode through the palace, heading for his rooms, he couldn’t help but feel good, despite a distant, niggling worry about the veil walker’s words. It only made sense that powerful people were watching the duels. There were tens of thousands of people in those stands; Gloria’s upset victories were sure to draw attention. When he talked Kynna into challenging some neighbors, life was going to get...dangerous. He was ready for it, and as far as scheming steel seekers might go, Victor figured he’d just have to stay a step ahead.

Victor walked through the remnants of his impromptu, celebratory get-together, idly counting the empty liquor bottles on his way to the balcony doors. He stopped at thirteen, shaking his head and chuckling. Foster, Bryn, and her two friends from the palace guard were all above tier eight, and they hadn't struggled in the least to clean out Victor's liquor cabinet. He pulled the doors wide, letting in the fresh, late-morning air, then stepped out, turning his face to the sun, soaking it up. He felt remarkably good.

Bryn hadn't been lying about the "Elemental Therapist." The fellow had used water and fire affinities to do incredible things to Victor's muscles. Besides his ability to chill and warm his tendons and muscles from the inside out, the man had been a skilled masseur, something Victor couldn't remember ever experiencing, at least not for a long, dedicated session like that.

He stretched, arching his back, then patted his stomach, not surprised to find it still satisfied after the food and drink he'd consumed late into the night. Bryn had arranged quite a feast, and though Victor could recall enjoying the company of her friends, he honestly couldn't remember much about the conversations they'd had. "Now, though, it's time to get to work." With a sigh, he turned away from the sun and walked to his door. When he opened it, he didn't find Bryn, but one of her comrades.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning. Will you advise the queen that I'd like to meet with her at her earliest convenience?"

"Right away, sir!" The young man slammed his fist to his chest and took off at a jog, his plate armor clanking with each stride. Victor closed the door and spent the next few minutes getting ready for the day—showering, shaving, cleaning his teeth, and putting on the perfectly clean clothes that he wore almost every day.

While he waited for word from the queen, Victor pulled some of his study materials out of his storage ring and stacked them on the small round table in the central parlor of his suite. He planned to do a little more research into Elder magic, and along with it, he intended to mess around with one or two of his older, lesser-utilized spells. It had been many months—years?—since he'd figured out how to create weaves of his affinities that produced justice-attuned Energy. He'd even discovered a powerful spell to use with it, The Inevitable Huntsman, but he'd so rarely had occasion to invoke the magic that he wondered if he couldn't improve or alter it somehow.

He had beautiful, large, thick sheets of paper that he'd gotten from Dar for writing out spell patterns, and he'd just taken one out and begun to delicately sketch the pattern for the huntsman spell when there was a tap on his door. "Come in," he called.

He had his back to the door, but he heard it open, gliding near silently on its well-oiled hinges, and then a strident voice startled him into nearly dropping his pen, "Her Majesty, Queen Kynna Dar!"

Victor spun in his chair to see Kynna gliding into his quarters, the jewels sewn into her dazzling pale gray and blue gown glittering in the light from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Her crown nearly brushed the lintel, but the palace had been designed with massive statures in mind, and it missed it by an inch or so. Mortified by the state of his quarters and ill-prepared state, Victor jumped to his feet and sketched out a hasty bow.

The queen smiled at him, then turned to the man holding the door. “Thank you, Seneschal Lovalle. Please wait without.” The slender, neatly coiffed man stooped into a low bow and swept out of the room, closing the door behind him. “Good morning, Champion.”

“Um, good morning, My Queen.” Victor straightened and gestured to the empty seat to the right of his own. “Would you care to sit?” The truth was, he was trying to get her to look his way before her gaze lingered on the mess in the sitting area near the windows.

It seemed it was too late, in any case. As she glided into the suite and approached the table where Victor was working, the queen said, “I’ll have Thorn speak to your housekeeping staff. This is no fit state for a royal champion’s chambers.”

“Um, no, Your Majesty, please don’t. I asked them to come back later. I, uh, didn’t know I’d have a guest.”

Kynna froze halfway to the table, staring at him with a blank expression. Her eyes weren’t particularly bright, generally, not like Dar’s, but at that moment, they were hardly glowing—almost like they were veiled by mist. It made Victor wonder about the nature of the eyes themselves. Were there actual fires burning in the sockets? Were the flames inside a transparent shell of something... keratin? “Did you not summon me?”

“I, uh, sent my guard to let you know that I wanted you to summon me whenever it was convenient.”

Kynna started forward again, shaking her head and tsking. “Perhaps the young man was overzealous. No matter. I’m here. What can I help you with, Victor?” She sat down, gracefully folding one leg over the other as she turned the chair to look at him more easily.

“Um, do you want a refreshment?” Victor prayed she’d say no. He had no idea what was appropriate to serve a queen.

“No, thank you.”

“Right, well, I wanted to talk to you about our strategy moving forward. I mean, now that your immediate threat has been dealt with, we’ll need to start implementing Dar’s plans.”

“Ranish Dar? What further plans are there? I assumed you’d linger here a while, ensuring no further encroachments, but I have a new cadre of champions now that we’ve conquered Xan and Frostmarch; I don’t think you should feel bound to further service.” She spoke plainly and seemed so oblivious that Victor had to lean back in his chair and think for a moment. Hadn’t he said he was there to help Gloria rise to...glory? He strained his brain, trying to think of his words when he’d first met the queen.

“My Queen, has Ranish Dar not conveyed his further wishes for my, uh, service to you? Didn’t I make it clear why I was here when I presented you with my spear?”

“You said that the time had come for my house to ascend to its rightful place of prominence on Ruhn.” She spread her hands and gave a slight, elegant shrug. “Both Xan and Frostmarch had recently conquered one of our other neighbors. With your two victories, we now sit at the head of a five-kingdom hegemony—more power than Gloria has held in twelve centuries.”

“Yes.” Victor nodded. “It’s a good start.”

“Start?” Kynna raised a delicately feathered black brow, and Victor thought he saw the fire in her eyes grow brighter.

“Yeah. Ranish Dar believes it’s time for a new empire to rule Ruhn, and, naturally, he wants his descendants to be in charge.”

Both of Kynna’s brows shot up, and her eyes widened further as she leaned forward and hissed, “He wants me to initiate a war of succession?”

“Yeah—initiate and win.”

She reached up to her crown and tapped a nail against the crystal. A chime rang out, reverberating as a pale blue dome of Energy surrounded Victor, Kynna, and the table where they sat. “Such words will bring imperial assassins!”

“You think spies are listening?” Victor scowled and looked around his room.

“When such words are spoken, one must always assume! Victor, what you suggest is insanity. Do you understand what such an action entails?”

“I have some idea, yeah. Your ancestor schooled me a bit before he sent me here. Still, let’s review. What do you think it entails?”

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“Even at the head of five nations, Gloria amounts to less than a tenth of the power of one of the great houses, of which there are seven. They all rule hegemonies of at least five major nations on the eastern continent. Consider that Khaliday, the imperial seat, is equal to any three of the great houses. Now, consider that, in order to challenge Khaliday, we’d need to conquer one of the great houses and to challenge a great house, we’d need to fight our way through dozens of lesser kingdoms here, on the western continent.”

“Hmm, actually, that sounds a little better than I’d feared. So, we’d snap up five or more nations by beating a great house? On top of that, once you rule a great house, you can challenge the emperor directly?”

Kynna stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "Victor, the champions of Frostmarch and Xan were formidable by the standards of far-flung western kingdoms, but they were children compared to the veritable demigods who fight for the great houses."

Victor nodded slowly. "I know. I know we've got a ways to go before we challenge a great house, too, but we need to start making moves that way. We need to start strategizing about which kingdoms here, on the Western continent, will most easily be bullied or tricked into a duel. Which kingdoms will bend the knee? We need to build momentum quickly to make it harder for the great houses to prepare and to minimize the time they have to try things like assassination."

The queen stared at him for a long time, and he could only imagine the wheels turning in her head. If Victor left, she'd have a very real chance to spend centuries in peace, ruler of a powerful mini-empire. If she went along with Dar's idea that she should try to conquer the entire planet, in her mind, she would be walking a path where defeat wasn't just possible but likely, especially considering what she thought she knew of Victor's capabilities. "Are you in contact with my ancestor?"

"I am."

"Then I must choose my words carefully, mustn't I?" She shook her head; whether it was at Victor or her own words, he couldn't tell. "I didn't bargain for this when I appealed to Ranish Dar for help. You speak blithely, but there will be no peaceful resolution for a nation that instigates a succession war—either we win, or the emperor will wipe out my bloodline. Of course, you bear the same risk as a champion, at least personally, but tell me, are you also putting your loved ones at risk?"

Victor had to admit she made a good point. It was one thing to risk yourself, but to risk your entire family, from your children to your distant cousins, was another matter. "I understand your concern."

"I must think on this. I know I risk my ancestor's wrath, but..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I must seek the counsel of people I trust, Victor. Tell me one thing: did you truly hold back so much against Obert and Qi Pot, or are you mad? I do not lie when I say that Obert would never dream of challenging one of the champions of the great houses."

"I might be crazy, Queen Kynna, but I'm not here for any reason other than I need some tough pendejos to fight. If Dar just wanted to beat the guys putting pressure on your family, he could have found someone in Sojourn to do the job. I'm here for the guys no one else wants to fight." Victor shrugged as if that was all he had to say.

She tsked. "Such pride! Do you not fear death?"

Victor sighed and leaned back, drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair while he thought about how to answer the question. "I have a Spirit Core. You know that, right?"

“Yes, I can discern that much.”

“Well, I’ve seen the other side. I’ve seen spirits and even spoken to a loved one after she passed. I’ve had my ancestors talk to me while I fight. They’ve even offered me boons. I don’t view death as the end anymore. I might once have worried about dying, worried I’d leave things unfinished in this world, but that worry has changed. Now, I worry I won’t do enough in this life to earn a proper place among my ancestors.

“I’m a fighter, Queen Kynna—it’s pretty much the only damn thing I have a hope of being excellent

at. I won’t earn glory for my ancestors by choosing easy battles.” Victor leaned forward, his eyes intense beneath the glower of his dark, heavy brow.

“I need you to start this war because I don’t see another easy way to get a fight with those pendejos on the eastern continent.” For the first time, Victor let his aura slip a little in the queen’s presence, giving her a taste of the heat and weight of it, the bloody taste and sharp edge, the hunger for glory tinged with the stomach-turning scent of fear and the blood-boiling fury of the mountain.

She leaned back, and her pale gray skin paled further as she visibly swallowed. She glanced toward the door as though weighing her odds at making a hasty retreat. Victor only let his aura ripple out for a second, though, and when it passed, it was like the room grew brighter. Kynna cleared her throat and nodded. “I have much to think on. Please delay your next message to my ancestor until we’ve spoken again.”

“I will.” As she stood and started for the door, Victor stood. “My Queen?” When she turned, he held his massive black spear in his hands. To her credit, Kynna didn’t flinch. “I promised you this spear and swore to use it to vanquish the hounds on your borders. Will you take it now?” Victor fell to a knee and held the spear out.

Kynna took a quick breath, and he could tell she’d had words on her tongue that she halted just before they escaped. After a moment’s consideration, she reached out, rested her fingertips on the sturdy weapon, and nodded. “I will. My thanks, Champion of Gloria.” As she finished the words, the spear disappeared, summoned into a storage container, no doubt. “I look forward to your award ceremony this evening, Victor. Will you wear a proper uniform if I have one sent here?”

“Sure.” Victor nodded as he stood, then walked over to the door, pulling it open for her. “Thank you for coming to see me so quickly. I didn’t expect such a courtesy.”

Kynna seemed to appreciate the chance to retake the upper hand. She smiled crookedly and glanced toward the mess in the sitting area. “I can see that.” Victor wanted to deny having drunk all those bottles of alcohol, but he just nodded with a slightly chagrined smile. And Kynna stepped through

the door. Over her shoulder, as her entourage formed around her, she said, "I'll have that uniform sent over soon. See you tonight, Champion Victor."

"Tonight, Your Majesty." Victor watched the group of guards, ladies in waiting, and officials make their way down the hallway, wondering what they all did while they waited outside a door for their queen. Returning to his chambers, he retrieved Arona's phylactery from his storage ring.

Her spirit rapidly materialized as he moved over to his sitting area to gather up the many empty bottles, dirty plates, and soiled linen napkins. He stacked them on the oversized ottoman that ran the length of the central couch, and Arona drifted over. "I see you survived your duel."

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't summon you right away, but I had to...entertain last night." He gestured to the mess. "I was just going to leave it for the cleaning staff, but now I feel guilty; I had a pop-in visit from the queen."

"Oh?" Arona moved to "sit" on the couch, even though she didn't really touch it.

"Yeah. She was slightly more clueless about Dar's plans for Gloria than I expected. I suppose I should be irritated with Dar for leaving me to break the news, but I guess it's on me, too, for assuming. Anyway, how'd it go with Trobban? When I got back, your phylactery was on the table, but I didn't see any notes or anything."

"I'm sorry I missed you. I was exhausted—keeping myself outside the phylactery takes much effort. As for Trobban, he's quite knowledgeable, but for each idea he has, he insists he's seen another dozen in texts he's read, so he wanted to do some research before devising a final plan for the components of my vessel."

"And you? I didn't get to speak to you without him listening. How do you feel about everything?" Victor couldn't help imagining a robot or a Frankenstein's monster when he thought of a "vessel" being created for her. He hoped it wouldn't be like that, but what did he know?

"I'm excited but apprehensive. Trobban believes there are natural treasures that can be used to form a Core, one that will absorb the Energy I've built up in this phylactery so that it will gain ranks nearly equivalent to what I had in life. He insists that he's read accounts of people's affinities changing when they adopted such a Core. In his opinion, it won't be difficult to change my affinity, but rather a byproduct that would be more difficult to avoid."

Victor plopped down on the couch. "I mean, that's good news, right?"

Arona's ghostly face brightened as she smiled, and her raspy voice smoothed out slightly as she replied, "It's wonderful news. Wouldn't it be grand to grow strong enough to face the likes of Vesavo? I'd so love to confront him about the torture he put me through—about the horrors he's committed on various worlds."

Victor nodded, smiling grimly. He could relate to the sentiment. “I know what it’s like to want to force powerful people to confront their bullshit, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Even Dar is leery of insulting Vesavo.”

“True. Still, if I could drink, I’d toast to our future goals. I’m glad I met you, Victor. I wonder where I’d be right now if I hadn’t—serving Ronkerz? No, I don’t think that foolish mission into the Iron Prison would have happened if you weren’t around. I’d be slaving away on some horrid project for Vesavo, likely dreading his next summons.” She surprised him by visibly shuddering. It made Victor chuckle as he tilted his head, looking at her sideways.

“It’s crazy how your spirit-form mimics how you were in life. Even your voice—raspy and low. Do you think your new body will change you much?”

She smiled, exposing her sharp canines. “It depends on how talented Trobban is. I’ve seen constructs that looked just like living, breathing people. The artifacts and natural treasures he’s researching will play a part. I’m excited, Victor!” She leaned forward as the truth of her emotions came out.

Victor laughed and nodded, smacking his fist into his hand. “Me too, Arona. I mean for you, but also me. When I look down the road ahead, the various crossroads and one-way turns, I see some that lead to victory and some that lead to death, but almost all of them lead to glory.”

Book 9: Chapter 20: A Gilded Cage

Victor stood in the wings of the stage, waiting for his name to be called. He shifted, strangely nervous about being the center of attention in such a stolid, formal ceremony. Victor liked attention, but he was far more at ease giving an impromptu speech or, if truth be told, fighting in front of a large crowd. He didn’t like the idea that he was expected to dress and act a certain way. In his mind, it was almost like a wedding ceremony or, more to his experience, a confirmation.

He was dressed in his new official uniform—similar to the guards’ uniforms, only fancier, made of some kind of silky, Energy-rich material with a subtle inner luster. Even the dark gray pants, boot-cut to accommodate his polished, shiny black boots, seemed to gleam in the darkness of the shadows where he stood. Tucked into the pants was a gray, form-fitting, long-sleeved shirt, over which he wore a royal blue uniform coat emblazoned with a brilliant yellow rose on the breast. The jacket was festooned with gilt embroidery along the sleeves and on the edges of the high collar. He felt he looked all right but really wasn’t a fan of the getup.

He fidgeted, Kynna’s voice echoing back to him as it was projected out to the audience—thousands of nobles and ten times as many commoners who’d won a “lottery” for tickets. Kynna was going on about the tribulations they all had suffered through together, about how the foes of Gloria had been given justice for their crimes, and how Gloria was rising as a nation of import on the western continent of Ruhn. Overall, she was whipping up the people’s pride, invoking past greatness and hinting at future growth and influence.

Only about half a day had passed since he'd spoken to the queen, so Victor didn't view it as strange that he hadn't heard from her one way or the other about proceeding with Dar's plans for a succession war. He figured she had a lot of thinking to do and would probably want to speak in seclusion with a few people she trusted. The prospect of war was a big deal, and he could see why she wouldn't want to do it, but he also understood the implied threat—Dar had sent him, and if Victor returned early, what might a powerful, deity-like ancestor do? Despite everything he knew about Dar, Victor still wasn't sure about the man's motivations. He didn't think he'd punish Kynna, but what if he pressed the issue?

As Kynna's speech rose to a crescendo and the audience's reactions grew louder, he contemplated helping Kynna get out of the situation. All he had to do was claim that he felt victory wasn't likely and didn't want to risk his life to challenge further champions. Dar had given him that out; he'd said something along the lines of this "campaign" lasting only as long as Victor thought it should—that he could withdraw when he felt victory wasn't achievable. If Victor left now, Kynna's people would be safe for a long while—decades or centuries—and he'd have done something great. Why did he feel like that wasn't enough?

He supposed part of it was that he knew he'd be lying and that Dar would see through it. Victor was not worried about his next fight, regardless of who it would be against. He and Kynna had a lot of work to do before they could challenge a great house, at which time Victor might feel his first genuine fear of defeat. Was he being cocky? Sure, he was, but that was his nature. He'd been that way before he'd woken up his Quinametzin bloodline, before he'd walked with the righteous fury of an awakened mountain, and before he'd embraced his affinity for glory. Now, the idea of backing down from a challenge such as the one posed by a succession war felt almost as unnatural as trying to breathe water.

"That's your cue, milord," the retainer holding the dark wing curtains aside said, startling Victor out of his ruminations.

"She announced me?" How had he missed that?

"Aye, milord," the young man said, smiling and ducking his head. Victor cleared his throat, straightened his shoulders, and marched through the gap in the curtain. The stage was bright, illuminated by brilliant glow-lamps high above, and the audience was thrown into shadows as a result. Still, with his Quinametzin eyes, he could see them—thousands and thousands of faces staring, silent in their rapt attention. He shifted his gaze to the center of the stage where Queen Kynna stood, glorious in her jeweled gown, her crown glittering with the inner fire of whatever great magic it contained.

She beckoned him to come forward, and he did. When he stood before her, she looked to the audience and, in a voice that carried as though amplified by a hundred hidden speakers, she said, "People of Gloria, I present to you our champion, Victor of Tucson."

The applause and cheers were thunderous, and Victor felt his heartbeat quicken under the focus of so many cheering folks. His Core surged with glory-attuned Energy, which leaked into his pathways. Unable to restrain himself, he lifted a fist high, and the crowd redoubled their cheers. It was deafening.

Queen Kynna delicately raised her right hand, and the assembly hall grew silent almost instantly. “Champion, for your victory over Obert and the kingdom of Frostmarch, I present to you one of the most valuable treasures recovered from the vaults of our foe.” She held out both hands, cupped together, and a glittering, gem-studded, gold-foil package appeared there, about the size and shape of a large orange. Victor could hear the collective intake of breath as the gems picked up the lights and sparkled, creating a dazzling display that seemed almost like illusory fireworks around Kynna and Victor.

“This beautiful package contains the egg of a creature of myth here on Ruhn, a Coldwater Sea Wurm.” Again, the audience collectively gasped, and a single strident voice cried out, sounding more dismayed than excited. “You can hear from our citizens’ reaction, Victor, that this is a treasure dear to the people of Ruhn, for Coldwater Sea Wurms have not been seen in our seas for nearly a thousand years. You see, their eggs are known to wake the secrets in a person’s blood, sometimes bringing forth latent attributes but always advancing a person’s racial status.”

Kynna paused for a moment, then turned and held the egg high, greatly expanding the size of the mystical light show it projected. “Do any of the fine people of Gloria begrudge our champion this prize? Is there any more worthy?” The response was silence, though Victor swore he heard people weeping. Kynna turned back to Victor and proffered the egg. “Will you accept this gift, Champion?”

Despite a small surge of guilt, a tiny voice in his mind that couldn’t believe he was going to receive something so treasured by these people after only being there a few days, Victor saw the egg for what it was: the whole reason he’d come to Ruhn—advancement. “I will.” He held out a broad palm, and the queen gently placed the egg in the center of it. Victor held the egg carefully but lifted it high, turning to face the enormous crowd. “Thank you, people of Ruhn!” His voice carried, just as the queen’s had, and the crowd once again erupted in cheers.

The queen allowed the cheers to go on for a moment, smiling at Victor with her hands delicately folded before herself. “Nicely done, Victor. Please store away your prize, and then, if you would, please kneel before me.” Her voice didn’t carry this time, but Victor heard it clearly. He sent the egg into his storage ring, then looked at the queen.

“Kneel?”

“Please, Champion. I will award you your second prize.”

Victor hated to kneel, especially with an audience, but he’d already done so to Kynna several times, so it seemed strange to balk. He nodded, then, smooth as a panther might crouch in the tall grass, he

lowered himself to one knee. Queen Kynna held up her hand again, and the audience grew so silent that Victor could hear her quick, shallow breaths. Was she nervous?

“People of Gloria, today we stand free, our chains shattered and thrown to the side, and our future bright with the potential for true glory—a virtue for which our great nation was named! This turn of events is thanks to the valor of one man, a man who, until now, had no ties to our world. He served my ancestor, the great Ranish Dar, but he was a stranger to us, a visitor. Nevertheless, he came and fought not only the champion of Frostmarch but that of Xan. In the face of overwhelming odds, he struck down our enemies and lifted the grip of their cruel blockades. Today, Gloria breathes again, thanks to his courage.”

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Kynna paused, allowing the audience to absorb the impact of her words, then turned and faced Victor fully. “For such heroism, words are not enough. Treasures are not enough. Deeds of such magnitude deserve deeds in return. Thus, Victor of Tucson, I bestow upon you not only our nation’s eternal gratitude but also something far greater.”

The queen turned back to the audience, spreading her arms for effect. “From this day forward, Victor shall be named Duke of Gloria, a title that carries with it the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that few have known. With that title, he shall take possession of the richest lands in all of Xan—the Duchy of Iron Mountain.” For the first time, the crowd wasn’t silent or cheering deafeningly; they murmured, a buzz of surprised reactions to the proclamation.

Kynna turned to look Victor in the eyes again. “The estate and all its wealth are now yours, including the stewardship of its people. As Duke, you shall oversee the noble Haveshi Family, Qi Pot’s surviving kin, and see to their well-being and livelihood as a testament to your honor.” Her tone grew soft, though her words were still carried out to the audience, “These lands will prosper under your care, just as our nation has thrived under your strength. Let this be a bond between us, Victor—a stake in the future of Gloria and a reminder that the freedom you fought for is now tied to you. The people you are responsible for will flourish or fail depending on our great nation’s course in the coming years.”

As the crowd buzzed, and Victor frowned, absorbing the import of the queen’s words, one man’s voice cried out, rising above the general clamor, “Who will be champion?”

The queen smiled and turned. Again, she spread her arms gracefully. “Rest assured, dear people, that Victor, Duke of Gloria, will remain our champion as long as he so desires. The offices of Duke and that of Royal Champion are not mutually exclusive.” She turned back to Victor. “Rise, Victor, Duke of Iron Mountain, Champion of Gloria. Rise and greet the people of your nation.”

Still frowning, well aware of the snare Kynna had just tightened around his ankle, Victor stood and turned to face the crowd. When he didn’t speak, and the crowd’s murmurs turned into a hush, Kynna cleared her throat. “Fear not the glower on our champion’s face—he’s a fearsome man; how else would he defend us? Now, feed his lust for glory, Gloria! Cheer your new duke! Cheer your champion

!”

Once again, the crowd erupted in thunderous applause, and Victor, ever slave to his pride and hunger for glory, couldn't help grinning fiercely as he held his hands above his head. He wanted to summon Lifedrinker, to let her bask in the glorious attention, but he knew better; his axe was still a secret on that world. Still, he pumped his fists in the air, pacing back and forth. After the crowd's enthusiasm refused to wane for several long seconds, he began to shout, bellowing into the air, roaring as his Core swelled with the glory-attuned Energy that found its way into his pathways.

After nearly a minute of that, Kynna used whatever uncanny ability she had to silence the crowd, and Victor calmed himself, lowering his fists and heaving for breath as he turned to regard the queen. “I'm pleased that our champion is so fierce and that you love him so, Gloria. Now, please follow your ushers' instructions as you safely exit the hall—it's time for you to return to the festivities! I'm extending the national holiday for another week!”

Victor was saved from further bouts of cheering as the heavy, midnight-blue curtain dropped from the rigging in the loft to conceal the stage. Alone on the stage with the queen, Victor glowered at her. “I know what you're doing.”

“Of course you do, Champion. You're an intelligent man.” She looked like she'd say more, but a dozen attendants had rushed the stage, and they were no longer alone. “Let us speak soon? I'm sure you're curious about your new holdings and how they might affect the...course of our diplomacy.”

Victor stepped close and spoke as plainly as he could without providing fodder to the many spies, no doubt listening to them, “I know how I want things to go. You know how Dar wants them to go. I don't think my new connections to your world will change much. Still, yes, My Queen, let us speak soon. I'd like to review how my role will play out now that I have a great duchy to manage.”

“Excellent. Tomorrow?”

Victor forced a smile. “If it pleases you.”

She shooed away a lady trying to help her doff the long, jeweled gloves she'd worn for the ceremony. “Unless you intend to consume the egg, that is. The literature all says that a person who eats one is likely to be incapacitated for upwards of a week.”

“I'll wait until we've spoken.”

“Very well. Congratulations, Duke Victor...What was your surname? I know I've been told—”

“Sandoval.”

“Duke Sandoval, then. It has a nice ring. Until tomorrow.” With that, she allowed her attendants to sweep her off the stage, and Victor was left standing in the gloom behind the dark curtains.

He pulled off the fancy jacket, sent it to storage, then stomped out of the enormous assembly hall, using the side exit where he'd been let in a couple of hours earlier. Of course, Bryn saw him as soon as he came through the door into the cool night air and hurried forward. "Your coach is ready, sir."

"Too much to ask that we walk?"

"The streets are crowded, especially around the hall—they're still releasing the audience." She hesitated a moment, then added, "I heard the news. Congratulations on your elevation."

"Elevation?"

"To the noble class. The Duchy of Iron Mountain is well known, even here in Gloria. There are stories about those lands—your wealth, in property alone, is now second only to the royal family."

"A pretty trap," Victor sighed, walking toward the bulbous, living-wood coach that had earlier delivered him.

"A trap?"

Victor ignored her until they were inside the plush leather interior of the coach, and he felt it gently lifting into the air. "Kynna wants me to have something more to lose than just my life." He frowned, and Bryn stared into space, perhaps trying to make sense of the statement. "What's the deal with the Haveshi family? Why am I in charge of Qi Pot's kin?"

"Because he was a duke, and there was no clause in the terms of the duel requiring his family to be slain or banished with his death. Queen Kynna is now the de facto ruler of Xan, so she can grant the various holdings of that Kingdom to people she views as loyal. Having given you Iron Mountain, Qi Pot's heirs will be stripped of their inheritance and most of their wealth. She's making you the honorary patron to their clan."

"Was his full name Qi Pot Haveshi, then?"

"I'm unsure." Bryn shrugged, making her armor clank. "I've only ever heard him called Qi Pot. Perhaps it's an assumed name or a title he earned with one exploit or another."

"Goddammit," Victor sighed, viciously scratching the sides of his head with his nails.

"What's—"

"That's the second time I've been given responsibility for the survivors of someone I've killed in a duel. It's bullshit. The first time was just a single girl—now I have a whole clan to look after? And how many will try to kill me in my sleep? I doubt they're all children, right?"

“That would be suicide for them. Their futures are now tied to yours. With your demise, they will be at the queen's mercy, or should you die in a duel, whatever ruler seizes the queen's power and lands.”

“And?”

“And most rulers would simply banish them to avoid trouble.” She shrugged.

“Banish or kill.”

“So, are they expecting that now?”

“Possibly. Queen Kynna is known to be kind, so they likely aren't afraid they'll be executed. However, banishment is surely on their minds. Keep in mind that while you are irritated by this turn of events, the Haveshi are only one noble family the queen has to sort out among dozens—nay, hundreds. She will have a very busy few months consolidating her grasp of the political landscape in her new hegemony.”

Victor's stomach rumbled, and he frowned, leaning back and thinking. He was irritated, but Bryn had made a good point; Queen Kynna had a big headache on her hands, and if Victor and Dar got their way, things would only get more complicated for her. He was complaining about being responsible for the fate of a single family and a single—albeit apparently large—duchy. At first, he thought she was just trying to tie him to something on Ruhn, and he felt like that was still true, but he also thought she might be trying to give him a glimpse into the complexity of taking on the rulership of an entire empire.

There were millions of people living on Ruhn. Millions of lives would be impacted by a succession war. Just because the nations of Ruhn didn't fight openly with armies didn't mean people wouldn't die. It didn't mean that people wouldn't be forced from their homes. It was a lot to think about. His stomach rumbled again, and Bryn cleared her throat.

“Dinner, sir?”

Victor shook his head. “I have something I've been wanting to eat back in my quarters. I need to do some thinking—let's head straight to the palace.” She nodded, and Victor smiled. He wondered what she'd say if he told her the thing he was hungry for was Qi Pot's heart.