

Victor of Tucson

#Chapter 1: Summoned - Read Victor of Tucson Chapter 1:

Chapter 1: Summoned

Tucson was hot in the summer; that wasn't anything new, but today the heat coming off the pavement felt particularly nasty to Victor. He was walking home from summer school - fuck Mr. Briggs and his fucking bullshit plagiarism. Victor spat and shook his head. No, he couldn't blame Briggs. He'd paid Tony for that essay; it wasn't Brigg's fault that Tony had got it off the internet. "Fucking pendejo," Victor laughed. That asshole charged him twenty-five bucks and then just cut and pasted it off some website. "Why am I thinking about this shit again? Fuck." He'd almost lost his chance to graduate and, along with it, his scholarship to Pima Community College. Yeah, big fucking deal, community college, right? But it was a start, and if he did well on the wrestling team there and kept his grades up, he'd maybe get to transfer to the U of A. Truthfully, he was fucking lucky Briggs had agreed to let him make up the missing credit through summer school. Well, Briggs, the Dean, and Ms. Marshal, the counselor. Damn, but she'd gone to bat for Victor.

"Look out, you fucking dipshit!" The shout accompanied a blaring horn and squealing tires. Victor stumbled back and realized he'd walked onto a crosswalk at a red light.

"Fuck you!" he shouted reflexively. The car was already speeding down Dodge Street, and Victor kicked some rocks waiting for the light to change. He almost dropped and did some pushups, but it was just too hot. He wiped some sweat off his brow, shoving it back into his short black hair. The hot wind blowing through the wet hair felt good for a couple of seconds, then it was just hot again. The light changed, and he jogged over Dodge back onto the sidewalk, following Grant Road west. His backpack bounced against his shoulder blades, sweat soaking the fabric of his shirt. The soles of his old Adidas tennies were worn so thin that the hot sidewalk made the rubber super malleable and almost uncomfortably warm. Impulsively, he picked up the pace, pushing himself into a jog, then a run, then a sprint as he came to Chrysler and took a left, his grandparent's neighborhood opening up before him.

"C'mon, just like coach says, 'always finish hard,'" Victor hissed. He sprinted past the Alvarez house, cutting the corner of their overgrown yard, into his grandparent's front yard, diving between the two huge old Oleander bushes, hopped the little barrel cactus, and then slid onto the shaded front porch. He knew his Abuela would have some juice made, and after he downed a huge glass, he'd take a shower and go see Marcy. She'd been funny lately, kinda distant. He was starting to wonder if she was gonna ditch him when she went to ASU. He opened the screen door and called, "Abuela!" He stepped into the living room, and then everything went black.

At first, Victor thought he'd passed out, but he was still conscious, still thinking, while he drifted in darkness. Was he drifting? He supposed he didn't know. He tried to wave his arms around, but he couldn't be sure they even moved. "What the fuck, man?" he tried to say, but no sound came out. He could think it, though, and he did. Just what the fuck was going on? Did he have a stroke? Sunstroke? No, man, he'd overheated before, and he knew what it felt like. He'd been fine, no headache, nothing. Some time passed while he contemplated his fate; he reflected on Marcy for a while, realizing he really didn't think it would be such a bad thing for them to take a break. She had a lot going on, and he needed to focus on getting his shit together. He thought about his grandma and how he needed to make her proud, which made him think about his Abuelo and how he'd never really done anything to make him proud before he died. Well, that wasn't entirely true: his grandpa saw him take second at state last year. Still, he'd wanted to do more. He'd always wanted to pay them back for taking him in when his parents died. His mom's parents hadn't given him the time of day.

A pinprick of light erupted in the vast expanse of darkness, and it jerked him out of his reverie. He watched as the pinprick expanded to a thumbnail, then a baseball, then a basketball, and then it rapidly widened to fill his vision, and Victor found himself standing in a big wooden room. Like everything was wood - the floor, the walls, the ceiling, everything. Four guys were standing in front of him wearing baggy brown robes with hoods, and they were all holding glowing metal rods. That's not what made Victor say, "What the fuck?" though. No, it was the strangers' blue skin and fucking fluorescent hair.

"Tshlanet!" one of the blue-skinned guys said.

Integrating non-system entity

Human species recognized and integrated

The messages flashed in front of Victor's eyes, and he swiped a hand over his face, thinking he had on some VR goggles or something, but there was nothing there. "What the fuck?" he repeated.

"Silence!" the blue-skinned guy on the left said.

"Well?" A deep voice sounded from Victor's left, and he looked to see a man leaning back against the wooden wall in the shadow of a support beam.

"I can sense a high Energy affinity in this one, but he's of pitiful rank and racial advancement - I'd say he's base zero. He must be from a dead world." One of the blue guys said. This one stood out with his bright green hair and eyes.

"Bah, another. Sell him to the pits."

“Hey, who are you, assholes? How’d you get me out of my Abuela’s house?” A yellow-haired blue guy stepped forward and swiftly tapped his metal rod on Victor’s forearm, and Victor felt cold wash over him. It was a deep, bitter cold that spread through his skin, into his bones, and down to the pit of his stomach. He felt like the life was being pulled out of him, but he couldn’t move; he didn’t even think he could breathe. The yellow-haired blue guy waved his rod again and uttered something, and then Victor felt himself lift up and float along, like how you might imagine Dracula would glide over the misty ground.

All the color in the world seemed drained, and Victor could mostly only see shades of gray as he floated along behind the blue man. He drifted through some doors, down a wooded forest path, and onto a wide dirt road. Victor panicked at first when he realized he wasn’t breathing, but then he noticed he didn’t feel any burning in his chest, didn’t feel any shadows creeping in on his vision, and he figured something the blue guy had done was keeping his body in a sort of state of suspended animation. He vowed to take that fucker down if he got the chance, though. This was a bullshit way to treat someone.

They followed the road for a while, and eventually, they started passing other people going in different directions. People in wagons and on weird mounts - things that looked like giant lizard birds, one guy rode a big fucking elk, and a huge hay wagon was pulled along by a lizard the size of an elephant. They came to a tall stone-block wall with a gate in it, and the blue guy leading Victor was waved through, though one of the guards frowned and spat as he walked by. Victor floated along behind the asshole through busy streets filled with lots of different kinds of people. So many weird-looking people that Victor started to think he must be tripping on acid or something. There were tall, beautiful women with glistening, magical-looking wings. He saw an eagle-headed guy arguing with a huge dude that looked like an otter. And there were lots and lots of blue and red-skinned people. The red guys were a bit bigger and meaner looking than the blue guys, and some of them had wings - enormous red dragon-style wings.

f(r)eeweb(n)ovel

They wended their way into back alleys, past very unsavory looking people, and deeper into the city still, where piled garbage was ubiquitous, and pools of questionable fluids had to be hopped by his blue-skinned escort. After more turns than Victor could keep track of, they finally entered a large wooden building with a giant wagon wheel hung over the barn-style doors. The blue man led Victor past men and women who sparred with fists and weapons. They were punching and wrestling all over the hay and sawdust-covered floors. They went to the back wall, through a small door, and into an office where an obese red-skinned man with black hair and black eyes sat at a small desk. He looked up, a wide grin splitting his thick lips and revealing long, gleaming white fangs. “What did you bring me today?”

“We got an item from a colleague at Fainhallow, he thought it might lead to an interesting summon, but we just got this base zero runt.” The blue guy waved a hand at Victor. “He has a high affinity, though. If you train him, he might be worth something someday.”

“Base zero, you say? He won’t make it through one Pit Night. I can’t pay much for fodder. I hope the summon wasn’t too costly.”

“Master ap’Gravin will take it out of his son’s hide; don’t you worry about that. Anyway, I’m late for dinner. What’ll you give us for him?”

“Oh, here’s five. More than that, and I’ll be losing money on his upkeep before Pit Night.” He pushed a little brown pouch toward the blue guy.

“Eh, it’s all the same to me; I didn’t put any money into his summon. I’m going to release him now; he’s your problem going forward. See you next time.” The blue asshole turned and walked past Victor, waving a hand as he went by. Victor felt warm tingles spread through his body, starting with his skin and progressing like a wave of ecstasy toward his stomach.

“Ah, Jesus, fucking pendejo!” Victor leaned forward and put his hands on his knees, gathering himself.

“Alright, boy. What’s your name?” The enormous red devil asked, standing up and shoving his chair back.

“Victor. Where the fuck am I?”

“You’re in my pit fighting hall, in a city called Persi Gables. You’re not from this world, just in case you were confused about that. Oh, and you’re my property now. Don’t make me exert dominance over you because I’d like you to be in one piece for Pit Night.”

“What? Assert dominance? The fuck are you talking about, man?”

“Did the language integration fail with you? Are you confused? Listen to my words, boy: you belong to me. You are no longer on your home planet. You will do as I say, or I will beat the piss out of you. Is the meaning of my words coming through?”

“Yes, fuck, man. How the....”

“Quiet now. I’m going to take you back to the pens, and one of the other fighters can play question and answer with you. I don’t have time for that nonsense. Follow me, and if you run, you’ll just follow me with a broken leg the next time.” Victor followed him. He didn’t like the idea of having to try to follow someone around with a broken leg, and the guy was big enough to do it; he had to weigh more than three hundred pounds. For all his size, the man walked briskly, passing over the sparring floor, through a side door, and into a long hallway lined with cages. Some of the cages were big with several people in them, and some were small and only held one occupant.

“Sir, what’s your name?” Victor asked, wondering if he could get anything out of the big man.

"You can call me Boss or Sir." He chuckled to himself as he fumbled with a big keyring, opening the door to a medium-sized cage with two other occupants. "I'll put you in here, Victor, because these are my two nicest fighters, and they might give you some pointers before Pit Night. You're welcome." He pulled the metal door open and gestured for Victor to enter. Not seeing any other option, Victor complied, stepping into the cage with a goat-man and a red-skinned woman with bright green-yellow eyes. "Vullu and Yrella, this is Victor. Victor's new around here; where are you from, Victor?"

"Um, Tucson?"

"Hah, okay, this is Victor of Tucson. Show him how things work around here." He slammed the metal door shut, and the two occupants went back to the dice game they'd been playing before Victor's arrival. He sat down on the straw floor and looked out through the bars of his cage, watching the strange prisoners of the other cells pacing around or sleeping or muttering threats at each other. What the fuck had he gotten into?

Chapter 2: Status

Victor had never been religious; sure, his Abuela was, and she made him go to church when he was little, but Victor had never seen eye to eye with the Catholic idea of life and death. That didn't stop him from falling on his knees in the hay and praying for a while, though. Hands clasped in front of him, eyes squeezed shut, he performed more Hail Marys than he ever had in his life, all the while wishing he had his grandma's rosary. This went on for a while until a cutting feminine voice said, "Kid, I don't know what you're doing, but stop it. You're driving me crazy." Victor opened his scrunched eyes, spots flaring in his vision, to see the lanky red-skinned woman squatting in front of him, scowling into his face. Her eyes were something else, though: mossy-green with specks of bright yellow and gold. When the lights hanging from the high wooden ceiling caught them just right, they almost glittered.

"Damn, your eyes are pretty," he said before he could catch himself. Her scowl didn't change, but her right hand came up faster than a striking cobra and slapped him on the cheek. Not hard, though, just enough to let him know she could. Victor tipped back onto his butt with momentum as he brought a hand up to his cheek out of reflex. He didn't say anything, though; why let her know it bothered him? "So, anyway, my name's Victor."

"Mmhmm, I'm Yrella. This is Vullu." She gestured to the goat-man, who leaned back into the far corner of the cage.

"Well, I've tried holding my breath, pinching myself, even praying, and I'm still fucking here, so I'd appreciate it, ma'am, if you could tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Oh?" she smiled and glanced at Vullu, sharing a joke. "So you're really not from this world, hmm? Old Yund sure has some interesting connections, eh, Vullu?"

“That he does, that he does. You know, I went to his house once, and not as a fighter, as a guest. Well, as the escort to a guest. His villa would send some of the nobility into fits of jealousy. Anyway, the point I’m making is don’t judge the man by the stinking cesspool where he works.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that. I’m well aware of his connections.” Yrella sat in front of Victor, crossing her legs in front of her, and contemplated him for a few seconds.

“Hey, excuse me? Would you mind just filling me in a little?” Victor couldn’t take it anymore.

“Oh, relax, kid. We aren’t going anywhere for a while. They won’t let us out to exercise until morning, anyway. So, tell me where you’re from, Victor.”

“Like my planet? It’s Earth.”

“Hmm, Earth. Not one I’ve heard before. You, Vullu?” The goat-man shook his head, eyes closed. “Well, what’s it like? Does everyone look like you there?”

“Uh, like, as in human? Yeah, but they all don’t look like me. Some have whiter skin; some have darker skin. Everyone has different hair. We’re all different sizes. Is that what you mean?”

“Human, hmm? Another new one. Well, you seem pretty weak, even if you are bigger than most Shadeni. What’s your level?”

“My what, now?”

“Your level. Hello? Maybe he’s not understanding everything, Vullu. Maybe the language integration didn’t work for him.”

“It’s possible, I suppose.” Vullu nodded, eyes closed, clearly almost asleep.

“Hey, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Look at your status sheet. Do you see System Language Integration under your skills?”

“Pendeja, are you fucking crazy? You’re talking like we’re playing a video game or something.” Yrella cocked an eyebrow and turned to look at Vullu, who had opened his eyes.

“What the Ancestors is going on with this kid?”

“Kid, say ‘status’ out loud and tell me what you see,” Vullu said. Victor looked from the goat-man to the demon woman, then shrugged.

“Status.”

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

—

Level:

0

Core:

—

Energy Affinity:

6.1

Energy:

0/0

Strength:

9

Vitality:

10

Dexterity:

9

Agility:

10

Intelligence:

8

Will:

8

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

—

Skills:

System Language Integration - Not Upgradeable

“Chingado....”

“Well?” Yrella pressed.

“Alright, what the fuck is this? There’s a fucking menu floating in front of my face.”

“Are you not familiar with the System?” Vullu asked.

“The what? No, we don’t have this system where I’m from. Are there fucking contacts in my eyes or something?”

Vullu and Yrella shared another look, then the goat-man sat up and scooted closer to Victor. “No, I mean the System, not a system. What level are you, Victor?”

“Umm, it says zero.”

“How can he be zero? He’s a man grown!” Yrella said.

“Victor, is there much Energy in your world?”

“Uh, yeah, even poor people have electricity where I’m from.”

“Electricity? Everyone is air-attuned on your world?”

“What? Dude, I don’t fucking get what you’re asking me.”

“How can they summon him from a System void? And from a dead world? He has to be from a dead world, right? How could he grow to his age, be fit physically and mentally, and not at least gain one level?” Yrella sat back, blowing out her breath incredulously.

“What the hell is a dead world? My world is plenty alive - billions of people, plenty of trees and fish and shit.”

“No, ‘dead world’ is a term for a world without Energy.”

“We’re talking in circles here! There’s fucking energy on my world. We have better lights and AC than this dump, that’s for sure.”

“He doesn’t know what we’re talking about,” Vullu said, “Here, Victor, look at my hand. These cages are warded, but I can get a little Energy out.” Vullu held his hand out, palm up, and closed his eyes. A moment later, a flickering blue flame took shape over his palm, growing to about three inches in height. Victor’s eyes opened wide, and he leaned forward, stretching out a hand toward the flame. It was hot!

“How the fuck you doing that?”

“Energy!” Vullu shook his hand, and the flame went away. A lightbulb went off in Victor’s head just then, and he looked at his status sheet again. There it was: Energy 0/0.

“Okay, I get it. I’ve played plenty of games; it’s like mana or some other bullshit. Well, I have zero out of zero.”

“Zero? It makes sense, I guess. If you don’t have Energy in your world, how would you form a Core? Well, don’t let that bother you. If you survive a few fights, you should start to build up some Energy, and someone can teach you to form a Core. That’s a big if, though, kid. Level zero? You’re probably gonna get killed pretty fast. Sorry.” In her defense, she really did look kinda sad, at least in Victor’s inexperienced opinion.

“So that big asshole is going to make me fight? For real? Like to the death, or are we talking MMA shit?”

“Oh, it’s usually to the death. Fighters want to get stronger, which means killing their opponents for an Energy increase.” Vullu shook his head while he spoke.

“So what the fuck? People can just enslave people and make them fight to the death in this world? That’s pretty fucked up.”

“Hah. There are rules, of course, but might makes right around here, kid, which puts you in a pretty shitty spot.”

“Hey, you said ‘shitty’ - so we have the same slang and everything? Is that the language integration you were talking about?”

“Oh, some of our slang will match, but you say some words I’m not understanding, and I’m sure I could find a word in my language you wouldn’t get. It’s pretty close, though. The System might be heartless, but it’s smart.”

“So what are the rules? How can that guy enslave us and get away with it? Aren’t there laws?”

“Oh, sure, that’s how he got us. Vullu and I got caught robbing a nobleman’s home. You go to prison, and people can buy your sentence. If we had powerful friends, they could have made Yund back off or bought our sentences themselves. We don’t have any, though, and you sure as hell don’t.” Yrella smiled, kind of glumly, and shrugged.

“Yeah, but I’m not a criminal!”

“No one in this entire world knows you, kid. Yund can do whatever he wants to you, and not a single soul will know or care. People will be having too much fun wagering on your fight to worry too much about where you came from.” Vullu scooted back to his corner and leaned back, crossing his hooved feet out in front of him.

“This is fucking bullshit.” Victor slid on his butt into the corner diagonally facing Vullu’s and leaned back, stretching out and crossing his arms on his chest. “Does this fucking System have any games? Or just this status shit?”

“Games? No, but we have some bone dice we made. I’ll teach you a game tomorrow, but let’s get some sleep before the other prisoners start throwing shit at us for talking too loudly.” Vullu yawned and nestled his chin down into his chest. Yrella didn’t say anything, but she lay on her side, resting her head on Vullu’s thigh.

“Did you mean that literally? Are they going to throw actual shit at us?” Victor asked quietly, looking around at the other cages and the sprawled-out inhabitants.

“Oh, I meant it. Good night, Victor.” A note of finality in Vullu’s voice forestalled any more questions from Victor. Instead, he grunted, rolling onto his side, wishing he had a jacket or his backpack for a pillow.

“At least I wore jeans today instead of shorts. I almost fucking wore shorts to school,” he muttered, closing his eyes, and had he been conscious to appreciate it; he would have been surprised at how quickly he fell asleep.

“Get up, Victor. You don’t want to miss breakfast.” Yrella nudged Victor with her foot, and his eyes popped open. It felt like he’d just gone to sleep. He groaned and rolled

onto his hands and knees. Out of habit, he started pumping out some pushups. He always did them first thing upon waking up - another thing his wrestling coach had drilled into his mind: before going to the bathroom, before brushing his teeth, before anything: pushups and situps. A booted foot pressed his shoulder and then shoved him sprawling onto his side. "The hell are you doing? You trying to get beat up in the yard? These meatheads don't want to see a runt like you trying to show off. Get up and line up behind me, so we can get out and eat." Yrella's voice was higher than usual like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Alright, jeez." Victor hopped up and stood behind Yrella, who stood behind Vullu, waiting for someone to come and open the door, he supposed. He looked up and down the long aisle between the pens, trying to discern if anything had changed, and he noticed the two cages to the left of them, toward the door, were empty. "Is it our turn next?"

"You learn quickly," Vullu said, a distinctly goat-like chuckle escaping his throat.

"After we eat, we get yard time?" Victor felt like he was in a prison VR. Now, he just had to keep his eyes open for some loose bricks or a guard who slipped away to be with his girlfriend, and then he could make a break for it. Yeah, right. He was mostly joking, but he did intend to try to get out of this place the first chance he got.

"That's right. We'll try to help you pick up a skill or two while we're out there."

"I know a few moves, but sure, I'm always up to learn something new. I guess fighting to the death is different from a wrestling match." Vullu looked back over his shoulder, up at Victor, and slowly nodded, and something was different in his eyes, almost like he'd appraised Victor differently. Victor looked down at Yrella's curly black hair, and before he could rein in his mouth, he said, "You seemed taller when we were all sitting in the cage." Yrella turned and looked at him, and Victor saw her right eye narrow slightly like she was contemplating something, but then she slowly exhaled through her nose and turned around without a word.

The door at the end of the aisle opened, and a large, furry otter-man came through, jangling a ring of keys. "You're up!" he announced, stepping up to their door and unlocking the cage door. Victor noticed that he had a metal rod with weird letters inscribed all over it, hanging from a loop on his belt. He stared at Victor with big, moist black eyes as he walked through the cage door. "Don't try anything funny, kid. Just 'cause Boss didn't tag you doesn't mean we won't."

"I won't," Victor said, hurrying after Yrella as she stepped through the door into the central portion of the building. He could smell something cooking, and as he stepped through the door, he saw that on the right, through a broad, short hallway, a cafeteria of sorts had been set up. He followed Yrella and Vullu as they walked around a few long wooden tables to a counter where a blue person in an apron was serving plates of food.

Victor took his, noting the buttered piece of round flatbread and the heaping scoop of fatty beans and mystery meat.

The trio sat at one of the tables without anyone else sitting at it and commenced to eat their food. Victor had eaten plenty of beans and eggs with tortillas, so he didn't balk at the lack of silverware; he just scooped his beans onto a hunk of flatbread and wolfed it down. The meat tasted like pork. "It's not bad, actually," he said. "Is there anything to drink?"

"Yeah," Vullu said, gesturing to a barrel and a small table stacked with wooden mugs. "Get us all a scoop, will ya?" Victor shrugged and went over to the barrel, grabbed a wooden mug, and scooped up some room-temperature water. He set the cup down by Yrella, then went back for two more.

"Not very refreshing," he said, sitting back down and taking a big gulp.

"Nope, but it does the job." Yrella slammed her empty mug down and burped. Vullu laughed, sipped his water delicately, and set his mug down.

"Well, what sort of fighting can you do, Victor?" Vullu asked, suddenly serious, "I'd like to see you survive your first Pit Night."

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 3: Practice

After they ate, Yrella told Victor that they'd have two hours to exercise before they had to go back to their pen. She and Vullu led him out of the cafeteria to the large grappling hall. There were already about twenty others tousling, exercising, and lounging around on benches watching. "What keeps you all from rising up? Fighting your way out of here?"

"Aside from the fact that most of these assholes would kill each other just as soon as they'd work together, most of us that Yund feels threatened by have been tagged."

"Tagged?" Victor looked at her quizzically. Yrella pulled her loose gray blouse up by her waist and showed him a bright blue tattoo on her hard, red stomach.

"Tagged. The ink is infused with an alchemical mixture that binds us to the control rods Yund and his lackeys have. It's an expensive process, so they don't do it to all of the fresh meat." She winked at Victor and tousled his hair.

"Well, you've got some fucking tight abs." He smiled at Yrella's confused face, then looked around the room and said, "Any workout gear? Or I gotta wear my jeans and shit?"

"Your clothes? You'll have to make do with what you have. Yund is a cheap bastard when it comes to us fighters."

"Alright, Victor," Vullu cut in, "let's see what kind of fighting you do." They were standing in a relatively quiet corner of the sparring gym, and Vullu sidestepped, facing Victor, beckoning him to come at him with one of his hands. Victor hopped up and down a few times, getting his blood pumping, then he faced Vullu, his center of gravity low, and moved toward him, circling with him, watching him for any forward movement. "Come, Victor, show me..." He couldn't finish the sentence because Victor had feinted with his right hand, drawing Vullu's eye, then he'd swept in low, grabbed Vullu's back ankle/hoof, lifted it tight to his chest, and swept his other leg, dropping the goat-man onto his back.

Congratulations! You've learned Unarmed Combat - Basic.

"Ancestors! That was smooth! You didn't even see him coming, Vullu!" Yrella laughed, mockingly offering to help Vullu stand, then pulling her hand back. Victor was too astounded by the message floating in his vision to pay them any attention.

"What the fuck is this? I just learned unarmed combat, basic. What the fuck? Basic? I don't think so!"

"Do you feel like you know anything new? Really think about it; concentrate on what you know about fighting." Vullu said, grunting and standing up. Victor did as he said and couldn't find anything new in his head. It was weird, exhaustively trying to contemplate what he knew about something, but nothing was new as far as he could tell.

"Nah, I don't think so."

"I think the System is still trying to categorize what you know, at least with regard to fighting. Let's go, try that again, and if you get it, keep going. Show me what you'd do next." Victor nodded and moved back into circling with Vullu. This time he closed in and grappled with Vullu a bit, reached in, grabbed his neck, pulled on him, grabbed his wrist, pulled it, let him try to grab his wrist, and then rolled it out of the grip. Then just as Vullu was starting to get lulled by the push-pull of the grappling rhythm, Victor swept low and forward, grabbed both of Vullu's legs, and drove him backward onto the wooden floor.

Vullu thrashed and tried to flop over, but Victor's ground game was strong. He scrambled up, keeping his center of mass pressing down on Vullu the whole time, then scooped up his head and left arm in a lock, driving his full weight into his shoulder, pressing down on Vullu's chest while he squeezed his head and arm. Vullu was definitely pinned, but now what? They weren't in a wrestling match.

"Uh, you have me immobilized, but now what? What if I start punching you?" Vullu grunted, balling up his free hand into a fist and pounding it into Victor's upper back and side. Victor hunkered down, so his head wouldn't get hit and squeezed harder, going up

on his toes to push more of his weight into his shoulder, bearing down on Vullu's chest even more. "Ugh, that's uncomfortable, but it won't stop anyone with any decent points in strength and vitality. What are you going to do?"

"Alright, pinche," Victor growled, then he hauled up on the smaller man, scooting his legs under him, so he was behind him, still holding his arm and head in a death grip. This wasn't high school wrestling; why the fuck was he following rules? He let Vullu's arm slip out of his grasp, but then he redoubled his hold on Vullu's neck, wrapping it deep into the crook of his elbow and pressing on the back of his head in a full, rear-naked chokehold. He held it until Vullu stopped thrashing, then he let go, pushing the goat-man off himself and standing up.

Congratulations! You've learned Grappling - Improved.

Vullu had started gasping for breath almost the moment Victor let go. He and his buddies had played around plenty with chokeholds; he knew when to let go to avoid hurting someone. "Fuck yeah! Improved Grappling that time!"

"That's a more specialized skill, but improved? How can someone without a class learn beyond basic?" Vullu looked at Yrella, and she just shrugged. He looked back at Victor and said, "That was a good choke, but you realize I haven't been fighting back, right?"

"Yeah, well, I kinda could tell." Victor shrugged.

"Hey, I just had a thought," Yrella said. "Victor, do you feel like you know more about grappling now?"

"No, I don't feel any fucking different."

"Uncle's arse, but you use that word a lot - 'fuck, fucking, fuck, fuck.' What does it even mean?"

"Fuck? You guys don't have that word? It means a lot of stuff. It can mean the same as shit, or it can mean extremely, like if I said, 'that is fucking cool,' that would mean something is extremely cool. It also means sex. I'm sure there's more to it, but that's all I can think of right now." Victor shrugged. Yrella looked at him strangely, opened her mouth to say something, then stopped and shook her head slightly.

"Anyway, I was thinking the System isn't giving you those skills; it's just recognizing that you have them." She turned to Vullu, "So it didn't give him an improved skill; he already had it."

"Ahh, yes. That makes more sense. If he'd just learned those skills, he'd have gotten Energy with them. Maybe even enough to gain his first level." Vullu was nodding.

"Victor, answer me this: have you ever learned to fight with any weapons?"

“No, not really. I mean, me and my buddies used to play around with wooden swords, but we never learned any real skills.”

“Yrella, will you go check out a couple of practice axes?”

“Axes? You sure that’s best for him to learn with?”

“Well, no. The spear would probably be better, but I like axes, so that’s what he’s getting.” Yrella shrugged and sauntered over through a doorway near Yund’s office. Victor watched her go, and Vullu snorted, “Don’t let her catch you looking at her like that, kid.” Victor jerked his head away and feigned a stretch.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

“Good, play it off. That one has teeth, and you have enough problems to deal with, you hear me?” Victor looked at the little goat-man again, more closely, and he had to admit the older guy could be intimidating when he wanted to be. He had a short gray beard, and a mostly human-looking face, except for those weird yellow-gold eyes with weird-ass irises.

“Hey, what are you, er your people, like called?”

“Ahh, no Cadwalli on your world, eh? Makes sense; I’ve never seen a wingless Ghelli like you.”

“The fuck? Ghelli?”

“Well, you look kind of like a Ghelli, though they’re very slight people - you’re too stocky, and, as I said, they have wings. Ahh, here she comes.” Vullu turned and held out a hand, to which Yrella tossed a heavy-looking single-bladed hand axe. He caught it, gave it a twirl, then nodded to Victor. Victor turned and took the axe Yrella was holding out to him. It had a stout wooden handle, and the axehead was broad and heavy, definitely bigger than his grandpa’s hatchet. He held a thumb to the blade and saw that it was rounded and smooth; he couldn’t cut butter with this thing.

“Alright, Victor. Stand behind me. I’m going to run through some standard axe forms, and I want you to mirror my movements. We’ll do each one five times at first, then run through them faster and faster. Victor nodded and took up position behind Vullu. Yrella stood to the side, scrutinizing him as he tried to copy Vullu’s movements as precisely as possible. The way Vullu moved reminded Victor of old dudes on VR doing that Tai Chi stuff - he moved slowly and smoothly, and Victor found it easy to mimic him, at least at first. After they’d gone through about ten different movements, repeating each one five times, like Vullu said they would, he picked up the pace, moving a little faster and only repeating the movements four times. Then he moved even faster, cutting the repetitions down to three. By now, Victor’s arm and shoulder muscles were starting to burn, and he was breathing heavily. Still, he pushed through - if coach Dorgan had taught him

anything, it was to push through the burn, push past the pain. When they were on their next run through, doing two quick repetitions, a new message appeared in Victor's vision:

Congratulations! You've learned Axe Mastery - Basic.

Victor stopped swinging in surprise when he saw a bunch of tiny golden flecks of light start to gather in the air around him. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, wondering if he was about to pass out or something, but then the little motes of golden light rushed toward him, and he felt like he'd just popped an E-bomb. He shook his head and put his hands on his knees. "Whoah, fucking hell."

Congratulations! You've achieved level 1 base human.

The rush faded quickly, and Victor stood up, feeling fresh, almost like he hadn't been working out at all that day. "Well, I'm fucking level one now. Watch out, bitches!"

"That's how things work when you learn a new skill, Victor. Think about the axe and what you know now about fighting." Vullu held up his axe like a visual aid. Victor did as he said and was surprised that he did seem to know an awful lot about axe fighting that he had no business knowing. He knew what angle to hold the blade at for different types of chops, he knew about not extending his center of balance when he swung, and he knew about following through and using momentum to create new opportunities. The number of little facts he knew about axes was simply mind-boggling.

"Well, that's nuts. So the 'System' just put a bunch of shit in my head? I could've used this during Chemistry class." He held his fingers up, making quotes when he said System, and Yrella and Vullu looked at him quizzically. He shrugged and said, "Eh, never mind. So, like, can I get my axe skill even higher by practicing with you?" .c(o)m

"No, not really. You can get more fluid and increase your ability to the very edge of 'basic,' but you won't be able to move to improved until you have a class that supports it.

"A Class? Jesus, this place really is like a game. So, how do I get a class?"

"You live long enough to get to level ten. Or, at least that's when most races get their class. I've heard that some of the lower races, like Urghat, get a class much earlier, though they have terrible potential for growth."

"Bro, you're losing me. So, if I'm like you guys, I should get a class around level ten. Alright, let's hope I can get there. Can you guys teach me more skills that will give me levels?" Victor looked from Yrella to Vullu, and they exchanged glances also, then Yrella shrugged.

"I could teach you some things with knives, spears, and swords. Vullu, you should teach him bludgeons. You'll just have basic skills with them, but you won't be helpless if they put weapons in your pit match. Vullu and I both have some Energy skills we could try to teach you if you had a Core, but you'll need a few levels worth of Energy to build a Core. Oh, look at your status - do you have any Energy now?"

"Um," Victor said, pulling up his status menu and looking at the little Energy label. "I have thirty over zero now."

"Good, your body is absorbing Energy properly. We just need to help you build enough to allow you to form a Core. I doubt we'll get there with just a few skills, though. You'll get a lot more from killing your opponents in the pit."

"Fuck. I keep forgetting about that shit, but I really have to fight to the death, huh? This shit is nuts."

"Unless you want to sit down and die. Trust me; they aren't going to throw you in there with a pacifist." Yrella said, stepping forward and squeezing Victor's shoulder. "You gotta get your head right, kid. This isn't a joke. There are worse places on Fanwath you could be, but not many."

Chapter 4: The Rusty Nail

Victor followed Yrella through the spear forms for the third time, stepping, thrusting, and shouting, "Eyah!" Then he brought the spear shaft around, pushing it with the rear gripping hand, then stepping back, snapping the spear back straight, and moving the spearhead in a small loop. He really didn't know what the fuck all these moves were for, but he could imagine an enemy before him and did his best to mimic Yrella.

Congratulations! You've learned Spear Mastery - Basic.

"That did it!" Victor braced himself for the rush of Energy as the tiny golden motes coalesced in the air and then surged into him. He whooped loudly and shouted, "Fuck yes! That never gets old."

Congratulations! You've achieved level 2 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.

"Oh, nice! I hit level two, Yrella!" The spear was the third weapon that he'd gained skill with that day; he'd started with bludgeons with Vullu, then Yrella had taken over and taught him some knife fighting skills before the spear. "I have five attribute points to spend, too!"

"That's good. It seems like your race has similar base properties to mine. The fact that you're leveling off a few simple basic skills shows you have good affinity, too. Celebrate; your people are stronger than Yeksa!"

“The fuck is a Yeksa?”

“You should hope to find out. With any luck, they’ll throw some Yeksa against you in the pit for your first few matches; I think you could win.”

“So they’re scrubs?”

“They’re,” she looked at him closely, squinted her eyes, then continued, “lesser creatures. They have poor affinity and struggle to gain a few levels in a lifetime.”

“Well, what should I do with my points?”

“Five points spread over several attributes will mean very little in tomorrow’s pit fight. I’d put them all into one - maybe strength or vitality.”

“Hey, you guys have been very helpful to me, and I appreciate it, but I can trust you, right? I mean, like, why have you been so nice? I don’t think you’d tell me some bullshit, but I gotta ask.” Victor braced himself for an angry reaction, but Yrella just smirked.

“We aren’t altruistic.” She nodded to Vullu, who was slamming his fists into a wooden post. “Vullu and I get some time knocked off our sentences for each win we get, and if we help out new fighters, we get a little bit of time knocked off if they win.”

“Ahh, damn. Well, thanks for letting me know.” Victor had a sudden thought, “Hey, so you guys have set amounts of time you belong to Boss,” he gestured to the big red man who was berating one of his employees in the far corner of the exercise hall, “but what about me? I don’t have a fucking sentence I’m serving. Am I trapped here forever?”

“That’s a good question, Victor. I’d focus on solving that problem after dealing with the more immediate issue - you have a pit fight tomorrow, and you’re level two without a Core.” She twirled her spear between her two hands, making it dance between them as she spoke. Victor frowned but didn’t argue. He called up his status sheet and decided to dump all five points into strength. Maybe it would let him break a hold or squeeze someone’s neck just that extra bit that would make the difference.

A wave of Energy flooded through his body after distributing the points on his status screen, and he took in a deep breath, stretching with his arms held out wide, arching his back as the tingles flooded through him. When it passed, he flexed his biceps, and they definitely popped a lot more than they used to. “Fuck yes!” He had very little body fat, even before he was summoned, but now, with his strength jacked and after a workout, his muscles felt and looked pumped like never before. Yrella snorted.

“You’re still just a baby, don’t go getting full of yourself. Some of the monsters in here,” she gestured around the warehouse, “would kill you just for the way you look.”

“Oh, like they’re fucking racists or something?”

“Racist? Yes, I suppose plenty of Shadeni hate other people just because they’re different, and I have bad news for you, Victor: you’re more different than anyone I’ve met.”

“Um, I didn’t want to be rude, but is that what your race is called? Shadeni?”

“Yes, that’s right.” She knelt to pick up the spear that Victor had dropped.

“Well, I mean, it’s not really true that I’m the most different - I mean, we have different colored skin, but I don’t have furry legs and hooves like old Vullu, there.” He nodded at the goat-man, who had stopped punching the wooden post and was unwinding the cloth strips around his knuckles.

“Don’t be so literal, kid. I meant there’s no one else like you in this world, as far as I know. C’mon, let’s go turn these spears in. Our time’s almost up.” She handed him his spear, and he followed her toward the equipment room.

“Do you think there’s any way I could get home? I mean, assuming I survive the pit and somehow get free of this place. You think I could find a way?”

“Assuming all that? Sure, why not? Some powerful mages summoned you, but I bet there are powerful mages that can undo it or just help you teleport home. A lot is possible for the higher tier Energy users.” That gave Victor plenty to think about, so he didn’t reply, just silently followed her as they turned in their gear. Further conversation was cut short when they were shouted at by one of Yund’s lackeys to get their asses back to their cage.

Victor was given a hard piece of buttered bread that afternoon, just like on his first day, after they were put back in their cage. As far as he could tell, he was the only one that got this treatment, and Vullu had explained that his low Energy level and lack of a Core meant he had to eat more food than the others to survive. He didn’t argue - he was starving like a motherfucker, pretty much all the time. Their water bucket was filled each day, and they all shared the same tin cup, but Victor also drank more than the others.

The afternoons were the most boring for Victor. Everyone else spent time doing something they called “cultivating.” They sat around meditating and didn’t speak for hours. Yrella tried to explain that once he had a Core, he’d learn how to cultivate Energy to build it up. That might be, but for now, he just had to bide his time, waiting for them to get tired of it so they could talk for a while before lights out. That afternoon proved worse than usual - Yrella and Vullu spent extra time cultivating, apparently trying to squeeze in as much as possible on the eve of Pit Night.

Victor wrestled with his fears and despair. He was good at bluster and bravado and shoving his feelings where he didn’t have to think about them, especially when he had training to do, but here, in the quiet cell, with everyone preparing for battle, he couldn’t escape his mental demons. What was going to happen? Was he going to die tomorrow?

Was he going to have to kill someone? Could he? Tucson seemed like a million years in the past when he tried to think of his friends or Marcy or his Abuela.

For the first time in a long while, he thought of his parents. He'd been eight when they died in a car wreck. He'd been in the backseat, but he didn't remember the crash at all. He remembered them arguing, though. His mom had been yelling, her red-brown hair tied up in a bun, her eyes red with tears. His father's hands gripped the steering wheel, staring straight ahead, refusing to answer her. That was the last image he could muster up from the depths of his mind. He didn't remember what they were saying or how the crash had happened; he just remembered his grandma picking him up from the hospital and taking him home. Then there'd been a funeral, and he remembered his aunties talking about how rotten his other grandparents were for not coming.

When Yrella finally stirred and interrupted his reverie, Victor was grateful. He was ready to jump at any excuse to banish the memories, so when she shook her dice, he scooted over in front of her, and they played the simple dice game for a couple of hours before Vullu spoke up and said they should be quiet and go to sleep. Victor groaned, but he was dog tired, so he slid over to his corner and laid down on his side, using his arm for a pillow, and closed his eyes. Sleep came quickly, as it inexplicably usually did in this place, and when he felt Yrella's boot shaking his shoulder, he hopped up, feeling refreshed, if a bit stiff.

They were given their normal breakfast rotation, but then the routine changed. Yund and his goons gathered up almost all the cage occupants and made them stand shoulder to shoulder in two rows of twenty. Then, Yund moved to the front of the hall, near the big barn doors, and addressed them in a booming voice, "Alright, you worthless slugs! Time to earn your food. Today we're going to the dockyard, fighting in the Rusty Nail, which means we need to travel. You know what it means when we travel, right?" He paused here, but whatever he'd been hoping Victor's fellow prisoners would say didn't come, so he kept speaking, "That means you better damn well be on your best behavior. Urt, Ponda, and I will be quick on the batons, and I swear to the Ancestors that I'll make you piss blood before I let off the pressure. You get me?"

No one spoke, some of the prisoners shuffled their feet and grumbled, but it seemed that everyone had learned, or inferred, in Victor's case, that Boss Yund didn't want anyone to answer his questions. Victor wondered if they were going to be allowed to just walk freely toward whatever the Rusty Nail was. Still, his hopes of sprinting away down an alley were dashed when Yund's lackeys, Urt and Ponda, came along the line, somehow producing leather belts out of thin air and handing them to each prisoner. When Ponda, the big furry, otter-looking fucker passed Victor a belt, he glanced at Yrella and saw she was already fastening hers around her waist. Victor did the same, noting that the clasp had an iron loop on it.

Urt came along then, leading a long, clinking chain. He went down the row, hooking the chain to each prisoner's belt through the iron loop. When he got to Victor, he reached out and yanked on the belt, making sure it was tight before he slipped the chain through

the loop. After this went on for a few minutes, Yund cranked open the big barn doors and led the prisoners, in two lines, out into the dirty street, walking toward the fat, orange, setting sun. Victor glanced around, happy for his first real look at the city, and he caught his breath when he saw the two moons halfway up the sky opposite the sun. One was huge with rings around it, and the other was small and looked almost like Earth's moon. "Chingada!"

"What?" Vullu asked from behind him.

"The moons. Fucking hell, we really aren't on Earth, are we?"

"You didn't believe it until now?" Yrella looked back over her shoulder at him.

"I guess I did, but seeing these fucking moons makes it a little more real."

"Welcome to Fanwath, runt!" a huge red-skinned man said over Vullu's shoulder. He was a good foot taller than Yrella, and he had big red spikes growing out of his shoulders; otherwise, he looked like one of her people. Victor just swallowed and turned back to the front, following behind Yrella and trying not to get noticed by any of the other prisoners. He glanced from side to side, noting the buildings and how they were so very different from those in Tucson. Every building was at least two stories high, and they were made from wood and stone blocks. He didn't see any stucco, nor did he see any concrete. The streets were made of bricks or, he supposed, cobbles. Trees were nowhere to be seen at first, but then they passed out of the shitty neighborhood where Yund's building was, and he started seeing big tall trees with fucking weird-ass blue leaves. They passed some parks with blue-green grass and some tall stone buildings with actual street lamps outside them, just starting to click on and give off a warm amber glow in the fading daylight; then, they were out of the rich section of town and walking downhill to a more industrial area.

When they crossed through a rather busy square that reminded Victor of a swap meet, something startling happened. A few spots ahead of Victor, one of the other prisoners grunted loudly and hunched over, his broad, musclebound red shoulders flexing with strain, and then he was suddenly sprinting away from the line. Victor saw his ripped belt fall to the cobbles, but as soon as he realized what had even happened, Ponda lept through the air, trails of wispy orange smoke in his wake, and smashed down atop the fleeing prisoner. Victor heard the snap of bones and winced. Ponda lifted the large prisoner with one hand, gripping him by the back of the neck, and dragged him back to the line. The man thrashed and cried out, clearly in pain, but Ponda strode doggedly along as if he were hauling a misbehaving toddler. Ponda produced a pair of iron manacles, hooked one to the man's wrist and another to the cable connecting all the other prisoners, and said, "Thanks for letting us know you need a collar. Don't try that again."

"Poor asshole," Victor said.

“Yeah, he’ll be stuck now; they’ll collar him or put a mark on him like me,” Yrella replied.

When they went around a corner and turned down another hill, Victor caught his first glimpse of the shipyard and a vast expanse of water. Victor had never been out of Arizona before, and when he saw the setting sun reflecting over the glittering water as far as he could see, he caught his breath and said, “Holy shit, is that the ocean?”

“No, it’s actually a freshwater lake - Lake Beliss,” Yrella said quietly, and Victor could see that she was also taking in the view. “My uncle had a ship and crew and fished out there when I was young.” She sighed heavily. “Maybe I’ll get back out there someday. It’s beautiful out on the water this time of day.”

“Especially if you have some wine and buttered freshwater qrell, right, beautiful?” Yund boomed from just behind Victor. How the fuck had he snuck up on them? Yrella ignored him, but Yund just laughed and walked up the line, jostling or yelling at various prisoners and laughing at their discomfort. They continued down the slope to the docks and then turned to the left, following a crowded wharf street to an even more crowded yard outside a large wooden structure. On the building, above the wide-open doors, a huge rusty metal spike had been mounted, and an equally rusted metal sign proclaimed, “The Rusty Nail.”

Chapter 5: Pit Night

The Rusty Nail was like a bad fever dream to Victor. As the sun set and the crowd grew, he and his comrades from Yund’s stable were kept sequestered in a roped-off section of the enormous warehouse, but he could see the craziness unfold from behind the ropes, just fine. Just like when he’d been led through the streets, he noticed the wide variety of people who cohabitated in this strange world. Red, blue, white, brown, black, tall, thin, short, fat, winged, feathered, furred, hooved, clawed, horned, almost anything he could fucking imagine was represented in the crowd of jostling, drinking, laughing, cussing, and fighting people. As the night outside deepened, the air in the warehouse grew heavy with odors and smoke and heat.

Yund wasn’t the only boss that had brought a troupe of fighters. The various groups, some as large as Yund’s and others with just one or two fighters, were all kept in roped-off areas on the back periphery of the Rusty Nail. The majority of the thousands of square feet in the warehouse’s interior were taken up by stands for spectators, mobile food carts, desks for bookies, and a dozen or so pits. The pits were about twenty feet in diameter, about eight feet deep, and each had a big wooden sign on a post that had a number on it. Victor surprised himself by not being a nervous wreck. He thought part of it was that the warehouse and the pits reminded him a lot of the inside of a big gym during a wrestling invitational. The pits were like different mats, and the pit fighters were like wrestling teams. He knew it was a bullshit comparison, but it was keeping him cool, so he didn’t overthink it.

"This is fucking nuts," he said to Vullu as he watched the crowd grow and a band started playing some strange, wild music on a small stage over by the big doors leading to the festival-like yard outside the warehouse. The music reminded him kind of like some fucking weird mix of country bluegrass and mariachi, with lots of stringed instruments and a really upbeat section of horns blaring over the noise in the crowd.

"Oh, aye. People love Pit Night in this city. There are at least four other locations like this. Yund even hosts a smaller gathering at the Wagon Wheel once a month." .com

"Did I hear you use my name, Cadwalli?" Yund turned from where he'd been talking to a sleazy-looking little blue guy and scowled at Vullu.

"No, boss, I think that came from just behind me. Not sure who it was."

"Right," Yund glowered at him for a moment, then turned back to the clipboard the little blue man was holding. After a few minutes and some grunted curses, Yund chased the guy away and then turned to his gathered troupe of fighter-slaves. "Listen up, you dogs!"

"Are there dogs here?" Victor asked Vullu quietly.

"Of course!" he said, then held a finger to his lips.

"We're overrepresented, and that little asshole just let me know that I need to adjust our roster to make up for it. That means some of you fodder will be fighting as a group against a stronger opponent. It's your chance for glory! You'll get a gold-tier reward when we get back to the Wagon Wheel if you win! Get yourselves ready - you know who you are." Then he turned and walked over to a table where a harried, white-haired woman was frantically flipping through some papers.

"That's you, kiddo," Yrella said from behind Victor.

"That didn't sound like good news to me."

"Not really. Just remember: no matter how strong, a fatal wound is a fatal wound. There are no trinkets or potions allowed in the pits. Cut through a neck, pierce a heart, smash a skull, and you can win." Yrella rubbed the outsides of Victor's shoulders briskly, then gave them a good slap. "Get your fire up, kid. You need to win; there's no other option." Victor nodded, scowling, trying to get himself pumped. He slapped his hands together and jogged in place, and then Yund was back.

"Alright, listen: Sarl, Turdwater, Asslick, Vel, and Victor, get in front of me!" Victor almost laughed when he heard some of the names, but adrenaline and nerves kept him from really enjoying it, so he ducked under the rope and stood in front of Yund. The others Yund had called jostled him as they came up from behind, pushing and shoving to stand close to Yund. Victor glanced at them and saw two blue guys, one with yellow hair and

the other colored bright rust. He saw another otter-person, but he thought it must be a female because she was slight and had some curves that stood differently than he'd seen on Ponda. The fifth member of their impromptu team was a fragile-looking man with lusterless, limp dragonfly wings on his back.

"Here, Boss," yellow-hair said.

"Right, Asslick. Follow me!" Yund turned and started to wend his way along the wooden pathway between pits, stands, and tables. He shoved people that blocked his way, and, generally, people scrambled to get out of his way. Victor followed closely, aware of all the eyes on him but still wondering if there was any fucking way at all that he might get out of this mess. Most of the pits were empty, the first fights just getting lined up, but they passed by one with some action going on. As they got close, Victor stared into the pit and almost puked his guts out when a tall, bird-headed guy tore a blue guy's throat out with his oversized beak.

"Fuck me," he said, and strangely, the otter-woman reached forward and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"Courage," she said in a soft, rich voice. Victor looked back into her big moist eyes, and he nodded, drawing his brows together, trying to look fierce. He looked back to Yund's back, followed him around one more empty pit, and then they were there, standing before pit number four. A good-sized crowd was standing around the pit's edge, but they cleared the path for Yund, and he waded up to the edge and gestured with one hand.

"In you go, runts. Good luck! Taste some glory in your miserable lives!" Victor walked up to the edge, thinking about jumping down to the sand. Before he did, he glanced over his shoulder at his "team" first. The otter-woman was right behind him, but the bright-yellow-haired blue guy had dropped to his knees in front of Yund.

"Please, Boss! I can be valuable to you in other ways; I'm not cut out for fighting!"

"C'mere, Asslick. Stand up," Yund said in a surprisingly gentle voice. Asslick stood and walked closer to Yund, hope in his eyes, and then Yund put one meaty hand around Asslick's neck and yanked him over the edge and into the pit. Asslick landed awkwardly on the packed sand, crying out as his knee buckled under him. "Get in the father-damned pit!" he roared. Victor didn't wait for another invitation and hopped down, landing lightly on his feet. Otter-woman followed, stumbling as she landed, and Victor caught her arm, keeping her from falling. The other blue guy hopped down, a nasty sneer on his face, and then the tall, winged guy carefully scooted to the edge and hung down by his hands from the edge until his toes touched the sand. "My team's ready!" Yund hollered from above Victor's head.

A goat-man like Vullu stood on the other side of the pit, and he nodded, gesturing to the pit. The woman who hopped down into the pit from behind the goat-man looked so

much like Yrella that, at first, Victor thought Yund would make her fight them. When she straightened up, though, Victor could see the differences. She was taller, more muscular, had little horns poking through her black hair, and her eyes were like smokey orange coals. She stood on her side of the pit, watching the five members of Yund's team coolly. A moment later, a blue guy with violet hair approached the edge of the pit with a spear in each hand.

"This fight will commence on my word. Are both teams ready?" While he listened to Yund and the goat-man answer in the affirmative, he tossed the two spears toward the far side of the pit, toward the middle. He looked at Victor's team, then at the tall Shadeni woman, then he shouted, "Begin!"

Asslick scrambled toward one of the spears; Victor crouched down and moved to his right, keeping the Shadeni woman in view. Otter-woman followed along with Victor, but the other blue guy stumbled back, trying to get to the pit's edge, his knee buckling with each step. The thin winged guy moved toward the horned woman with his hands out in fists. Asslick made it to a spear and turned, grinning, toward the tall red woman. She hadn't yet taken a step, but she smiled at Asslick and strode toward him. He charged with the spear, driving the point toward her stomach, but she smoothly sidestepped, then burst forward so fast that Victor thought she blurred a little, and drove the edge of her hand into Asslick's throat with such force that he was flipped backward off his feet to land on his back with a resounding thud.

As Asslick lay writhing, choking, and scrabbling at his neck, the winged guy dove at the woman with surprising grace, dodging her kick and then landing a solid punch to the side of her head. She smoothly stepped back, assessing the winged guy anew, then began to circle him. "C'mon," Victor said to Otter-girl. "She'll take us apart if we fight her one by one." Otter-girl nodded, then they started to circle the Shadeni woman, already named Big Red in Victor's mind, making her split her attention from the winged guy. The woman hadn't bothered to pick up the spear that Asslick had dropped, and Victor thought he could get to it pretty easily, but he wondered if he should. Would it just make him her next target? Instead, he moved over toward the spear, keeping his hands out, his center low, ready for the woman to charge him.

"Ghelli, just lay down, and I'll end this quickly," Big Red purred, her voice sending chills down Victor's spine.

"I didn't lay down when ap'Guin's men raped my wife. I didn't stand down when my men and I tore his household limb from limb. I didn't stand down when the Count burned my estate. I didn't stand down when the farcical trial sent me to the mines. I didn't stand down when I was sold to this hell. No, you will have to finish me kicking and screaming the whole way."

"Quite a speech! Did you rehearse that?" She glided over the sandy ground to the winged man like a rattler darting toward a mouse. They exchanged a flurry of blows and blocks that Victor couldn't keep track of, but he didn't care; he'd been waiting for this

moment, and he flicked the spear up with the top of his old worn Adidas, grabbed the haft in his right hand and chucked it like a javelin at the woman's back. She must have sensed his movement because she whirled around as though to strike him, but it wasn't him ripping through the air; it was a sharp spear. Her outflung arm deflected the spear's trajectory, but it tore a long gash along her forearm. As she hissed and grabbed at the cut with her other hand, the winged dude landed a thunderous haymaker into the back of her skull.

Victor figured that if the winged guy were stronger, it would have been lights out for Big Red, but though she stumbled forward, shaking her head, she didn't go down. That's when the otter-woman strode forward past Victor, hands outstretched. Victor felt the air temperature drop, and then white frost started forming around the otter-woman's hands, and a spray of tiny shards of ice blasted out, tearing into the Shadeni woman. She screamed, holding her arms in front of her face, then she whirled away, rolling over the sand to the spear against the far wall. The spray of ice shards sputtered out, and the otter-woman leaned forward, gasping for breath. Victor ran toward the other spear, looking around to see what the fuck the rest of his team was doing. Asslick was lying still on his back, eyes open and staring. Was he fucking dead? The other blue guy was scrabbling at the pit's edge, trying to climb out.

"You fucking dick! Get down and fight!" Victor screamed as he slid into the spear like he was coming in hot to home base. He scooped up the spear, scrambled to his feet, and whirled to face the Shadeni woman. She wasn't where he'd last seen her, though; she was standing over the otter-woman, spear buried in her furry chest. "Fuck!" Victor choked out when he saw the blood bubbling out of the woman's sad-looking mouth and her moist eyes slowly blinking while she scratched fruitlessly at the sand with her little, webbed hands. Big Red twisted the spear a couple of times, then yanked it free, trailing an arc of bright crimson blood.

"What's your name, Shadeni?" The winged guy asked as he circled behind her, trying, Victor thought, to get her to turn her back on him again.

"I'm Thessa-dak. Learn it well, Ghelli; my offer of a quick death has been rescinded." She didn't look at the winged man while she spoke; she hefted her spear and turned to the blue guy who had given up climbing out of the pit and was leaning with his back to the wall, edging sideways. Maybe the laughing, jeering spectators standing above him had something to do with his decision to stop trying to climb. A slow grin spread on Big Red's face, then she took two steps and let the spear fly. It punched through the blue guy's chest and pinned him to the wooden wall of the pit. A short scream tore out of his throat, but it quickly subsided to soft gurgling.

"Hey, pendeja, you think it makes you tough to fuck up some people weaker than you?" Victor didn't really give a shit about the chickenshit guy she'd just killed, but he was fucking torn up about that otter-woman. He felt tears stinging his eyes, but they were tears of futile rage, not fear. "This fight is fucking bullshit!" He started striding toward Big Red, reason having fled his mind. He dropped low, spear out, and went through the

motions as he had practiced with Yrella and Vullu. At first, a tiny voice in the back of his mind said he was committing suicide, and though he tuned it out, he knew a part of him believed he was about to die. After he'd blinked away his frustrated tears, though, the only thing left in his mind was furious rage. Rage at being tossed into this pit, rage at being summoned to this world, rage at this fucking bitch that killed that soft little Otter-woman.

She was fast and strong, but every time she started to push past Victor's guard, the winged guy would dart forward and land a kidney punch or a snap kick, and she'd be forced to back away to regroup. She was getting visibly frustrated; she was more than a match for either of them, but now that they'd found a rhythm, they were beginning to wear her down. Suddenly she hissed loudly and screamed, turning away from Victor and leaping through the air, a move that would have made a pro baller proud, and landed on the winged guy, driving him to the ground. Victor didn't waste a second, though; while she was bearing him to the ground, biting at his neck, Victor charged forward and drove the spear into her lower back, punching it through where he figured her kidney should be. She screamed and writhed, turning toward Victor, but the winged guy grabbed her in a bear hug, wrapping his arms and legs around her and holding her down. Victor yanked the spear out and drove it again and again, filling her back with gushing, spurting holes.

Finally, Thessa-dak stopped thrashing and lay still on top of the bloody, panting man. Victor leaned forward on his spear, lungs heaving for breath.

"I am Sarl, brother. I take it you are Victor?" the man gasped, trying to shove the woman off himself.

"Yeah, Sarl, that's me. Good to meet you. What the fuck..." Victor cut himself off as he watched motes of golden Energy start to bead up and coalesce all around Thessa-dak's body. A great swarm of them split into two streams and flooded into him and Sarl.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 3 base human. You have 5 attribute points to allocate.

The euphoria of the Energy flooding him filled Victor with strength, and he stood up straight, looking around the edge of the pit. For the first time, he noticed the roaring of the crowd, their cheers, and stomping feet. He felt high from the influx of Energy, and the cheers filled him with that old feeling he used to get when he pinned an opponent, so he held up his fist, screaming triumphantly into the face of the crowd.