

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 16: Justice

Several days passed at the Wagon Wheel before anything new or remarkable happened to change up the doldrums of Victor's days. He'd just finished with a particularly infuriating bout of cultivating, managing to level his Core again when the door to the main exercise room slammed open, and Ponda came striding in, holding the end of the chain they used to bind the prisoners for travel. However, this time, he wasn't there to chain up Victor and the other fighters; he was delivering a line of new "talent." He strode down the aisle until the train of people following him had cleared the door, then he went back, counting them off as he passed, to slam the door shut. Victor saw twelve new fighters, ranging in age from kids to senior citizens and in size from tiny to massive.

Ponda unchained their belts, told them to take them off, then started ushering them into cages, introducing them to their new roommates. Victor felt his stomach make a little nervous loop when Ponda approached his cage with a small, red-skinned Shadeni girl. She was shorter than Yrella had been and lacked her lean hard muscles. She seemed like a kid. "Victor, this is, uh, what's your name again?"

"Belsa," she said in a quiet voice, looking down.

"Right, Belsa. I need you to show her how things work."

"C'mon, Ponda. Don't do this to me."

"What, killer?"

"I can't show her what's up without learning what she's like, and then I'm going to get depressed when she dies in a week or so." Victor tried to say it quietly, but he knew the girl heard him. She didn't say anything, though, just looked at the ground, quietly shuffling her feet.

"Sorry, kid, but your cage has plenty of room, and I need you to step up. If you don't want her to die, teach her a thing or two." Apparently, that was the end of Ponda's desire to talk because he opened the cage, gave Belsa a nudge through it, and slammed it behind her. Victor looked at Belsa standing awkwardly in the middle of the cage, and he pointed to the corner where Vullu used to sit.

"That's your corner. Sleep over there." She wore dark brown leather pants, no shoes, and a matching leather vest with blue and green beads sewn onto the front panels, making little zig-zagging designs. She didn't look at Victor, but she walked over to her corner, sat down on her knees, and seemed to meditate or pray or something, still

facing into the corner. "Hey, if you didn't hear, my name's Victor, and I'm sorry if I came off as an asshole. I just can't deal really well with this place, so I'm fucked as to why they'd put you in here with me."

"It's alright," she said softly but didn't move or speak beyond that. Victor sat down and looked at his status sheet. Just as he'd hoped, leveling his Core had given him another hundred Energy points.

"Hey, um, if you need to go to the bathroom, there's a bucket there. It's gross, I know, but people are cool about not watching each other when we use it."

"Thank you." Again, she spoke softly and didn't look up. Victor was starting to feel really shitty about how he'd acted when she first got there. She seemed younger than him, and he began to wonder how the hell she ended up in this place.

"Um, you're Shadeni, right?" Suddenly she turned, glaring at Victor with bright green eyes that reminded him very much of Yrella. She lifted her lips in a snarl and inhaled sharply.

"Why do you talk to me, boy? I thought you wanted to avoid getting to know me before I die?" Her voice was cutting and sharp, and Victor knew it carried around to the other cages because it got quiet as others tuned in to hear the drama.

"Whatever. I said I was sorry for that, but if you don't wanna talk, that's cool." He refused to yell or get upset. She was hurting, and he knew what it felt like, so he just sat down and went back to cultivating. She didn't say anything more, and when he couldn't take any more processing of his rage and stopped for the night, he saw her curled into a ball, sleeping in her corner. He stood, stretched, and then lay down in his corner, staring at the ceiling for a long time before falling asleep.

"Hey, wake up." The voice intruded on his dreams, and he groggily opened his eyes. Belsa was kneeling near his head, and when she saw his eyes open, she leaned close, "Someone's fighting in the big cage over there. It sounds like they're killing someone!" Victor's heart started to hammer, and he jumped to his feet, looking out through the cage's bars, trying to see what Belsa was talking about. He heard a gurgling sound and a wet "thwap."

"Hey, what the fuck's going on there?" he called.

"Mind your business, kid," a dark shadow leaning against the other cell said.

"That you, Zan? C'mon, man, you know we'll all catch hell if we're caught fighting."

"Quiet down, and no one will get caught; he's dying in his sleep, is all."

"Fucking hell, pendejo! You guys killing one of the newbies?"

“He had it coming, trust me; now shut up before Ponda hears your whimpering.”

Victor slumped against the bars and turned to Belsa. “I can’t do anything about it. Do you know who it is they’re attacking?” She shook her head. “Well, unless we wanna be targets to the old monsters in here, we need to shut up.” Her eyes blinked slowly, then she nodded and moved back to her corner. Victor did the same and was glad that he didn’t hear any more sounds from the other cell. Apparently, they’d finished their business, and he could rationalize that it would’ve been too late for him to get the victim any help, even if he’d wanted to risk enraging the other fighters. He closed his eyes, and it felt like he’d only just started to drift into sleep when he heard the main door slam open. He sat up, saw daylight streaming into the cages through the gaps in the warehouse boards, and looked to see who had come in. Ponda was striding down the aisle, and he shouted, “Mealtime, line up!”

Victor stood and moved to nudge Belsa with his toe. When she stirred, pushing her black hair out of her face, he said, “Hey, time for us to get some breakfast, line up behind me by the door.” He and Belsa were waiting their turn as Ponda let the closer cages go first when one of the guys from the pen across the way ran up to the bars and yelled.

“Ponda! Something’s wrong with this guy. He’s not getting up!”

“Shut up! It’s too early for yelling. I’ll check it out in a minute.” A moment later, Ponda opened Victor’s cage, and he led Belsa out and showed her the mess hall, glad that he wouldn’t be in the pens when Ponda discovered the dead guy.

“This place is fucking savage, Belsa,” he said as they sat down with their food. She didn’t reply, just took a bite of her congealed pork fat and beans. “How’d you end up in here?”

“So, now you want to get to know me?”

“Am I going to pay for that comment for the rest of my life? I’m sorry, alright? For the third fucking time.” She stared at him for a moment, then took another bite.

“Well, I got captured. My tribe was raiding a town in Spinecut Gorge. Most of my family got killed; a few of us lived, some court sentenced us to prison, and they sold our sentences at auction.”

“Madre! Any of your people here with you?” He gestured around, indicating the Wagon Wheel.

“No, most of us got split up at the auction.”

“Well, you got a shitty deal. Sorry. I’ve been here a couple of weeks, and more than half the people I’ve met here are dead. I hope things go better for you, though. Do you know how to fight at all?” She snorted and nodded.

“I’m Shadeni. I was born with a spear in my hand.”

“Oh, well, that’s good. I, uh, well, the first person I met here who was really kind to me was a Shadeni. Her name was Yrella.” Something about saying her name aloud made water well up in Victor’s eyes, and he looked down, busying himself with eating his breakfast.

“Where are you from, Vic-tor?” She said his name slowly, like she was feeling how it came out of her mouth.

“Well, some assholes summoned me for some reason from my world. I think it was a mistake because they didn’t seem happy to see me, then they sold me to this guy who runs these pit fights.” Victor shrugged, polishing off his flatbread. “Shall we go get some exercise in? It’s the best part of the day unless you like laying around in the hay and feeling bored.” She nodded, and they walked out into the exercise hall. Since she’d said she was ‘born with a spear,’ Victor checked out a spear, and they practiced with that weapon for a while. Belsa wasn’t slow or weak, but she was no Yrella or Vullu, and Victor didn’t find himself learning anything from her. Still, it was good to have a partner to go through the spear forms with, and they had a good workout going when Yund’s office door slammed open, and the big Shadeni man hollered for Victor to come over. Victor handed Belsa his practice spear and jogged over to Yund.

“Kid!”

“Yeah?” he panted, slightly out of breath.

“I got you a special fight tonight. Private exhibition. Some rich bitch has a thief she wants punished. She hired the Wagon Wheel to put a fighter in the pit with him.”

“Why me?”

“Cause you’re the right tier, and I said so. Wait for me here a minute, and we’ll get going. Gotta take a coach; her estate is outside the city.” Victor nodded and stood there, in his blood-stained clothes, sweat dripping down from his hair, and wondering at the strange, impossible turn his life had taken. Belsa walked over toward him, still holding the practice spears and raising her eyebrows in a questioning look.

“Uh, I have to go to some fight with the Boss. Just turn those in, and then it’ll be almost time to go back to the cages. See you later. Well, I hope.” Victor grinned at his dark humor. Belsa waved, choosing not to reply. He’d found she was a girl with a decided penchant for speaking as little as possible.

“Let’s go, kid!” Yund said, loudly banging his door open. Victor waited for him to lead the way and then followed him out of the Wagon Wheel, down the narrow, trash-filled alley to a busier, wider street, where Yund started looking around for a coach for hire. As always, Victor was kept fascinated watching the people and the strange animals they used for transportation. The coach Yund ended up hiring was a small shiny black box pulled by two bird-lizard things, with the driver sitting up high on a springy seat.

The inside of the coach had once been plush, Victor could tell, but the red upholstered seats were threadbare, and the carpeted floor was mudstained and patchy. He sat back in the deep cushion and caught the distinct scent of weed clinging to the fabric. “Boss, people smoke weed here?”

“Weed?”

“You know, pot. Marijuana? I can smell it in the cushions.”

“Oh, sure, that’s ban blossom. Banban.”

“Huh, sure smells like weed. Does it make you high?”

“Sure, kid, but I’m not getting you any, so quit bugging me about it.” He produced a clipboard from some secret container and started flipping through papers while Victor sat back and let the rumbling of the coach lull him into a nap. “Get up, Victor.” Yund’s voice cut through his dreams, and Victor sat up, blinking his eyes rapidly. “We’re here; get your fight face on.” Victor almost laughed at the idiom, but he snorted, stretched, and waited for the coach to come to a halt. After a moment, its wheels came to a stop, and Yund popped open the door, squeezing his bulk through the narrow opening. Victor followed and was immediately grabbed by the fresh, cool air. No more stink of garbage or excrement, just fresh, clean air. Victor had never been out of Arizona, and he’d never breathed such cool, fresh air. Even up in the Santa Rita’s, there was the ever-present taste of dust in the air.

He saw he was standing on some cobbles, and they’d been dropped in front of a large, white manor or estate. It was constructed of stone blocks and sprawled out into lots of different buildings with tall, peaked roofs. An Ardeni man in a red and black uniform waited for them near the door, and when they approached, he looked at Yund briefly but then stared at Victor for a long while before finally announcing, “He won’t do.”

“Oh, think again, lad,” Yund said, not phased in the least.

“Excuse me, sir Yund, but he’s only tier one, and he looks like he’s been dragged through a charnel pit.”

“Well, you guys can put something fresh on him, and as for his tier, you needn’t worry; he’s up for the task.”

“Sir, the criminal is tier two.”

“Exactly. Not a problem. Now go ahead and take my fighter where you need him. I’ll find the festivities.” Yund didn’t wait for a response, striding straight to the door and into the manor. The uniformed man looked at Victor with an air of defeat and then beckoned for him to follow.

“This way. We’ll have to give you some clean clothes. You realize you are representing the Lady’s Justice tonight. I hope you don’t let her down.”

“Justice? What do you mean?” The inside of the manor was fancy, like the rich people’s houses on VR. The floors were smooth white stone, the walls were smooth white plaster, and art, furniture, and plants were everywhere. Where did rich people get so much shit to put around their houses? They had to be constantly shopping or something.

“I mean just that. Rather than send this man to trial and then prison, she offered him a trial of combat. The fact that you are under-ranked is not going to make her happy. If you lose, your master will have a very unhappy customer.”

“Well, I don’t want to lose either, bud. Also, he’s not my master.” They’d come into a long narrow room with several beds lined up along each side. Each bed had a chest at its foot. Were these servants’ quarters or maybe soldiers’ barracks?

“Wait here.” He moved to a large chest at the end of the room, opened it, and started rummaging inside. “White, black or red clothes? The only boots I have are black leather.” He threw a pair of black shoes that looked like a cross between cowboy boots and hiking boots at Victor’s feet.

“Uh, just black, I guess.”

“Yes, it should hide stains the best. Though they have minor cleaning enchantments.” He straightened up and held out some heavy garments to Victor. They felt almost like denim, but they were black and looked more like cotton. Victor held up the shirt and saw that it had tiny letters or figures stitched around the cuffs in a shiny black thread.

“Yo, these look way too big. Same for the boots.”

“Yes, fool, do you think we size all of our servants and custom tailor their garments? These will fit you perfectly after you bond with them.”

“Bond with them?”

“Ancestors! Where did they find you? Put on the clothes, and channel some of your Energy into them. They’ll bond with you.” He stood there, watching Victor expectantly. Victor shrugged and stripped out of his crusty, stained t-shirt and jeans, kicking his

tennies off and noticing the new holes in the soles. He stood there in stained boxers and hole-filled socks.

“Man, you got any clean underwear and socks by any chance?”

“If the Lady hears of this....” the man grumbled, but he walked back to the chest and came back with some soft, white underwear and thick woolen socks. Victor wasted no time, slipping out of his filthy undergarments and trying on the new ones. They were too big, but he did like the guy said and tried to push a little bit of Energy out his pathway into them. To his astonishment, they immediately shrank to fit him snugly. Excited by the prospect of magical clothes, he pulled on the pants and shirt, then slipped on the big boots. He performed the same trick, channeling some Energy into the clothes and boots, and soon he was standing with clothes that fit him perfectly for the first time in his life. The shirt had a low collar and flatteringly clung to his chest and arms. The pants were about as similar to black jeans as he could imagine, even having pockets like he was used to. The boots were the most kickass thing, though. They felt more comfortable than any tennies he’d ever owned, snugly hugging his feet. The sole seemed like rugged leather or wood, but it somehow cushioned his feet perfectly, and he wondered if they had some sort of comfort enchantment. The thing he liked the most about them, though, was that they were tough, with a metal-plated heel that clicked on the marble floors when he walked.

“That certainly made a world of difference,” the uniformed servant said. “Now, you look like someone who could represent Justice. Please drop your old clothes in that chute.”

“Is that the laundry?”

“No, the incinerator.” Victor opened his mouth to argue, but then he realized that if they burned his old clothes, they would have to let him keep these, so he dumped his old belongings into the chute, belatedly realizing that he had nothing left of his life on Earth. “Good, follow me.” Swallowing the lump in his throat, Victor turned away from the chute and followed the servant. They passed through several hallways, across a breezeway, into another building, then out into a garden and along another path that opened onto a lawn lit by glowing yellow orbs and a large bonfire. People stood around drinking from glasses and talking, and a tall Ghelli with glorious wings that shed sparkles of light was singing and playing a stringed instrument.

Her voice was ethereal, and the music was unlike anything Victor had ever heard, seeming to push right into his mind, triggering emotions and memories from distant corners of his life. On a primal level, he recognized that he was being influenced by Energy, and he tried to focus his will to push the music out. The music didn’t resist him, and he soon heard it normally, without its unnatural influence. “Is that singer trying to cast spells on me, man?”

“Energy enhances her song - it’s a skill of hers. You should easily be able to avoid the effect if you don’t like it. Come, I’ll introduce you to the Lady.” Victor followed the man

across the lawn to a group of Ardeni women standing around wearing slinky dresses and sizing each other up. The guy who'd been showing Victor around stopped a few feet away, so Victor did too. They stood there for a while, then one of the ladies, the tallest one with bright yellow hair and eyes, looked their way. The servant seemed to recognize some sort of signal and stepped forward to say, "Lady ap'Brellin, may I present your representative of Justice." He gestured, and Victor moved up to stand at his side. He had no idea what to say, so he just cleared his throat and nodded.

"What a tall and striking Justice we have tonight. Is that my household livery I recognize?" She stepped forward and reached up to rest a hand on Victor's chest, tracing a finger over the fabric of his shirt.

"Ahem, yes, my Lady; I felt he would more appropriately represent you wearing these garments."

"Hmm, yes. Very good, Pel. Well, you're a quiet one, aren't you? Are you ready to deliver Justice?" She turned from the servant to stare into Victor's face, her hand still on his chest. He'd be lying if he said he didn't like her warm hand resting there, but he was also a little flustered with all the other people around and the ladies visibly snickering behind their napkins or drinks.

"Yes. Uh, yes, I'm ready." His voice had cracked at first, and he couldn't help the embarrassed grin that parted his lips. The lady also smiled, and, allowing her fingers to drum upon his chest one last time, she pulled her hand away and called out to the people milling about the lawn.

"It's time for the trial; our Justice is here and ready to perform!"

Chapter 17: Prizes

The liveried servant led Victor down another pathway through the gardens to yet another lawn, where a fighting pit had been dug and lined with fresh wood; the smell of sawdust and paint still hung in the air. The Lady and her guests came in twos and threes to find spots around the pit's edge while Victor stood off to the side, waiting for instructions. Yund appeared after a few moments, a clutch of snacks held in a napkin in one hand and a delicate wine glass in the other. The glass looked comically small in his massive hand, and Victor snorted an involuntary chuckle at the sight.

"Friends, thank you for coming. As you're no doubt aware by now, my household suffered an affront that left us shaken and inconsolable last week. A vagabond took it upon himself to break into our home," she gestured around her to the grounds and the manor in the background, "steal from us, assault us, and even try to take my daughter's innocence." She paused for the crowd to gasp, exclaim, and even swear threats of vengeance. "I took the matter to Magistrate Dorl; he cautioned patience. He counseled a measured and restrained response. He spoke of politics and influence! Our representative for Justice in the city spoke of politics! My blood boiled; I fumed; I raged

at those who love me, shaken by my impotence. If only I'd had the guards kill him in the act! If only I'd made him disappear before approaching the authorities! Those are the mad thoughts that whispered in the back of my mind. Then, dear Larl, here, found a solution." She paused again and gestured to a tall, thin Ardeni man wearing a very sharp-looking suit.

"That's right! It might be archaic and out of fashion, but trials by combat are still perfectly legal, regardless of the political connections of your offender!" He said loudly, obviously reciting words that he'd been practicing.

"Precisely!" the Lady continued, "It is my right, nay, it is everyone's right to put an offender that they've captured in their own home into a trial of combat. All we need are witnesses," she smiled and waved around at the crowd, "to ensure a fair combat, and a willing," she pointed at Victor, "Champion of Justice. Why, Magistrate Dorl's assistant, Lisell, is even here to bear witness to the legality of our proceedings." A thin, severe-looking Shadeni woman, wearing a black robe and a strange, square golden hat that reminded Victor of an old lady's purse, nodded to the crowd, not a hint of emotion on her face.

A commotion broke out from the other side of the pit as a man wearing nothing but a pair of loose black pants and chains was pulled toward the pit by two servants wearing the Lady's livery. He was an Ardeni, but big, larger than many the Shadeni Victor had met. He was as tall as Yund, though not nearly as heavy. He struggled and strained against the servants, but they had some control over him with the chains and managed to get him to the pit's edge, where they held him, looking expectantly at the Lady.

"Gweld ap'Horrin! Your time for justice is at hand!" the Lady shouted, pointing at the bound man. He glared at her, eyes hooded by heavy, black brows scowling with his lips pulled back in a sneer. He started to answer, perhaps to offer a retort, but the Lady yelled, "Put him in!" The two servants gave him a shove, sending him down the eight feet to the hard dirt bottom of the pit. Then she whirled on Victor, "Your time is nigh, Justice! Do your work!" Victor felt a big meaty hand on his shoulder, nudging him toward the pit, and when he looked behind him, he saw that Yund had made his way over. Victor snorted and walked toward the pit; no doubt Yund wanted to make sure he didn't make a run for it.

"Bitch! Wench of a lesser house! You call this fair? Me fighting bound by magical chains?" Gweld was shouting as Victor approached the edge.

"Your chains will be removed when our Justice has taken his position in the pit." Lady ap'Brellin said, striding to a big wooden chair positioned on a small dais to provide her an unobstructed view of the pit. Victor stood at the edge and looked at the Lady. When she nodded, he hopped down into the dirt, staring at the guy he was supposed to fight and kill. He wasn't a pleasant guy, that was for sure. Still fuming and straining against his chains, he had an ugly expression on his face, snarling and nearly frothing at the mouth he was so agitated. His hair was black, which was strange to Victor - every

Ardeni he'd met had bright, colorful hair. Was he not Ardeni? Could the races of this world mix, perhaps?

"Are you ready, Justice?" the Lady asked from her perch. Victor formed his hands into fists and nodded. "Release his chains!" she shouted to someone; Victor had no idea who. A brief flash of light, and a puff of smoke, signaled the destruction of Gweld's chains, and the big man flexed his fists, looked at Victor, and grinned.

"No weapons for us, then?" he called up at the crowd, suddenly charming. The frothing, raging face was gone, though his eyes were still obscured, hidden in the shadows of his brows.

"Justice?" the Lady looked at Victor questioningly. He didn't know how to respond. The guy was bigger than he was and presumably quite a lot higher level. Maybe a weapon would even the playing field, or maybe it would just get Victor killed faster. According to the System, his skill with weapons was only "basic" - what if this guy was some kind of expert? He looked at the Lady and shook his head. She smiled, looked at Gweld, and said, "No, dear thug. You will die by the bare hands of Justice."

"This lady really hates you, pendejo," Victor quietly said as he started to circle the larger man. For his part, Gweld growled, rubbing his hands together, staring at Victor. Victor felt a surge of something like paranoia, and he wondered what strange fucking thing this guy was going to do. He didn't want to give him time to do something wild, so he used his Channel Spirit ability to launch a rage-fueled leg sweep. He slid forward gracefully, bringing his left shin, throbbing and pulsing with red-hot Energy, toward Gweld's legs. Gweld had been standing straight, not a muscle tensed, and Victor hoped to catch him off-guard. He was partially successful; Gweld cursed some word Victor hadn't heard before and pulled his hands apart, pointing one palm down toward Victor's sliding body. A wave of cold poured over him, cooling the rage-attuned Energy in his leg and slowing his movement immensely. His shin collided with Gweld's and bounced off painfully.

"Fuck!" Victor grunted and tried to roll away, but he felt like he was in slow motion. He'd just dipped down to his shoulder when Gweld's foot snapped into his hip, throwing him off balance and tumbling into the dirt. The crowd hissed, and if Victor could see the Lady's face, he'd recognize the look of uncertainty and abstract frustration. He rolled again, nearly running into the pit's wall, trying to get some distance between himself and the other man. He scrambled to his feet, arms held in a guard position in front of his face and neck, but Gweld hadn't pursued him. He was standing in the center of the ring, concentrating on the space around his hands again. Victor saw white smoke or steam rising from them, and he was just getting ready to launch himself at Gweld again when white crystal erupted around Gweld's hands, spreading up over his arms, chest, head, and down his legs. After an instant, Victor faced a man encased in steaming white ice crystals. "Oh, this is bullshit!"

Victor had barely finished his objection when Gweld was on him, moving with the inevitability of a juggernaut; he stomped up to Victor and started punching at him like his

arms and fists were pistons on a machine. Victor tried to block the strikes, but it was like trying to block burning logs; wherever he touched Gweld's icy carapace, he was singed, and when he put enough force into his blocks to actually stop a punch, he felt his flesh getting smashed and torn, and the impact jarred him deep in his bones. Victor retreated around the edge of the pit, realizing he was in over his head. Again. Rather than panic or terror, though, he started to feel angry. Yund knew this fucking guy was tier two. What was this bullshit ability that coated him in fucking freezing ice? How was he supposed to fight that? Should he have asked for a weapon? Maybe a damn hammer would have been the right move. All these thoughts raced through Victor's mind as he backpedaled away from the juggernaut.

The other half of Victor's mind, the part that hadn't been spouting a string of pointless questions and complaints, had noted that Gweld might be nigh-invincible and able to throw endless, painful punches, but he was also predictable. As he pursued Victor, he followed the same pattern: step, punch, step, punch-punch, step, punch, step, punch-punch. Victor avoided most of the punches, painfully deflecting one now and then to keep Gweld feeling like he was accomplishing something. As he backed away from a punch-punch combo, Victor channeled Energy into his right fist, used his Sovereign Will ability to pump up his strength, and stepped into Gweld's left jab, taking the blow on the shoulder but delivering a savage right hook to Gweld's hard, icy chest.

A thunderous crack echoed up out of the pit as Gweld's carapace shattered, and he was flung back to the pit wall like a wrecking ball had struck him. Victor had no idea what kinds of tricks someone over level twenty might have in store, so he didn't think it would be smart to let up the pressure. Instead, he went Berserk; he lifted his face to the night sky and roared, his muscles convulsing as rage-attuned Energy poured into them, making his back arch. As shades of red clouded his vision, Victor looked at the man sitting up out of the crumbled chunks of ice, and fury filled his mind. Here was his enemy; here was the one who'd been burning and smashing him. Here was the thing he needed to destroy.

Victor leaped at Gweld, hands clenched into rock-like fists, and they collided in a flurry of punches, explosions of ice, snarls, and screams. Gweld wasn't done - he conjured hunks of ice to block punches and sent shards of ice stabbing into Victor's body, eliciting cries of fury and even more frenzied punches and kicks and headbutts. As soon as the ice fragments pierced his flesh, his body pushed them out, flesh pulling together with hardly any blood loss. Gweld's smug grin was long gone; panic stared out of the deep hollows of his bloodied eyes.

Victor could feel the rage waning, feel the fury in his muscles starting to cool, and roared in denial, pulling forth more Energy out of his Core and sending it surging along his pathways. Dimly he was aware that his Core was more a flickering light than a raging sun, his Energy nearly spent. Still, he didn't care; the only thing that mattered was that Gweld was still moving, still trying to fight back. He drove him from one wall to another, punching, grabbing, throwing, pursuing. After a time, his mind came back to him, and he felt his hands hefting something heavy. He followed through with the

motion, throwing it against the wall, and when he saw Gweld's mutilated corpse slide down into the dirt, Victor stumbled backward, looking around in a panic.

The Lady's guests were standing around the pit. Some held napkins or handkerchiefs in front of their mouths, looks of horror in their eyes; others leered openly, words of encouragement sent Victor's way. Victor stumbled backward to the center of the pit and looked up to the Lady. She sat in her chair, beauty personified, with her hair perfectly coiffed and her hands folded in her lap, but in her eyes, in her bright, yellow eyes, Victor could see despair. At first, he thought she was upset by his savagery. He was certainly upset about it; why shouldn't she be? But then she spoke, "Well done, Justice. Friends, please return to the estate; dinner will be served shortly. I apologize, but I'll need a few moments - I'd hoped this swine's death would bring me closure, but I feel nothing." She stood and walked away. Some of the other ladies followed after, but most of the guests moved away from the pit, talking in hushed or excited conversations about the fight.

"Well, come on, kid. I'll give you a hand out." Yund had approached the pit behind Victor. Victor reached up and took his hand, allowing him to hoist him up to the edge. "I knew you were fighting above your rank, but that was better than I'd hoped. Nice work." He patted Victor's shoulder and steered him toward a dark path in the garden. "Let's walk around the manor to get to the coach. I'd rather not go through that house with all those fancy shits. I already got my payment."

They walked in silence for a while, then Victor said, "I'm glad he turned out to be a bad guy. Yund, I don't ever want to fight someone like Belsa."

"First of all, kid, 'bad' is relative. Just because all these nobles at this house hated that asshole doesn't make him 'bad.' Don't get me wrong, he probably was, but don't believe people just because they're beautiful and clean. That 'Lady' has a lot of blood on her hands, believe me." Yund reached up and put a hand on Victor's shoulder while they walked. "Second of all, Belsa's that new girl I got at auction yesterday, right?" Victor nodded. "Yeah, well, I'm an asshole, but I know you by now, kid. I'm not going to arrange a fight like that for you. What good would it do me for you to get yourself killed cause you feel sorry for your opponent?" He shook Victor's shoulder and continued, "Now, enough moping. You won an impressive victory here, which means I owe you a reward. I already got it for you, too. Hang on; let me see here." He held a hand to one of his pouches, concentrating for a moment while they walked along the garden path. "Aha!" A rolled-up piece of paper with a hunk of red waxy stuff holding it closed appeared in his hand. He handed it to Victor and said, "It's a general cultivation method for Spirit Cores. When we get back, break the seal and stare at the runes - the System will trigger it, and the knowledge will go into you."

"Seriously? I wish I had scrolls like that in high school."

"Listen, that was pretty expensive - not many people are interested in Spirit Cores, at least not in this part of the world. After you learn it and get a few more levels, I'm going

to need you to either get tagged or start wearing a collar between fights. Nothing personal, but I have an investment to protect.”

“Whatever. If I have to do it, I will, but I’d rather not get the tag - it seems too permanent. Hey, I didn’t level from that guy.” freewebnovel.com

“Your new class probably takes more effort to level. Maybe next time, or maybe now that you have a cultivation guide, you’ll be able to advance that way too.” Ahead of them, Victor could see a light on a brick post, signaling a gateway. When they approached, he saw that they’d come out of the gardens near the front of the house by the stables and waiting carriages. Victor followed Yund toward one of the carriages, but a figure stepped out from the shadows nearby as they approached. Lady ap’Brellin walked up to them, a small package in her hands.

“I know you’ve been paid, Mr. Yund. I wanted to give a gift to our young representative of Justice.” *freewebnovel.com*

“Oh, of course, Lady,” Yund said, bowing low and stepping to the side.

“I’ll see that he takes full possession before you leave, sir. I know how cutthroat your business is.” Yund’s obsequious smile faltered momentarily, but then it was back, and he nodded enthusiastically, taking yet another step back. She nodded and stepped closer to Victor, holding out the package. Self-conscious of his blood-stained hands, Victor reached out and took the paper-wrapped box. It was about three inches square and as heavy as a paperback book.

“Um, what is it?” he asked.

“Open it.” She nodded toward the box, indicating that she’d be staying around until he complied. Victor peeled off the brown paper, revealing a light brown wooden box. He lifted the lid, revealing a straw-filled interior on which a deep purple plum-like fruit sat. “This fruit will advance your race. If you want to ever achieve levels much beyond fifteen, you’ll need at least one advancement. This fruit should get you as many as four.”

“Lady! This is too valuable for someone like him! I can’t see you wasting such a prize!” Yund stepped forward, reaching for the box in Victor’s hands.

“Sir! You will back away and allow him to consume this fruit! I have paid for his services for the evening, and I will reward him as I see fit.”

“He could die in a day! Why such a rare fruit? You could give him a Wyrkla berry for a hundredth of the price!”

“That is the last outburst I’ll tolerate from you, Mr. Yund.” She didn’t even look at him, trusting that her words would suffice. They worked, though. Yund turned away and paced in a small circle, visibly clenching his mouth shut to avoid saying anything.

“Come, Justice. Sit in your coach and eat the fruit. You won’t want to be standing when the effects hit you.”

“Um, okay. Thank you.” Victor was at a loss for words. What the hell did it even mean to ‘advance your race.’ He knew these guys used the word ‘race’ differently than the humans back home. When there were actually different species of people, it kinda made worrying about the color of someone’s skin seem a little dumb. He stepped past the Lady, opened the coach door, and climbed up onto his seat. He looked at the woman’s beautiful, cold face one more time, she nodded, and he ate the fruit.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 18: Cultivating

Victor sank back into the cushions of the coach, the scents of perfume, sweat, and old smoke wafting up around him. As he swallowed the fruit, which hadn’t tasted like a plum, more like an orange with the texture of a banana, warmth pulsed through the flesh that it touched, and then in a wave from the center of his belly out to his limbs. He felt a buzzing sensation all over his body, and then he felt heavy, like he was sinking into the center of the world, pulling the coach and everything else along with him. Waves of pink light, darkening to violet, rolled over his vision, and he lost himself watching the patterns of shifting colors. When he started to feel himself again - began to remember that he was a person - he became aware of the rattling clatter of the coach wheels outside the window and the bump and sway it made as it rolled down the street. “What happened?” he muttered, mouth feeling like he’d tried to swallow a cup of dusty sand.

“What happened? You got a tip worth more than I made at the last three Fight Nights.” Yund sat across from him, eyes narrowed as he studied Victor. “Well, what happened? I can see your race advanced. How much?”

“You can tell?” Victor coughed. “Hold on,” he said and thought about this status page:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human - Base 4

Class:

Spirit Champion

Level:

10

Core:

Spirit Class - Base 4

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

420/420

Strength: .com

25

Vitality:

20

Dexterity:

17

Agility:

17

Intelligence:

10

Will:

10

Points Available: *freewebnovel.com*

0

Titles & Feats:

—

Skills:

System Language Integration - Not Upgradeable Unarmed Combat - Basic Knife Combat - Basic Axe Mastery - Basic Spear Mastery - Basic Bludgeon Mastery - Basic Grappling - Improved Berserk - Basic Sovereign Will - Basic Channel Spirit - Basic

“It says base four next to my race now.”

“Three ranks. From one fruit. Well, nicely done, kid. I hope you live long enough to appreciate it.” Yund folded his arms on his chest and visibly sulked.

“What’s the point of racial advancements anyway?” Victor held up his hands and noticed that some of the scars he’d accumulated recently were gone, and almost all of them had faded to faint white marks.

“If I had a mirror, you’d know. When you stand up, you’ll notice. You’re bigger, taller. More than that, your body has improved from your blood to your heart to your bones. It can hold more Energy now, which means a higher level cap. If you had a peaceful life, you’d live a lot longer now, too.”

“Awesome,” Victor said, running his fingers along his face, trying to notice anything different. He felt good, but other than that, he seemed the same. When they got back to the Wagon Wheel, and Victor clambered out of the coach, he noticed a remarkable difference: he was looking at Yund almost eye to eye. “Fucking hell, I did grow!”

“Ponda!” Yund barked as they strode through the door. The big Vodkin came waddling out of the mess hall.

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Put him back in his cage and put a collar on him. He’s grown a bit much to be wandering without a leash.” Victor felt a little surge of heat in his Core when Yund spoke about him like a dog, and he snarled involuntarily. “Here, kid.” Yund held out his hand, “you dropped this when you ate the fruit.” Victor reached out, and Yund pressed the scroll with his cultivation method on it to him.

“Oh, thanks, Yund.”

“You mean Boss.”

“Right. Thanks, Boss.” Victor walked over to Ponda and followed him to the pens. He was pleased to see that Ponda didn’t seem so big to him anymore, either.

“Getting bigger, eh, kid?” Ponda asked as he unlocked his cage.

"Yeah, got a prize for winning." Victor shrugged and ducked into the cage. Ponda didn't close it right away but pulled out a dull iron ring about four inches in diameter, holding it up to Victor's neck. "I think that's too small, dude."

"Nah, it'll stretch when I activate it. Hold still." He pressed one edge of the ring to Victor's neck, then Victor felt it get warm, then hot, then seemed to flow around his skin, stretching itself into a ring of metal that snugly wrapped around his neck. "Don't do anything dumb with this on, kid. Boss can kill you from a mile away as long as you're wearing this."

"Alright." Victor didn't like the sound of that. It made him think of a VR flick he saw where prisoners' heads exploded if they tried to run away from the warden. Ponda didn't seem to care to stick around to hear his concerns, though; he slammed the gate shut and walked out of the pens without a backward glance.

"Where'd they take you? Did you really have to grow even taller? You were already a freak compared to most Shadeni." Victor turned to see Belsa sitting in her corner of the cage, green eyes glinting brightly in the shadows.

"I had to go to this rich lady's house and fight a criminal. I won, so she gave me a prize," Victor gestured at his body, "racial upgrade."

"You really know how to paint the scene with your words." Belsa laughed.

"Damn, you're in a better mood. Teasing me, huh?" Victor moved to his corner and sat down, wondering if he could use the scroll in such dim lighting.

"I guess I'm relieved that I don't have to get to know a new cell-mate yet. You might be rude, but at least I know you. Who knows what I'd get next! What's that?"

"Alright, nosey chica, it's a cultivation method, I guess. I'm supposed to stare at the runes or whatever." Victor ran a finger along the loose edge of the scroll, pulling it under the red seal, and it broke away into little crumbles. Victor had a sudden thought, "Hey, when I say 'girl,' what word do you hear?"

"Girl?"

"What about when I say 'chica?'"

"Girl?"

"That shit's crazy. I just said 'girl' in two different languages, and you heard only one."

"It's the language integration. The System makes us all hear our native language when others speak."

“Yeah, I get it. It’s just fucking weird.”

“Fucking?”

“C’mon, you can guess what it means.” Victor unrolled the scroll and saw that the runes were faintly shimmering symbols of letters that he’d never seen in his life. Belsa said something, but he’d tuned her out, staring at the runes as they shifted ever so slightly on the page. Suddenly one of them moved more than the others, then it popped out into the air. Victor almost dropped the scroll in surprise, but he held on, and then more runes popped off the paper and began to flow into a glowing line that streamed toward Victor’s eyes. As the runes hit his eyes, they became a pulsing beam in his vision. A dull ache started to throb at the base of his skull. Just as he began to fear his head would burst, it came to a stop.

Congratulations, you’ve learned a new skill: Spirit Core Cultivation Drill - Basic.

“I mean, that was cool, but I don’t know if I really like the feeling,” he said, mostly to himself. He thought about cultivating Energy and found that he suddenly understood a great deal more about the subject. Thanks to Yrella’s guidance and his experimentation, he’d figured out a lot of the process. One thing he knew now was that Spirit Cores couldn’t absorb unattuned Energy. He had to process any Energy he cultivated into rage-attuned Energy. There were ways to do so, and it turned out the one he’d figured out was the crudest, most dangerous method recorded in the manual.

There was a method to memorize and imprint the feelings associated with memories that evoked strong emotion so that you could study those feelings but not relive your trauma over and over - the pure essence of rage rather than rage-soaked memories. Victor found he hadn’t done everything wrong, though - you needed those memories to study in order to develop your meditation on the feelings and essence of the emotion. Because the manual was for general Spirit Core cultivation, it didn’t deal explicitly with rage. Rather, it spoke in generalities about ‘emotions’ and their essence.

Another thing the manual provided was the drill for cultivation itself. It was an exercise that began with Victor studying the essence of his attunement, creating a self-propagating feedback loop within his Core. As the Energy became too intense, he was supposed to push it through his pathways in a specific pattern, to create a loop that brought in external Energy, converted it to rage-attuned Energy, and then directed it back to his Core. It was similar to what Victor had been doing but far more efficient.

“Did it work?” Belsa had scooted closer to him and was staring expectantly.

“Yeah. Got a cultivation drill.” He moved to sit in the position Yrella had taught him and closed his eyes, ready to begin the possibly arduous process of developing rage constructs to study so that he could stop reliving all of his most painful memories.

“What are you doing?”

"I'm gonna try it out! Chill out, please. Go do some meditating or something." He spoke sharply, and kind of regretted it when she looked down quickly and scooted back. He almost took the words back, saying he was sorry, but didn't, and it pissed him off that he was being such an asshole. He decided to use that feeling and quickly started following the cultivation manual's process for studying a feeling and turning it into a pure construct. It was kind of like a mnemonic trick or some sort of self-hypnosis, but he understood it so thoroughly, thanks to the way the System put it in his head, that he performed it flawlessly. He found that he could study the construct of the feeling caused by his interaction with Belsa to start a hot pulse in his Core, actually generating Energy with his rage. The best part was that he could study that feeling, experience the rage, and feed off it without the emotional baggage of remembering Belsa's crestfallen face. It was like he pulled the feeling out and could leave the memory in his subconscious.

Victor stopped, letting his Core wind down, and then he purposefully thought about how he'd snapped at Belsa. The shame and guilt were still there, but not the rage. Had he really separated that feeling from the memory? "How fucking weird!" Belsa shifted but didn't say anything. "Hey, I'm sorry I snapped at you. I have a lot on my mind, and I couldn't think."

"It's fine."

Victor knew very well that it wasn't 'fine,' but he figured he could try to cheer her up tomorrow. He'd said he was sorry, and she could sleep on that. If that little surge of anger allowed him to cultivate rage, how would a bigger memory work? Could he separate the rage from a truly white-hot fury-inducing episode in his life? He was too chicken to even contemplate thinking about Yrella's death right now, and he was tired of soaking in the frustration of his parent's car wreck, so he picked something a little less tender: the time he'd been hanging at his aunty's house with his cousin Tricia and her friends. The time they'd been speaking Spanish, and Victor, barely able to follow a slowly worded directive from his Abuela, couldn't follow along. His cousin had said, "Better speak English; his mom was white." Her friends had laughed and said something in Spanish that, again, Victor hadn't been able to follow. He'd been embarrassed and angry at being singled out, so he'd lashed out. He was a nine-year-old boy, and he'd cussed at his cousin, called her a bitch, and run to hide.

Victor focused on the memory, studied the rage, and used the method in the manual to create a construct from it. He was fascinated to see that most of the anger he felt in that memory was aimed at himself. He'd been angry for not being better at Spanish. He'd been angry at himself for not being able to defend his mom; he'd been angry at himself for feeling small and unable to stick up for himself. Most of all, he'd been angry at himself for reacting so harshly to his cousin; they'd never gotten along the same since that day. When Victor built the construct of all that rage, he found it flamed hotter and quickly started pulsing in his Core.

On a whim, he added the construct from his interaction with Belsa, and he found that their ability to generate rage complimented each other. Victor ran through his drill twice,

noting that he'd built his Core far more significantly than in an entire afternoon of cultivation with his old method. He wanted to stop, though, and analyze the memory from which he'd built the rage construct. When he thought about that day, all he felt was guilt and a sense of loss. He really had pulled the anger out of the memory. Was it hypnosis? Was it magic? There was so much to learn and understand about how the System and Energy worked, and Victor knew he was only scratching the surface.

Not wanting to tangle with any more memories, Victor spent the evening cultivating around the two constructs he'd made. When he received a message announcing he'd improved his Core by another rank, he almost whooped aloud but caught himself when he noticed Belsa's sleeping form. He found that he wasn't tired at all; in fact, he felt energized, and he knew it was from the racial upgrades he'd just gone through. He went back to cultivating and didn't stop until he got another System message and saw the sunlight poking in through the high boards on the east wall of the building.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 11 Spirit Champion. You have gained 7 will, 7 vitality, and have 7 attribute points to allocate.

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 19: Private Party

"You know, I really didn't think much about escaping until they put this fucking collar on my neck," Victor said, trying to squeeze a finger between his skin and the thick metal band; he had an itch developing that was fast becoming a new source of rage Energy for him.

"Why didn't you ask for the tag?" Belsa sat up from where Victor had tossed her, trying to teach her to manage her momentum better.

"I dunno. Something about it reminded me of how ranchers brand their cows and shit." Again, he rubbed at the collar. "Of course, this isn't much better. Collars are for dogs, not people, you know?"

"Oh, I agree. You think they'll put one on me?"

"When you get to rank two, or are a tough rank one like me," Victor jammed a thumb into his chest and flexed his other arm, hamming it up. She laughed, in a much better mood today than she'd been the night before. He supposed that was a direct result of him not being an asshole today. Victor felt like this revelation should be written somewhere: people tended to react to you similarly to how you treat them.

"You joke, but I guess it shows they're afraid of you. Or afraid of what you might do, at least."

"Yeah, of course, I didn't realize it in time." He flicked the metal collar again.

“What about your clothes? Did Boss give those to you?”

“No, and you can call him Yund when it’s just you and me. It bugs me that he makes us call him Boss.” Victor rubbed the sleeve of his black shirt between his fingers, marveling at the garment for at least the tenth time that day. When he’d woken, he’d been stunned to see that all the little rips had mended, and the blood that had matted the fabric was gone entirely. “Nah, the Lady at the house we fought at gave ‘em to me. I guess her servant did, actually. Seemed like a decent guy.”

“Well, that shirt isn’t as nice as my vest, but it looks better than those bloody rags you had on before.” She gestured to her beaded vest proudly while she spoke, and Victor got the feeling she was fishing for a compliment.

“Yeah, that vest is nice. Did you, uh, sew those designs on it?”

“Yes, I did the beadwork. An Artisan in my clan made these beads - they’re all polished stones and shells.”

“Yeah, they’re, um, they’re real nice.”

“Victor! Kid! Come over here!” Yund had poked his head out of his office door, saving Victor from an awkward conversation about fashion.

“Keep working on your falls,” he said as he jogged away, past a few other sparring fighters, and up to Yund’s door. “Yeah?”

“You ain’t going to Pit Night tonight.”

“What? Why?”

“Another private fight. I’m going to have Urt take you. You’ll have to leave soon because the fight’s outside the city again.”

“Oh, c’mon, Boss. Do I have to be a ‘justice’ again?”

“Nah, but it’s related - one of the guests liked what they saw and wanted to enter you in a private tournament.” Yund looked down, and to the side, kind of shiftily, and Victor knew he wasn’t telling him everything.

“Anything else I should know?”

“No, kid. Well, actually, yes - don’t mess around or get any ideas - Urt’s going to have control of that collar, and he’s a lot less patient than I am!” He slammed the door in Victor’s face after he finished speaking, and Victor turned back to the exercise hall. Yund was definitely acting shifty, but he was a shifty guy in a dirty business. Was it anything unusual? Unfortunately, there wasn’t any way for Victor to know. Maybe Urt

would let something slip on the way to the fight. Victor wandered back over to Belsa, and she seemed to pick up on his mood right away.

"What's wrong?" Her green eyes crinkled in her round face, a look crossing her face that Victor couldn't place - was she scared? He supposed it would be scary for her; she didn't know anyone else in the Wagon Wheel. If things were bad for Victor, her little bit of stability could disappear.

"Oh, Yund just told me I have to go to another private fight. No Fight Night at the Rusty Nail for me."

"So I'll have to go alone?" she asked, her voice soft and her eyes unfocusing, staring into space.

"No, you won't be alone! Everyone here is going, except Urt and me, I guess. Ponda will be there, and he won't let anyone mess with you. Well, outside your fight at least." He reached out and held out a fist to her. After a moment, she scrunched up her knuckles and knocked them against his. "That's the spirit. You're going to do fine - Yund will put you with someone you can beat; I'm sure of it."

They sparred for a while with spears, then did an exercise circuit, and then Ponda was screaming at everyone to get back to their cages. It was time for the next round of prisoners to come out for exercise. They'd barely gotten back in their cage, Ponda slamming it shut and stomping out when Urt came in, slamming the door open against the wall. Victor briefly congratulated the guy who'd built that door - it saw a hell of a lot of abuse. He stomped up to Victor's cage, hawked a huge loogie, spit it into the hay, and said, "Looks like you got a special night ahead, boy."

"Not my choice." Victor shrugged and walked over to the cage door. Urt fumbled with the lock, and Victor looked over to Belsa. "Hey, good luck tonight. You'll do fine. We'll swap stories tomorrow, alright?"

"Right. Good luck, Victor." She nodded her head, mouth held in a straight line, and her eyes did not betray any emotion. Victor had to admire her guts. He'd at least had Yrella and Vullu at his first Fight Night. Urt pulled the cage open and gestured for Victor to follow. He held up a little silver rod as they walked.

"With this, I can make that collar so hot it melts through your neck. Don't cock about, got it?"

"Yeah. Fuck, man. Have I ever caused you trouble?"

"Just keep it in mind." Urt walked to the door, slamming it open again, then motioning Victor through. They strode through the big exercise hall. Ponda had a group of the newer fighters assembled near the far wall and was yelling at them about some rule or another they'd broken. Yund's door was closed, and no one looked at them or said

anything as they walked through the big doors and out into the street. A coach much like the one Victor had ridden in with Yund was already waiting, and they clambered up into it.

The coach's interior was in much better repair than the other one. Victor saw that right away - there wasn't any mud on the black lacquered floor, the red seat cushions weren't threadbare, and it didn't smell of anything in particular. "Not too bad," he said to Urt, partially trying to make conversation and partially trying to irritate the recalcitrant manager. Victor laughed at himself, thinking of Urt as a manager. Sure, he "managed" the fighters, but he was more like a prison guard than a coach or anything.

"Huh. Yeah, I didn't hire it. The guy paying for you to fight did." That was interesting. Victor looked around more closely, but he didn't see any identifying marks on the coach's interior.

"Do you think it's his coach? Or did he hire it and send it to us?"

"How the shit would I know? Quiet now, and let me snooze." Urt leaned back, closed his eyes, and crossed his arms on his chest, the rod that controlled Victor's collar clutched firmly in his left fist. Victor briefly entertained the idea of trying to grab the rod and jump out the coach's door. He reached out and tried the latch, not really surprised when he couldn't move it. He was locked in here. These guys seemed dumb and lazy, but they weren't new at the whole kidnapping and enslaving part of their lives. He pulled the curtain aside to at least get a view of the journey through town, but the glass was black. He couldn't see anything outside. The light coming from the little glowing orb in the coach's ceiling looked so much like daylight that Victor hadn't realized at first that the windows were covered.

"Great. Guess it's going to be a boring ride." He looked at his status page and decided to allocate his seven free points. He'd debated it for a while, not sure what was the smart move, but he figured he'd been winning fights by being able to finish people quickly while he was Berserk. Since that seemed to be a winning strategy, he decided to put three into strength, two into agility, and two into dexterity. He figured that would be a good distribution to follow for a while. His class levels gave him plenty of will and vitality; he just thought he should keep his other physical stats improving with the free points. He stared around the coach's interior, stared at Urt, and wondered which of his rings and belts were the mysterious "dimensional containers" that all the non-enslaved people in this world seemed to have.

A dark thought crossed his mind; could he strike Urt hard enough to knock him unconscious or kill him before he could activate the collar? He was just laying there, helpless. What if he channeled his rage and really let him have it, right in the head or neck? Victor ran through it in his head over and over. What would happen if he killed him? He could take the rod, hopefully, get this collar off, and then try to break out of the coach? Should he sit in the coach and wait for the driver to open it? Then he could make a run for it. What if he failed to knock Urt out? The guy was an ex-fighter and

supposedly pretty high level. If he didn't incapacitate him, he'd be in trouble for sure. What if he couldn't get out of the coach or if they had guards waiting? What if the driver was some kind of powerful Energy user?

Victor shook his head, sitting back in his seat and closing his eyes. "Chicken shit," he said, lightly banging his knuckles into his forehead.

"Quiet!" Urt grumbled, snorting and swallowing a mouthful of phlegm.

"That's fucking gross, bro." Urt didn't respond, and Victor decided to pass the time with some cultivation. He'd run through his entire drill four times when the coach's rattling, swaying travel slowed, and the sound of the wheels transitioned from softly grinding dirt roads to clattering, grinding cobbles again. After a few moments of this, they came to a stop, and Urt sat up as though he'd never closed his eyes.

"Alright, look tough." Urt scooted up in his seat, facing the door, and when someone rapped on the dark glass, Urt knocked back in a similar pattern.

"You guys have a secret knock?" Urt didn't answer, just shrugged. The door opened, and the coachman held it while Urt scrambled out. Victor followed, stepping onto rounded cobbles into the cold night air. He looked around, noting the dark shadows of thick tree canopies on either side of the cobbled path. A stone wall and gate were nearby on this side of the lane, and Urt motioned for Victor to follow him to it. The coachman didn't say anything, but Victor heard him close the door, and, as they stepped through the shadowed gateway, he heard it clatter a short way down the lane and then stop. The path they walked along was bedded in small, round stones and roughly ten feet wide. On either side of it, tall, looming trees made the night feel exceptionally deep and heavy. As they walked, Victor's and Urt's feet crunching in the gravel filled the air, nearly drowning out the chirping and droning of all the nighttime insects lurking in the thick foliage. They walked for about five minutes, every now and then passing lamp posts that shed yellow islands of light in the darkness. When they followed a final curve in the path and a stone wall with a black, iron door mounted in it came into view, Victor felt a little surge of relief - he'd been a bit unnerved walking through the dark forest, regardless of the well-maintained path and the intermittent lamps.

Two Ardeni men stood outside the door; both wore black and blue uniforms, had swords on their belts, and sported shiny metal helmets. As Urt approached, Victor in tow, one of them stepped forward. "From the Wagon Wheel?"

"Aye," Urt said.

"You have the contract and the control rod?"

“Aye,” Urt pulled a rolled-up parchment out of “somewhere” and handed it and the control rod for Victor’s collar to the uniformed servant or guard. He turned to look at Victor, then shrugged. “Sorry, kid.”

“Here’s for your boss.” The guard handed Urt a heavy-looking sack about the size of a bag of sugar.

“The fuck is going on, Urt?” Victor looked at Urt with wide eyes, but he refused to make eye contact.

“Shut up and move with us.” The guard turned and opened the metal door with a grinding squeal, signaling seldom used hinges. Urt, for his part, turned and walked up the gravel path, his feet crunching loudly at first and then fading as the night swallowed him. “I said let’s go. I don’t want to have to use this.” He waved the rod in front of Victor. Victor looked from one stony-faced guard to the other and followed through the doorway. They were in a narrow, low-ceilinged stone hallway. Victor had to stoop to walk along behind the first Ardeni, and the other took up position behind him. Yellow light globes appeared in the tunnel every twenty feet or so, just bright enough to keep the space dimly lit. Victor didn’t note any doors in the tunnel, and he could feel that they were slowly moving down a slope.

“Can you guys tell me what the fuck is going on? Am I here to fight in a tournament?” The guard in front of him laughed, a short, mocking sound.

“That what your owner said? Sure, that’s what it is. We’re taking you down here to a ‘tournament.’” He snickered again, and the guard behind Victor snorted also. Victor knew he wouldn’t get any answers from these assholes, so he just readied himself, figuring he’d have answers soon enough. They finally came to a T in the tunnel, and the guards led Victor to the left. After a while, they arrived at another heavy, iron door. The guard put a big metal key into the door, grunted as he twisted it, broke away some rust, and then pulled the door open, hinges squealing.

They walked into a round room with a convex stone ceiling and mortared stone walls. In the center of the room, a lone table sat on a sturdy metal frame. The first guard touched something on the wall, and cool white-blue light filled the air, almost like it was being exuded from the stone ceiling. He walked to the table and turned some sort of crank, and it rotated up ninety degrees. The rear guard gave Victor a shove, propelling him toward the table. “Stand with your back against the table,” he said gruffly.

“The fuck is this?” Victor began to panic and started to reach for his Core.

“Don’t even think about it, shit head. I’ll melt your head right off.” Suddenly the collar around Victor’s neck grew warm, then uncomfortably hot, and he reached up in a panic, trying to squeeze his fingers in between it and his tender throat. “Just do what I said, and I’ll cool it off.” Victor complied, walking up to the table. As soon as he was standing with his back touching the metal surface, the collar started to cool, and the guards each

pulled one of Victor's hands down to the table, claspingsomething around his wrists. Then the guards backed away, and the first one stepped around to crank the little wheel again. Victor rotated backward ninety degrees so that he was now lying facing the round dome of the ceiling. "Alright. I'll watch him. Go let Lord ap'Horrin know he's here."

Victor's mind raced as the other guard walked away, pulling open and then closing the squealing metal door. He'd heard that name before - ap'Horrin. He couldn't place it, though. It might have been a name he heard at one of the fight nights or someone that Vullu or Yrella had mentioned. He couldn't figure it out. He knew one thing, though: Yund had fucked him over. Yund, Ponda, Urt - they'd all known this was going down. Ponda hadn't looked at him when he was leaving. Urt had said, "Sorry, kid." Obviously, Yund knew - he'd been paid a fat sack of whatever passed for money in this world. What were these assholes planning for him? He couldn't think of any sort of good scenario where someone is strapped to a metal table deep underground. Sure, maybe they were going to do some cosmetic modifications - give him a tattoo and some fangs. He snorted a short laugh.

"Good that you can have a sense of humor. I'll be honest with you; I hope the Lord's quick with you cause I don't have the same kind of stomach he does." Victor had almost forgotten the other guard was still in the room.

"Dude, can't you tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"Shouldn't be that hard to figure out. How many lord's kids have you killed?"

"What the fuck? I only fight in pits, dude, and I sure as hell don't get to pick my opponents."

"True, it's not really a fair deal for you, but Lord ap'Horrin has to save face somehow, and he can't very well kill Lady ap'Brellin, can he? Now shut up; I'm not supposed to talk to you." Lady ap'Brellin, the Lady that hired him to be a "Justice?" Images of the garden party and the newly constructed pit filled Victor's mind. The man thrown in the pit with him had been a noble, the "criminal" he'd killed because the courts wouldn't do what the Lady wanted.

"Oh, God." Victor strained against his restraints, but they were immovable. He knew if he tried to use his Energy abilities, the guard would use the collar, but he couldn't help the panic rising in his chest. What was this fucking guy going to do to him?

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 20: Fractured

Victor felt like the lord that the guard had gone to fetch would arrive any moment, so he lay there tensely, his mind providing detailed fantasies about what kind of hell was waiting for him. He lay like that for a long time, tense, sweating, even twitching with

nerves. When long minutes went by, then hours, he thrashed about, trying to get even a tiny amount of wiggle-room in his wrists so that he could turn or look behind him. His restraints wouldn't budge, though, and though he tried, he couldn't get his head turned far enough to see the guard that was presumably still sitting or standing behind him. He tried to engage the guard in conversation a few times, but after a few grunts of "Quiet!" or "Just wait," he gave up.

After a while, he tried to find some solace in dozing off. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on things that made him happy, or at least places that made him happy. He imagined walking around the big wash where he and his buddies had built a fort every summer. He remembered how it smelled out there during monsoon season, how the water would flow for a few hours after each storm, and then he and his friends would go out and find tadpoles in the big puddles left behind. Where did those toads go during the rest of the year? His friend, James, had said they hibernate, but Victor couldn't picture toads sleeping underground for most of the year, just coming out during a month or two when the rains really pounded the desert. He supposed anything was possible, though.

"Creosote," he mumbled. "That's what smelled so good around the washes during the rains." He lifted his head off the table and brought it down with a thud. He did it again, harder, with a louder thud.

"Cut that shit out." The guard didn't sound happy. Maybe he was as bored as Victor.

"Oh, you're still there? Fuck you, pendejo." Victor closed his eyes and let himself drift again. Memories and dreams blurred together for a while, and then he really did sleep, deep, sinking into the earth sleep, with no dreams to bother him. Then he felt a gentle hand on his cheek, caressing it lightly, and he opened his eyes to the cool, sterile light of the domed stone ceiling. He blinked a few times and saw that an Ardeni man with a neatly trimmed black beard was standing next to him, his hand resting on Victor's cheek.

"Ahh, there he is. There's our young Justice." He patted Victor's cheek twice more, then pulled his hand away. He didn't have a smile on his face, but his voice didn't sound particularly angry or cruel. Victor saw that he had dark eyes like the guy he'd fought in the pit. Another Ardeni without bright hair and eyes? He wanted to ask about it but knew he had to play this smart, so he kept his mouth shut. "Well, have anything to say for yourself?" *freewebnovel.com*

"Um, are you the father of the man I had to fight, um, at that Lady's house?"

"Oh, just an innocent victim of circumstance, hmm?" The man's brow furrowed, and a glint of cruelty interred his eyes.

"You can say what you want, man, but I didn't fucking choose to be there, or even in this goddamned world!"

“Is that right? So, some stranger, some victim, just a tier-one nobody, managed to kill my tier-two son in a pit fight?”

“Actually, yes. I didn’t even want to fight there. I had no idea who your son was.”

“What do you say to that, Drelk?” He looked past Victor toward the part of the room behind his head.

“Well, I told you about his savagery. I don’t think I need to say more. I can’t imagine anyone unwillingly doing what this beast did to your son, to your son’s corpse.”

“And that,” a hard glint entered the lord’s eyes, and his voice became icy, “is why you must be gentled and put somewhere away from society, Victor. Did I say that right? Your name? It’s a new one to me, but I saw it on the contract I purchased.”

“The fuck do you mean, gentled? Dude, just let me go, and I won’t bother you or your society.” Victor strained against his bindings again, but he made no headway.

“Victor, I’m going to watch what my friend Tkelvic does to you, and I’m going to enjoy it. It’s the least I can do for myself as consolation for the loss of a child, however misbehaved he was. When Tkelvic is done with you, I will sell your contract to a place often equated to hell. Do they have a concept of hell where you come from? A place for terrible souls to go after life? Don’t bother answering me, Victor. I’m not interested, really.” He stepped back from Victor and looked around. “Drelk, you may go. Hols, please get Tkelvic; he’s in the next oubliette.”

Victor lay there, paralyzed by panic. He heard people moving around and then the scraping of chains on stone, accompanied by the click-clack sound of something big moving around on stilts or wooden shoes or something. He stared at the ceiling, trying to will himself out of his predicament, but then a long, dark shadow fell over him, and he looked up in the face of horror. A man loomed over him, but not a man like any he’d ever seen. This man was naked and had gray skin and a long angular face with huge black saucers for eyes. His mouth and jaw reminded him of an insect’s mandibles. The freakiest part of him, though, was that he didn’t have arms. No, he had long, thick spider legs coming out of his shoulders and back, allowing him to loom over Victor’s table. Victor opened his mouth to scream, and that’s when he saw the tentacles. The man had a nest of tentacles at the base of his abdomen, and two of them shot forward and wrapped around Victor’s face, clamping his mouth shut.

“No noise, meat,” the gray man-spider said in a grinding, discordant voice that registered deep in Victor’s gut. Victor strained against the tentacles but couldn’t move his head at all. He darted his eyes around, trying to find some sort of solution, some hint of hope. That’s when he noticed the collar and chains on the creature. So, he was enslaved, too?

“Do not kill him, Tkelvic!” the lord’s voice came from behind Victor. “I want him to feel what you do to him, and I want him to live with it.”

“Yes, Lord,” the horrifying creature said in that deep grinding voice. “I feel his Core. He’s a spirit wielder. I’ve never broken a Spirit Core.”

“I don’t care what his Core looks like or if he’s got twenty affinities. Shatter it!” Hearing those words, Victor felt real panic enter his mind, and he thrashed against his restraints, thrashed against the tentacles holding his head. He arched his back, reached into his Core, and pushed his Energy into his pathways, trying to activate Berserk. He didn’t care about the collar anymore; he had to do something. Just as the Energy left his Core, he felt it dragged along his pathways and into the restraints at his wrists. His body’s weak thrashing couldn’t dislodge the tentacles and didn’t affect the bonds. “The restraints flashed; he’s trying something!”

“He cannot break free. I must concentrate,” the looming, gray man-spider said as if to dismiss a child’s worries. Victor’s head was being held so that he could only stare at the ceiling, but he felt more of the tentacles start to wrap around his abdomen, squeezing him uncomfortably tight. Suddenly he felt a heavy pressure, right above his navel. Then it was like something was digging into his flesh, driving into his stomach, pulling apart his abdominal muscles and slipping between them. He screamed as he’d never screamed before. The pain was horrifying, but his inability to move and the invasive way the creature was probing into his body magnified his pain and discomfort. He kicked and thrashed, but the creature’s weight and death grip with its tentacles kept his torso still.

The pain in his stomach grew as a hot buildup of some sort of foreign Energy began to throb right where his Core was. Victor stopped trying to see anything with his eyes, closed them, and turned his vision inward, trying to see what was happening to his Core. There it was, dim, low on Energy, but still whole, a red sun drifting in a vast void. Then Victor saw what the alien creature was doing: a bright spot of Energy was taking shape near his Core, slowly growing, pulsing with a sickly green radiance. He weakly thrashed with his body, but he knew he was on his last dregs of consciousness. He watched helplessly as the foreign Energy grew to eclipse his Core, and then with a white-hot, searing, acidic burn, it flashed into his Core and tore it apart. Victor screamed like someone was peeling the flesh from his bones and then sank into the endless void, drifting without a coherent thought.

An eternity later, Victor opened his eyes to gray daylight. He was lying in some straw on a wooden floor. The floor bumped and jostled, and, as he blearily rubbed at the crust binding his eyelashes, he foggily surmised he might be in a wagon. His right hand felt heavy, and he looked at it, noticing the metal cuff and chain hanging off it. “Fuck,” he groaned, trying to push himself to a sitting position. He felt so weak like his arms could barely manage the motion.

“Oh, you’re alive after all,” a dry, wispy voice said from behind him. He managed to scoot to a sitting position and looked toward the voice. An old, gray-haired Ardeni man

was chained to the floor a few feet away from him. A few other hunched individuals shared a similar fate further into the wagon.

“Damn, dude, where the fuck are we?” His voice was scratchy, his throat sore and raw.

“In a wagon! Hah!” The old guy grinned, showing an alarming lack of teeth. Victor felt like shit. He felt worse than he had since coming to this world, worse than that time he’d had the flu and couldn’t eat for five days.

“I get it. A wagon. Where’s it going? Who chained us in here?” Victor tried to gather some spit and swallow it to make his throat a little less scratchy. His mouth was like the inside of a cotton ball, though, and he could barely dampen his tongue.

“We’re bound for Greatbone Mine. I imagine the Greatbone Mining Consortium put us in the wagon - that’s who bought us at auction.” How the fuck had Victor missed an entire auction? He tried to remember the last thing that he’d done. There’d been some practice with Belsa, then the private fight.

“Oh, fuck.” All the memories came to him - the metal table, the huge insect man, his Core. His Core! Victor looked inward, and there, where the bright, blazing sun of his Core used to pulse, he saw scattered bits of Energy, some yellow, some faintly flickering red, but none of it responded to him; it just floated listlessly in the void. “What did that fucker do to me?” He called up his status page:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human - Base 4

Class:

Spirit Champion

Level:

11

Core:

Spirit Class - Base 5 (fractured)

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

5/5

Strength:

28

Vitality:

27

Dexterity:

19

Agility:

19

Intelligence:

10

Will:

17

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

—

Skills:

System Language Integration - Not Upgradeable Unarmed Combat - Basic Knife Combat - Basic Axe Mastery - Basic Spear Mastery - Basic Bludgeon Mastery - Basic Grappling - Improved Spirit Core Cultivation Drill - Basic Berserk - Basic Sovereign Will - Basic Channel Spirit - Basic

His Core now said it was “fractured” and he had a maximum of five Energy. In other words, he couldn’t do shit. He reached up to scratch his neck and noticed the collar was gone. “I guess they don’t need to collar a guy with a fractured Core.” He couldn’t even activate Berserk or Channel Spirit. He supposed he might be able to use his Sovereign Will skill, but he couldn’t be sure until he tried. A wave of nausea rose from his stomach, and he bent over, shivering for a few minutes. When the discomfort faded, he attempted to straighten up, but a sharp pain from his stomach stopped him. He lifted his shirt and shivered at the sight. He had an eight-inch cut, crudely stitched and scabbed with puffy red flesh running laterally along the center of his abdomen. Thin, jagged black lines ran off into his tanned flesh from the incision.

“That looks infected, friend,” the strange old man said.

“Yeah, it sure does, man.” Victor leaned back, groaning and shaking, a sheen of sweat coating his face and forehead.

“When we stop, tell the wagonmaster. He won’t want you dead before delivery.” The older man sniffed and started picking at something on one of his bare feet. Victor looked down at his own feet and saw that his new boots and socks were gone. He still had on his black pants and shirt, though. If he could just activate his Berserk, it might heal his stomach, and he might be able to break the chain. He knew it wouldn’t work - he was seventy Energy shy of the minimum to activate it, but he wanted to try. He concentrated on the ability and tried to activate it as he’d always done. He felt a little flutter in his gut, but nothing happened. He didn’t feel it fail or pain or anything; it just didn’t work. He leaned his head back against the bumping wagon and closed his eyes.

“I’m fucked, man.” While he waited for something in his world to change, Victor thought about the people he’d met in this world. He thought about Yrella and savored the deep knot of discomfort that formed somewhere around his heart. It was nice to have a good, clean moment of sadness, a memory untainted by his current predicament. He tried to imagine what Yrella would say to him right now. It would probably be something about keeping his head up, staying ready for anything. Did he have that kind of fight left in him? What did it mean that his Core was fractured? Would he ever be able to gain power again? Would he be a broken person in this world? He supposed it made trying to get home an easier choice; if his Core was shot, there wasn’t much point in not trying to get back to Earth. That thought surprised him a little - he hadn’t consciously admitted that he’d been thinking about staying in this world, but there it was. He’d been gaining a lot of new abilities and a feeling of power that he’d never replicate back on Earth. He supposed that he’d kind of hoped to break free of the pit fighting and then see what he could figure out. He laughed bitterly. “You’re a fucking idiot. You can’t do shit; how are you going to get home or anything?”

“Hey, don’t get too down - just because someone bought your contract doesn’t mean they don’t have to follow it. How long was your contract for?” The old man nudged him with his bare, calloused foot.

“Somewhere between four and five years, I guess. You really think they’ll let us go after our time’s up?”

“It’s the law! We’re in the Ridonne Empire now - no slavery is allowed, only indentured service.” The old man had a manic tone to his voice, and it set Victor a little on edge.

“Dude, I hate to break it to you, but it ain’t much different. We’re going to some mine? You think they keep good records of their miners and their service terms? Is there some sort of government inspection to keep them honest?”

“Haha! Smart questions, young man! I’ve been indentured eleven times in my life. Guess what that means? I’ve been set free ten times! Have some optimism! It’s important for surviving times like this. My name’s Pel, by the way. What can I call you?” Whether he wanted to admit it or not, the old man had managed to ignite a tiny spark of hope in Victor’s heart. He might be down, but maybe it wasn’t forever. Five years was a long time, but he had a long life to live if what he’d heard about racial improvements were true.

“I’m Victor.” He closed his eyes again, and he didn’t try to think about anything this time. However, some images still came into his dozing mind: Belsa smiling as he showed her how to do an armbar, the healer at the Rusty Nail when they’d flirted while she fixed his shoulder, Vullu laughing at Victor when Yrella snatched his flatbread off his plate. He smiled but couldn’t help the little pools of tears that started to fill the corners of his eyes.