

Victor of Tucson

Chapter 6: Afterparty

Yund practically yanked Victor out of the ring when he finally moved to climb out. He pulled Victor up into a laughing hug and slapped his back several times. "By the Lady's swingin' tits! That was well done, boy! You and that old Ghelli made your Boss several sacks of beads!" He reached down for Sarl's hand and pulled him out of the pit. "Come on, men! You can rest and watch the rest of the matches. I'll even buy you each an ale. Dead Gods, but it was fun to see Tarlen's face when his bitch died."

Yund turned to start stomping his way back to their roped-off area, but Victor paused, looking out over the pit to the crumpled bodies lying within. He hadn't cared for the blue guys, but that didn't mean he wanted them dead. Then there was the little brown corpse of the otter-woman, one arm stretched to the side, her face turned forlornly up at the dim, smoke-hazed ceiling. Lastly, he looked at the body of Thessa-dak, the first and only person Victor had ever killed. His heart lurched toward his throat momentarily. He'd killed someone. He stared at her long, red-fleshed body, the darker holes on her back, and the big muddy-maroon puddle that had spread underneath her. He shook his head, turned, and followed after Sarl and Yund.

When they got back to their area, Victor noticed that many of Yund's prisoners were gone. He scanned the twenty or so faces sitting and standing around behind the rope, but he didn't see Yrella or Vullu. "Hey, Boss, are Yrella and Vullu fighting?"

"That's right, runt. If you see Urt or Ponda, they can tell you what pits." He turned and started talking to another member of the Rusty Nail's staff, writing something on a clipboard as Yund rattled off some numbers. Victor looked up and down the line, but couldn't see Ponda or Urt, so he started looking around the nearby pits, but the crowds were thick, and it was impossible to make them out. He decided to just wait around by the ropes, hoping they'd be back by to pick up or drop off a fighter.

"That was good teamwork, Victor," Sarl said, walking toward him with a big wooden mug in each hand. "Boss said we could have one, so I picked these up on his credit." He smiled, and Victor took the mug he held out.

"Damn, thanks," Victor took a sip of the stuff, and it tasted like warm, flat beer, but in that moment, it was one of the best things he'd ever tasted. He took a long drink and sighed. "Man, who would think some warm beer could be so damn good?"

"It's not the beer that's good; it's your hard work and your joy in being alive - they'd make anything taste good right now. To living!" He said, knocking his mug against Victor's, and they both took another long pull. Some of the other fighters gave them sour looks, but Victor pointedly avoided eye contact.

"The hell do you two think you're doing?" Ponda waddled toward them, his two center teeth jutting out of his half-open, scowling mouth.

"Easy, Boss. Big Boss said we could have an ale for winning our match," Sarl said, a lazy smile on his narrow face.

"Ha, he musta won some good bets." Ponda shrugged.

"Hey, Ponda, Boss said we could watch some matches. Can you tell me where Vullu and Yrella are fighting?" Victor asked, noticing a slight buzz already hitting him.

"Vullu is in seven, but I don't know about Yrella; Urt took her."

"Alright, thanks!"

"Hang on, boys. If you're going off to watch fights, then I gotta collar you. I only got two collars with me, so don't be gone long in case Boss wants to let some others watch. Just watch a fight or two." Seemingly by magic, he produced two black metal collars that he held out. Sarl backed away, though.

"I think I'll just wait here. I don't really want to watch any fights anyway, and I hate the idea of wearing a collar."

"Who do you think you're fooling? Collar or not, you belong to Boss." Ponda snorted, smirking. Sarl just shrugged, raised his mug to Victor, then turned and walked back under the rope.

"Well, I wanna see Vullu fight, so go ahead, slap it on me."

"Smart lad," Ponda said, snapping the cold, heavy collar around his neck. Victor didn't notice feeling any different.

"What's it do, anyway?"

"If you disappear, Boss can use a linked amulet to make it so hot it melts through your neck."

"Fucking hell," Victor spat but then turned and scanned the pit signs for number seven. He saw six and figured seven would be close, so he worked his way over there. It seemed like most of the races in this world were generally smaller than the average human, but every now and then, he'd bump into a person that just seemed larger than life. They were physically imposing, but also, a certain presence seemed to bleed out of them that just made Victor feel insignificant and small. He tried to avoid those people simply because they made him feel shitty and because he figured that if he felt that way, his instincts were trying to tell him something, so he'd treat it like a warning.

He had finished his ale by the time he found pit seven, and he tried to surreptitiously make his way toward the edge so he could see in. Most spectators had to jostle for space on the floor, but a few sat in little bleacher-like stands and had an unobstructed view from one side of the pit. Victor knew better than trying to get into the stands, seeing as he was wearing a fucking slave collar, but he managed to worm his way close enough to the edge to see over the heads of a couple of blue guys who were shouting and cheering excitedly. When he finally saw into the pit, he could see why - Vullu was punching the shit out of a big Shadeni, and there were three other mutilated corpses in the pit. Victor saw discarded axes, knives, and a long pole with a small sword blade affixed to one end lying on the sandy ground. As the Shadeni staggered and fell against the pit wall, Vullu didn't back off, and he didn't pick up a weapon; he just kept pummeling him in the head. He smashed him into the side of the pit until golden motes started to coalesce around the bodies, and four streams of Energy slammed into Vullu. He stood, bloody fists in the air, and howled.

Victor started to cheer for Vullu, but then it hit him that he had just watched another guy beat the fuck out of someone until they died. He was looking at four corpses. Again. It all started to feel a little too crazy for him, so he turned and made his way back to the roped-off area where his fellow prisoners were waiting for their turns to fight or die. His earlier euphoria had faded with a suddenness that left him reeling. When he slipped under the ropes, Ponda wandered by and took the collar off his neck, admonishing him to stay put behind the rope. Victor stood there, looking around the hazy, noisy warehouse at all the strange people and listening to people screaming and roaring, and he wondered if this could possibly be real.

"You won!" Yrella's voice cut through his inner turmoil, and when she grabbed his shoulder, jostling it in excitement, he couldn't stop the smile that turned up the corners of his mouth, especially when he looked at her and saw the huge raccoon-eye bruises around her eyes. The dark bruises looked positively black through her red skin, and he almost laughed aloud.

"Yeah, but what the fuck happened to you?" She reached a hand up and tenderly touched the flesh under her left eye.

"It shows?"

"Oh yeah! You look like a raccoon."

"What's a raccoon?"

"Uh, a small animal, but it has black fur around its eyes."

"Ugh, that asshole pounded my face like seven times before I slipped free."

"Jesus! Fucking prick, but you got him, right?"

"I did! But tell me about your fight; Vullu and I thought you were doomed!"

"Pssh," Victor made the leaky tire sound, then laughed. "Well, me and that winged guy, Sarl, ended up making a pretty good team."

"Winged guy? He's a Ghelli. Now that you've survived a Pit Night, I'm going to have to expand your education."

"Anyway, yeah, we managed to double team this big red bitch...." he trailed off, then corrected himself, "er, we managed to beat this really tough, respectable, Shadeni woman."

"Is that how you think of us? Red people? I guess to someone new here, that would stand out the most. What do you call the Ardeni? Blue people?"

"Uh, is that what they're called? Thanks, Yrella. I'm not trying to sound like an idiot, but sometimes that's what comes out. I spend too much time with my buddies, I think."

"Well, you used to. Now you're stuck with us." She smiled and slapped his shoulder, and Victor swallowed the lump that had stuck in his throat at her words and forced himself to smile back. They stood quietly for a few minutes, Yrella slowly massaging the skin around the bruises on her face. A few minutes later, Vullu arrived, and they all congratulated each other on their victories again. Victor zoned out a lot after that, and the hours kind of blended together while they waited for all of Yund's fights to finish up. It was after midnight when they were all chained together and led back to the Wagon Wheel. Victor counted only twenty-eight fighters in the line going back, which meant that twelve had died at the Rusty Nail.

When they got back to the Wagon Wheel, the last thing Victor felt like doing was partying. He wanted to crawl into a corner, bury his head in some hay and go to sleep, hopefully dreaming about someplace other than here, about doing things other than killing. Yund had other ideas, though - his bets had gone very well, and he wanted to share the wealth, such as it was. He'd sent Ponda back ahead of the fighters, and when they came into the big exercise hall, there were three barrels of ale and a tabletop covered with meat, cheese, and bread. The fighters cheered and rushed forward, and Victor followed along with Yrella and Vullu.

Victor had been drunk a few times in his life. It wasn't all that hard for a guy to find a party where no one was checking IDs in Tucson; it was a University town, after all, and Victor had made a lot of friends on the wrestling team, being on varsity since he was a freshman. At that moment, if he couldn't fall into a sleep coma, he figured a drunken stupor would do just fine, so he grabbed a tin cup and set to it, downing three full cups of the bitter, warm ale before Yrella pulled him away from the table.

"Trying to blackout the night's events?" she asked wryly.

“Easy to see through me, huh?” His head was buzzing pretty hard already, and he always talked too much when he’d had some beers, so he tried to really think about his words before letting them come out of his mouth.

“It’s normal, Victor. A lot of the people put into the pits aren’t killers - just criminals or people caught on the wrong side of a war. Me and Vullu were ready for this place, though - we were up to a lot of bad stuff, to be honest.”

“Well, you seem pretty cool to me.”

“Easy to be ‘cool’ when we get paid for it.” She shrugged.

“Hey! You’re using my words now. That means we’re friends.” Victor nudged her with his shoulder, grinning down at her.

“Hah, don’t get ahead of yourself, kid. Sure, we’re friends, though, unless Yund finds a way to make money putting us in the pit against each other, anyway.” When she grinned at him this time, she was sure to show her long, sharp canines. Victor knew she was teasing, but still, a little cold shiver crossed over the nape of his neck because he realized there was a vein of truth in what she said. He shoved the thought to the back of his mind, though. Instead, he admired the way her lips curled up and the little crinkles around her eyes. She took a step back.

“Easy, kid. Just enjoy being alive for now, eh? Drink a few more cups, but just be ready to work your ass off tomorrow; Yund doesn’t give days off.” She turned and walked away, presumably to find Vullu and hang out with him. Victor went back to the table, a little annoyed that she was treating him like a kid but well aware that he wasn’t exactly a match for her. He shrugged and filled his cup.

He glanced around the big exercise hall and noticed that, while they were being given some liberties, Yund was careful not to let his guard down—he had Ponda sitting on a stool next to the big open doors, and Victor could see a couple more of his lackeys lurking around outside. One of them was smoking something from a pipe, but they looked very alert. Not for the first time, Victor studied the walls, looking for another way out of the place, a way he could slip through some boards or anything. There was no way he meant to spend the rest of his life in this shit hole, but he couldn’t see an easy way out. He took a big gulp of his drink while trying to imagine a way past Ponda.

“Hey, Victor!” Sarl approached him from the other side of the table. “Why not come and sit with me and a couple of friends from my cage? I’d like to introduce you, seeing as I already told them what a great team you and I were!” The thin, wan-looking man looked different to Victor; he wasn’t sure if it was because of an actual change or if it was that Victor had seen him fight and knew that under that unassuming appearance, he was a tough bastard.

“Alright, man, let’s get wasted.”

Chapter 7: Core

Yrella hadn't been lying about Yund not giving days off. The next morning and day went just the same as any of the others Victor had experienced in the Wagon Wheel. Wake up, get breakfast, workout, and go back to your cage to be bored shitless until the next day. At least it seemed to be going that way until the Boss, himself, approached Victor's little trio as they were working on his axe forms. "Runt! What level have you managed to get to?" he hollered as he got close.

"Uh, level three, Boss."

"Huh, not terrible. Listen, I may be a right scoundrel, but I keep my promises, and I offered your group a gold reward if you won. I already gave the old Ghelli his prize, now it's your turn, and I'm going to give you a choice."

"Okaaay...." Victor didn't know what to expect, so he looked from Yrella to Vullu, and they both maintained neutral expressions, so he just looked at Yund expectantly.

"Well, you came here at level zero, right?" Victor nodded, "Well, I doubt either of these two geniuses have helped you build a Core yet, eh?"

"No, I don't have a Core. I'm also holding five attribute points if you could give me...."

"That's not important right now; listen: I can either pay one of those book-brains from the academy a fee to come and help you make a good Core, or I can buy you a racial upgrade fruit. You're at the lowest level for your race, right?"

"Uh, how do I see that?"

"On your status sheet. What the runny shits have you two been teaching this kid?" He glared at Yrella and Vullu.

"Only to keep himself alive in a lopsided pit fight, no big deal!" Yrella retorted.

"Huh. Look at your status sheet, kid, where it lists your race. What does it say after it?"

"Um, base one."

"Right, that's the lowest. I can get you a fruit to lift it to base two, or I can help you make a good Core. What's it gonna be?" He stared pointedly at Victor, who had no idea what the correct answer was, so he looked at Yrella. She mouthed the word "Core" pretty clearly, so Victor shrugged and turned back to Yund.

"The Core, I guess."

“Smart man. One racial upgrade probably won’t save your ass during the next Pit Night, but using Energy just might.”

“Hey, Boss,” Victor licked his lips nervously; he’d wanted to ask this question for days now.

“Yeah? I gotta go schedule this thing; what is it?”

“Well, I kinda got fucking kidnapped and forced to come here, and I have no idea how long you own me for. Is there any way I can get free?” He cringed back as the massive, red-skinned man frowned down at him.

“Huh, I’d call you ungrateful, but I guess you have a point. Listen, kid, most of the dregs I buy from those mages don’t last more than a fight or two. No point talking about freedom when that’s the case, right? Tell you what: you win five matches, and we’ll make a contract. Nobody ever better say I ain’t fair, right Vullu?” Vullu nodded his head, but he wasn’t smiling. “Right, well, I’ve got a business meeting, then I’ll see about getting you some help with your Core. Get back to work!” He turned and walked away, not glancing at Victor, let alone waiting to see if he was amenable to his terms.

“That could have gone worse,” Yrella said, slapping Victor on the shoulder. “Smart move asking him right after a big win.”

“I didn’t plan it that way, but yeah. I’m not really excited about having to fight four more times, but I guess it’s something to shoot for.” Victor looked around the big exercise room and, for the hundredth time, wondered if there was another way out of this predicament. What if he ran to the police or whatever and told them what had happened to him? It couldn’t be fucking legal just to summon innocent people and then sell them. Every time his mind went down that road, he remembered the warnings about getting ‘tagged.’ He knew Ponda, Urt, or one of the other lackeys was always watching the door. Then he thought about how it was his word against Yund’s and that no one, literally no one, in this entire world knew him or could vouch for him.

Shortly after that, they had to return to their cage, and Victor played around with Yrella’s dice while she and Vullu did their meditation thing. They had just finished and were getting ready to teach Victor a new dice game when Ponda slammed open the main door and walked over to their cage. “Kid, follow me. Boss got your reward.” He unlocked the metal gate and motioned for Victor to follow.

“See you later, Victor,” Vullu called. Yrella just waved and leaned back against the metal frame of the cage, letting her eyes close lazily. Victor nodded to Vullu and then followed Ponda. He didn’t know why, but it felt like he was going somewhere to be punished. He hoped he was just being paranoid.

“Boss has that wizard waiting for you in his office. He said I have to leave you alone in there, but I’ll be right outside the door. Don’t mess with any of Boss’s shit. Clear?”

“Yeah, I’m not going to mess with that dude’s shit. You think I’m interested in his old socks and diaries and shit?” Victor scowled at Ponda; the big furry guy was acting like his friend Mike’s dad, and it rubbed him the wrong way. Mike’s dad was always assuming he and Victor were up to no good, and, while it was true a lot of the time, it was shitty to assume the worst of people. Then again, Ponda was a hired guard for a bunch of criminals they were forcing to fight to the death. It was probably healthy for him to assume the worst.

They got to Yund’s office door, and Ponda opened it, giving Victor a little shove, then he pulled it closed. Victor looked around in the dim light, glad to see Yund wasn’t present. Instead, a man the size of his six-year-old cousin sat in Yund’s chair. The guy was wearing a shiny silver robe and had painted his entire bald head royal blue. There was a leaf painted in white on his blue left cheek. He cleared his throat and, in a surprisingly deep voice, said, “Ahh, Victor, I presume. Take a seat.” He gestured to the wooden chair in front of Lund’s desk.

Victor sat down, keeping his eyes on the strange man, and as he got closer, he saw that what he had at first taken for sparkly blue eyes were actually gemstones. The man had glittering little gems where his eyes should be! “Uh, hello,” he said as he sat down.

“Hello. I’ll cut to the chase, Victor. I was paid to perform a service, and I’m going to do it, then I’m going to get out of here. I’m not here to waste any time. Is all that clear?” His eyes stared at Victor, not blinking as normal eyes should, and it was unnerving as hell.

“Yeah, fine. What do we do?” He slouched in his chair, feeling like he was in front of an annoyed Dean of Students for the thirtieth time.

“I’m going to perform some diagnostics, and then I’ll help you, with the aid of some tools, to form your Core. First, how much Energy have you banked?” Victor looked at his status screen.

“Two-twenty,” he replied.

“That should be more than sufficient; I’ve helped Bogoli children form Cores with only forty-five.”

“Bogoli?”

“My race, now please don’t interrupt my process with questions.” He closed his eyes, twiddled his fingers around in the air in front of him, and then a blue, sparkly sphere appeared in his hand. He set it on the desk.

“How did you do that? I’ve seen a bunch of people pull shit outta nowhere in this world!”

“You don’t have dimensional containers where you come from? My ring - it’s also a storage device.” He closed his eyes again and wiggled his fingers, frowning like he was

trying to find something. Victor thought about his answer, and he would have been a bit more shocked, but the truth was, he expected something like that. He'd been fucking summoned by wizards to get here, after all. The blue-painted guy grinned, and a pair of thick, lavender glasses appeared in his hand. Victor caught himself thinking of him as 'the blue-painted guy' and remembered his foot-in-mouth conversation with Yrella after the Pit Night.

"Hey, what's your name, mister?"

"You may call me Dolo. It is an honorific meant for teachers and elders among my people."

"Er, okay. Thank you, Dolo." The little blue man nodded, then pointed to the sparkly, blue crystal-looking sphere.

"Please pick that up and hold it between your hands." Victor did as he instructed, picking up the heavy, cold ball and holding it in his two palms. It reminded him of a snowglobe, and, as he looked into the glassy surface, he saw that the little sparkles were moving around. He stared into it, growing ever more fascinated by how the tiny lights flickered and flashed. The closer he looked, the more he realized the sparkles were all different colors, and they seemed to follow a secret pattern. He felt like if he just watched it long enough, maybe the right little stars, he'd start to learn the design. He snapped to himself when he felt a long strand of drool run down his chin and fall onto the thigh of his jeans. He shook his head and looked at Dolo.

"The fuck is this thing?" he asked, swallowing all the spit that had accumulated while he'd sat there with his jaw hanging open. Dolo, for his part, seemed unaware of Victor or his embarrassing drooling incident. He had on his violet sunglasses with brass-colored frames, and he was staring at the ball in Victor's hands. He didn't respond to the question, and Victor wondered if he'd been dumbstruck too. "Dude, you there?" He waited for an answer for at least a full count to sixty, and then he started to wonder if he should shake the guy. He was just beginning to move to set down the ball when Dolo cleared his throat.

"Wait! Don't set it down yet." That cleared that up. He wasn't dumbstruck; he was just an asshole that responded when he felt like it. Victor felt sorely tempted to set the ball down in spite of his request, but then he wondered if that would mess up the test or whatever he was doing, and then maybe he'd get pissed and leave Victor hanging with no Core. So, he swallowed his irritation and held onto the ball, waiting for Dolo to snap out of it. Eventually, he said, "You may set the ball down now. What an interesting alignment. It looks like spirit might be the way to go with your Core class. Just a moment while I sort the proper tool."

"Why's that interesting? Is it good? Bad?"

“Hmm, it could be either, but it’s interesting because it’s quite unusual for the civilized races of this world to have a spirit marker for their Core alignment.”

“Well, I don’t know what you’re talking about, so I’ll take your word for it.” Victor drummed his fingers, watching the little guy mentally going through his things. After a moment, a flat black stone, as wide as Victor’s old school tablet, appeared in his hands, and he set it on the desk in front of Victor.

“This will sound rather obscene, but please put some spit on this slate.” Dolo looked down, almost like he was embarrassed.

“You want me to spit on it?”

“That’s right. Just a few drops, please, no need to gather any phlegm.” Victor sighed and leaned forward, squeezing some saliva out between his lips to let it drop onto the center of the slate.

“Excellent, thank you,” Dolo said, then he pressed his index finger against a corner of the slate and closed his eyes. A moment later, the little puddle of Victor’s saliva started to bubble, and then it flashed into a bright red cloud of steam. Dolo nodded, staring at the cloud through his glasses, then he said, “Quite interesting, indeed! A rage affinity!”

“A rage what?” Victor leaned forward, watching the red smoke dissipate.

“An affinity. Listen, I’ll need you to make a decision now.”

“Wait a second! Can you tell me what affinity even means? Like on my status sheet, I have an Energy affinity line, and I don’t even know what it is.”

“Oh, bother,” the little man sighed heavily. “I’m going to help you out here, Victor. Energy affinity is a touchy subject among the peoples of this world. Primarily because some people see races with low natural affinity as less-than. They believe that those born with a high affinity are chosen somehow and destined for greatness and dominance over those with lower affinity. Some creatures, like Yeksa, don’t have enough natural Energy affinity for the System even to recognize them, hence their lack of language integration.”

“Alright, so I shouldn’t talk about it? What’s a ‘high’ or ‘low’ affinity?”

“Well, for instance, races like the Yeksa have generally less than one affinity. We Bogoli are quite gifted, and many of us have affinities in the sixes or sevens, though the average is quite lower. Now, I can tell your affinity for rage-attuned Energy will be quite high, and that’s all you should ever tell anyone—that it’s high. Only people you trust, mind you. I wouldn’t ever mention that to someone in a position to do you harm.” He looked toward the door pointedly.

"Huh, I get it," Victor said, looking again at his status sheet and his six-point-one Energy affinity.

"Now, are you ready to make a decision?"

"What kinda decision?" Victor frowned.

"You have a close alignment to spirit with a very strong rage affinity," he said, then looked at Victor's confused expression and said, more slowly, "You have a chance to have a powerful, specialized Core. It comes with some strings attached, though - such a strong rage affinity would mean that you'd struggle to channel unattuned Energy. Rage-attuned Energy is very potent, so that wouldn't be such a bad thing; it's just that the types of skills and spells that you can easily manage with such Energy are often violent and destructive. Hence the choice: create a specialized spirit Core or forget about your affinities and create a very neutral generalist Core. I think you could easily form a pearl class Core."

"Why can I make a spirit Core?"

"You are strongly aligned with spirit, which allows...."

"No, I mean, why am I aligned like that? What is the spirit?"

"Spirit is where our emotions, our feelings dwell. It's the part of us that isn't physical. Surely you must at least have some sense of it?" Dolo looked at Victor, a blue painted eyebrow raised up in an arch. He wasn't sure why, but unbidden memories came to his mind - memories of his Mom and how he'd spent so much time talking to her long after the car accident. He'd spoken to her while he lay in bed, unable to sleep in his new room at his grandparents'. He'd told her about how he was scared at school, about how he missed his dad. He'd raged at her for dying. The thing was, Victor swore, even now, years later, that she'd spoken back to him. He swore he'd heard her saying, "Everything will be alright. Everything's going to get normal again." Did he have a sense of his spirit? Yeah, he'd say he did. He knew what Dolo was talking about.

"So it's because I'm close to my feelings?"

"Not necessarily close to them; maybe they influence you more than normal. Or maybe it has nothing to do with any of that, and the Ancestors have chosen to give you this alignment."

"Ancestors? You mean like my genetics?" Dolo looked at him blankly. "Like it runs in my family?"

"Oh, perhaps. Members of the same family often have similar affinities and Core alignments."

“When you say ‘ancestors,’ are you, like, praying? Do you all worship your ancestors?”

“Praying? No. We Bogoli know better than that.” He looked offended.

“Yeah, well, I don’t want some generic bullshit; let’s do that spirit Core.”

“Yes, that’s an interesting choice,” he paused and looked around the pitmaster’s office, then continued, “I think it will serve you well.” He concentrated on the air in front of his face for a moment, and then he started setting items down on the table. A little blue bag, a red candle, and a long golden chain and amulet. “Put this chain around your neck and lean back in your chair so the medallion rests on your navel.” Then he opened the little blue pouch and took out a red crystal lens. While he was positioning the candle, Victor looped the chain over his head and pulled it down so the round, glinting medallion rested on the center of his stomach.

“What the fuck are we doing, actually? This is looking a little weird.”

“Don’t balk now, Victor; this was the right choice. Mediocrity never writes history!” He stared at the candle for a moment, and it flared to life with a crackling red flame at the end of its wick. He held the red crystal out in front of the candle flame, and as the light from the candle hit the angles of the crystal lens, a beam of red light came out the other side. Dolo angled the lens so that the red beam hit the center of the amulet on Victor’s stomach. “Do you feel that warmth, Victor?”

“Ahh, yes! You’re burning the shit out of me, dude!”

“No, Victor, it’s Just the Energy I had stored in this candle; it’s fire attuned, which is the closest I had to rage. It will work, though. It should work. Victor! Concentrate on the heat, feel how it echoes into your body, feel that heat flowing through your flesh. Now pull it to that hot spot where the amulet is.”

Victor listened to Dolo, and not wanting to fuck up this procedure, he tried his hardest to do exactly as he said. He concentrated on the hot spot in the center of his belly, then he traced that burning feeling and felt the tiny echoes of it around his body, kind of flowing around through veins or something. He tried to imagine scooping up all those little hot spots and pulling them down to the center of his stomach.

“That’s it, Victor, good. Just keep pressing all that Energy in; feel where it passes through your body. The amulet will help you create your pathways, too, don’t worry - once we trigger it with enough Energy.” Just then, the amulet on Victor’s stomach lifted into the air, flared a brilliant crimson, and began to pulse with a red light over Victor’s stomach. Victor felt a hot, angry flare in his stomach with each pulse. The heat spread out, radiating into his body, limbs, and head. He was transfixed by the process, unable to contemplate moving, sort of outside his body, watching the red rivers of anger spread through himself.

Victor focused his attention on that central point of heat in his stomach, and after a few seconds, his surroundings seemed to fade away, and it felt like he was seeing inside himself. A hot, pulsing red star lay in the center of his being - his Core. He watched the red Energy from the candle rushing into him to meet with the more crimson Energy flowing through the channels in his body, collapsing into the hungry, pulsing star. Suddenly the star, his Core, seemed to collapse in on itself, shrinking to a tiny point of brilliant red light, and then it surged out, like a star exploding, only in slow motion. A wave of red Energy expanded from the center of his being, spreading through his entire body, through every cell. Victor went even more rigid with the slow cascade of Energy, and when the wave finally passed through his extremities, he collapsed back into the chair. A sheen of sweat instantly coated his body, and he panted like he'd just sprinted a mile after doing circuits.

Congratulations! You've formed a Spirit Class Core - Base 1.

"Well, that's my job done. I appreciate you making this tedious bit of shady business at least a little interesting. Good luck with your endeavors." Dolo scooped up his candle and other paraphernalia, then stood. All the while, Victor tried to get his breath back and take stock of his situation.

"It worked?" He finally croaked out as Dolo was walking around the desk, his little blue-painted head just a few inches higher than the top.

"Oh yes, I'd say you must have a powerful rage affinity after that display. I'd be careful using too many Energy abilities unless you want to lose yourself in it. I'm sure you'll gain more and more control with practice and, hopefully, a class that helps you refine your talents." Once again, he looked around the filthy office with a frown, then said, "Good luck," and knocked on the door. Ponda opened the door immediately, and Dolo walked out. Victor stood shakily and started to leave as well. Ponda blocked his path at the doorway, though.

"Well, what did that little weirdo do for you?" He asked with a note of genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Helped me form my Core."

"Ahh, you were that far behind, huh? I knew you were shit level, but I didn't know you didn't even have a Core. Well, back to your cage, runt. Two more days until the next Pit Night!" Victor nodded and walked toward the pens, calling up his status sheet as he moved:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human - Base 1

Class:

—

Level:

3

Core:

Spirit Class - Base 1

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1

Energy:

93/93

Strength:

14

Vitality:

10

Dexterity:

9

Agility:

10

Intelligence:

8

Will:

8

Points Available:

5

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

That little guy hadn't been lying about his rage affinity, whatever the hell that was. It looked like his normal Energy affinity had gone down. "Well, here's hoping that guy didn't fuck me over."

Chapter 8: Rage

Victor had to tiptoe when he returned to his cage with Ponda because he didn't want some pissed-off pit fighter to toss shit at him for waking them up. He didn't know if they'd actually do that, but Vullu had seemed serious about the risk, so he figured he wouldn't take chances. He'd crept to his corner of the cage, curled up on some straw, and gone to sleep, listening to Yrella and Vullu breathing and the soft, deceptively soothing sounds of prisoners shifting around, snoring, and mumbling in their sleep.

"A spirit Core, huh?" Yrella wore a frown and looked a little skeptical.

"Yeah, it was either that or some generic all-purpose Core, at least according to that Bogoli guy."

"Any affinity?" Vullu asked.

"Yeah, um, rage." Victor shrugged helplessly.

"That sounds portentous!" Yrella laughed.

"Portentous?" Victor wasn't bad at English, but he'd definitely done more wrestling than reading the last few years.

"Let's just say rage might not be a bad affinity for a pit fighter," Vullu joined Yrella in her chuckling.

"Alright, alright, now that I have a Core, what do I do with these ninety-three Energy points?" They were sitting in the mess hall, waiting to be dismissed to practice.

"I can show you how to channel Energy into your strikes. It should help you a lot, and as you experiment and fight and gain levels, hopefully, you gain some skills or spells that utilize your particular brand of Energy." Vullu said, mopping up the last of his eggs with a corner of his flatbread.

"Yeah, and tonight, we can try to help you figure out how to cultivate." Yrella chimed in. Ponda's bulk filled the doorway, and he hollered for everyone to get out of the mess hall, so the three of them hustled out to the exercise hall. They moved to their usual corner, but a large Ardeni man, that's what the blue guys were called, if Victor recalled correctly, was occupying the space, twirling a large staff around.

"Zan, this is our space," Vullu said flatly. Zan stopped swinging the staff around and looked at Vullu for a few seconds, visibly contemplating his response, but then he just shrugged and walked toward the center of the gym, as Victor had taken to calling the space. "Alright, kid, let's practice with fists first."

"Okay, what do I do?"

"Settle down; let me try to explain this. Hmm," he tapped his furry chin as he spoke.

"He needs to be able to feel his Core and his Energy first," Yrella said, resting a hand on Victor's shoulder.

"I think I can feel it. When that guy was helping me form it, I kinda looked inside myself and could even see it." As he spoke, Victor heard his words and blushed, realizing he sounded like some kind of new-age nutjob.

"Oh, that's good, Victor! Your affinity must be pretty high - I couldn't see my Core until I'd practiced meditation and found my center after quite a few days of practice."

"Yes, good, Victor; can you see your Core now?" Vullu asked. Victor closed his eyes and felt the heat at the center of his body, turning his "eyes" inward toward it. There it was - a bright, pulsing, crimson star.

"Yeah, I see it." His voice sounded far away from himself.

"Good, now, you know how you turned your vision into yourself? Now you have to imagine you have a presence there, that you can push and pull things around. Use your presence to pull some of the Energy from your Core into the channels around it. Let me know if you can do that." Vullu's voice also seemed far away, and Victor found himself

more and more wrapped up in his study of his Core. Still, he heard what Vullu said, so he tried to imagine pulling on some of that red Energy, and as he did so, a strand of it broke away and illuminated the pathways near it. Victor smiled and pushed the strand into the nearest pathway.

“Okay, done it.”

“Good!” Vullu’s voice had a touch of excitement that Victor rarely heard from the dour goat-man. “Now, visualize that Energy traveling up the pathway toward your right fist. When you’ve got it, say so.” Once again, Victor followed Vullu’s directions, pushing that strand of Energy further into the pathway, guiding it along his stomach, up his chest, down his arm, and into his fist. All the way, it felt hot, pulsing with a heat that was more than temperature.

“Got it!” There was an edge to Victor’s voice like a snarl lurked beneath the surface.

“Now, open your eyes and punch the post!” Vullu said quickly. Victor opened his eyes, and it seemed like a very faint red haze obscured his vision. He glanced to his left, saw the wooden post, and punched it with his throbbing, itching right hand. He felt his body’s muscle memory as he stepped into the punch, twisted his hips, and drove his fist into the wooden post. A resounding crack rang out as a flash of red Energy splashed out of Victor’s fist. Unbidden, a savage grunt rose from Victor’s throat.

“First try! And he split the post!” Yrella cheered.

“Uh,” Victor’s voice was thick, and only his deepest vocal cords seemed to want to engage, “Goddamn, I feel like punching more shit!” He stood up straight, looked away from the post and his friends, and shook his head, taking several deep breaths.

“You alright, Victor?” Yrella started to reach a hand out to his shoulder, but Vullu grabbed her wrist.

“I think his rage affinity is extreme, Yrella. This will be something he needs to get used to slowly.”

“I’m alright, but yeah, I was feeling a little nuts for a second there. Like I wanted to fight, and it didn’t matter who.”

“Sorry, Victor; I don’t know much about spirit Cores. We had one woman in my hometown with one, but she had a love affinity. She was well sought after for her services....” Vullu trailed off, then continued, “The point is, I have no idea how those sorts of affinities work.”

“The good news is you smashed that post!” Yrella said, clapping Victor’s shoulder. “I think you just need to keep practicing, as Vullu said. When you feel normal, throw another punch; hopefully, it’ll get easier to control.”

“Right, let’s do some grappling in between. What do you guys say?” Victor asked, dropping to the sawdust to stretch. They agreed, and their hours of practice were spent alternating between grappling, with Victor helping them get better at takedowns, and Victor channeling rage-attuned Energy into his fist and punching something. Each time, he felt the emotion rising in him, but never enough to entirely lose control. Victor knew if he channeled more than one rage-fuelled strike, he’d run the risk of losing himself in it. He hoped it got easier to control; otherwise, he didn’t know how useful it would be.

That afternoon, Victor got to join in the ‘cultivating’ that all the other prisoners did. Yrella took the lead in trying to explain it to him, “First, you need to understand that Energy is everywhere. It wasn’t always so dense around our world, but when the System and the great oceans of Energy came to our part of the universe, it became a very tangible, important part of life.” She paused to look into Victor’s eyes to see if he was following her.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Well, so the next thing you need to know is that the Energy in your Core is probably different from the Energy around us. Energy can have lots of different affinities. Some of the most common ones that you’ll run into are elemental affinities - some Energy is attuned to fire, wind, or other elements. Other, less common affinities might be something like death or life or pestilence. I’m sure there are more than I know of and more than I can list. Like your affinity, for instance, I hadn’t heard of a rage affinity before, though I knew things like that existed.”

“Okay, everything you said makes sense, I guess, but I’m not sure how people end up with affinities.” He gestured at himself to make his point.

“People who claim to understand that are probably lying,” Vullu said from his corner of the cage.

“Right, let’s focus on what we know: because of the different Cores and affinities, it’s very common for people to cultivate Energy differently. These cultivation methods are often called ‘drills’ because it’s a routine you repeatedly follow, slowly building your Core and thus your strength with Energy. You can even gain levels through cultivating if you’re good at it and do it enough.”

“So, you guys don’t know how I’m supposed to cultivate, do you?” Victor could see where this was going.

“No, not exactly. We can describe our process, though, and maybe you can figure things out. Over time, you’ll hopefully perfect your method, or maybe you can buy a cultivation manual for your type of Core down the road.” Yrella smiled, giving him a chagrined shrug. “I’ll do my best.” Victor smiled back at her. She might be older and think of him as a kid, but she was fine as hell, and when she smiled like that, he was just grateful Yund put him in this cage when he’d first arrived.

“Hey, I appreciate any help you guys can give me.”

“Alright, so sit like I am, with your legs crossed and your palms open on your knees. Most people have Energy pathways open to the world on their palms. I’m pretty sure you do, judging by how your Energy-infused punch worked.” Victor did as she said, feeling kinda silly sitting there like he was going to do yoga or something, but Yrella nodded, reassuring him, and he settled into the pose. “Now, turn your mind inward, and look at your Core.” She waited a moment and then continued, “When I cultivate, I move some of my Energy from my Core into my pathways and let it cycle through, all the way to my hands, and then back toward my Core. As I send it back to my Core, I try to pull some of the Energy out of the world with it, adding to my Core a tiny bit with each cycle.”

“Huh, let me see....” Victor trailed off as he tried to do what Yrella described. He had no problem pushing a strand of his Energy into his pathway and then nudging it out along his pathways. It circled through a winding path around his abdomen, then out toward his left hand, and when he felt the burning, furious Energy bubbling up around his palm, he pushed it back toward his Core. Almost too late, he realized the thin strand of Energy he’d pulled from his Core had become a thick, surging river. He could feel it and see it with his inner eye, like a roiling red torrent that struggled to push out into the world, but he grit his teeth and growled, pushing his will against the flood and forcing it around into a return pathway toward his Core. He tried to do what Yrella said and pull some Energy out of the air with it, but he wasn’t sure he got any because his own Energy was so bright, hot, and full of roiling emotion that whatever Energy might be in the air around him seemed to pale into non-existence.

“Are you alright, Victor?” Yrella’s voice sounded small, distant, and irritating, and Victor growled again, bearing down on the Energy flowing through his pathways, pushing it back toward his Core. It bucked and surged, trying to turn down other routes to find an outlet, but he fought it, sweat breaking out on his forehead and soaking his filthy green t-shirt. While he struggled, thoughts came floating out of the back of his mind into his consciousness, making him look at memories that he’d rather stay buried. He remembered his cousin on his Mom’s side texting him after his parents had died, “Why don’t you come to grandma’s house anymore?” He remembered asking to visit them and having his auntie tell him that his mom’s family didn’t want to see him anymore. Victor growled, clenching his fist and pushing against the surge of Energy. The flood of Energy had made a complete circuit now and was starting to return to his Core. Annoying little memories started to pile forth; he remembered when he’d asked Paul to let him use his deodorant, reaching into his locker to grab it before he answered, and how Paul had slammed his locker on Victor’s hand. He remembered the fight that ensued and growled savagely.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he opened red, bloodshot eyes and bared his teeth at Yrella, who had moved to kneel in front of him. “Victor! Push the Energy back to your Core! Don’t cycle anymore.” With a monumental effort, Victor closed his eyes, burying the murderous thoughts that had come out of nowhere. He turned his mind to his

Energy and continued to push and bully it back into his Core. Finally, he felt the red, angry heat start to fade from his flesh, and he breathed deeply, burying all the infuriating memories back into the depths of his mind, so he could open his eyes without hate glowing balefully forth from them.

"Sorry," he said in a throaty voice and wiped his face, hoping the tears that had pooled in his bloodshot eyes would blend with the sweat that soaked him.

"Don't apologize, Victor," Vullu said from his corner. "You did a good job containing that surge. I think you'll need a lot of practice, and we need to learn more about spirit Cores. Your Energy might not be cultivated the same as mine and Yrella's."

This content is taken from

Chapter 9: Massacre

"That's right, pull that rope next to Leshal!" Ponda shouted at Victor. He wasn't sure who Leshal was, but he figured it was probably the Ardeni woman standing nearby. He grabbed the rope and yanked, and Ponda hollered, "Good!" He bent and pulled on a brass latch, and a massive section of the floor started sliding toward Victor, slipping underneath the wooden planks where he was standing. He kept pulling the rope, and he heard Vullu and another guy grunting as they pulled theirs, and the floor kept sliding, revealing the deep pit that had lain hidden the whole time Victor had been training at the Wagon Wheel. Pit Night was happening at the Wagon Wheel that night.

The venue wasn't nearly as large as the Rusty Nail, but there wouldn't be as many fighters here; according to Ponda, there'd just be another fighting troupe coming here to compete with Yund's stable. These were terms Victor was starting to pick up. Stable - like they were horses or something. Fighting troupe - a nice name for slaves who had to fight for your amusement. He felt some red heat start to spread through his body, and he clamped down on his Core, trying to think of something happy. His fuse seemed shorter now that he had actual rage Energy boiling at the center of his being.

It was funny how a person's living conditions could change their outlook. Over the last few days, as they practiced fighting, and Victor practiced using his Energy and trying to figure out how to cultivate his Core, he'd begun to look forward to the next fight. He'd put another point into strength, a point into dexterity to bring it up with agility, and the rest into vitality. He felt great, despite his shitty living conditions and boring diet. His muscles were ripped, his endurance was easily as good as when he'd prepped for State, and he felt vital - more alive than he could remember, and he was an eighteen-year-old athlete, so that seemed to be saying a lot. "Hey, Ponda, what's next?" He called after the pit was fully open.

"Now you five over there need to get your asses out back; bring in the stands and set 'em up. Vullu, you know how it's done. Show the others." Victor followed along, helping Vullu or Yrella with one chore after another. They'd been at it all day, converting the

practice gym into an exhibition hall. When they were finally done, and Yund announced that they'd be in their cages until match time, Victor was tired but impressed by the transformation. The pit was bigger than the ones at the Rusty Nail, though there was only one. It was a good forty feet by forty and had tall wooden stands on three sides. The side that faced the open barn doors of the Wagon Wheel was open so that the riff-raff without the funds to buy a seat could crowd around to watch the fights.

The afternoon passed quickly as Victor and his cage-mates rolled dice or dozed away their exhaustion. Sometime during the afternoon, lying on his back in the scratchy hay and sweating in the hot, stuffy air, Victor tried to think about his life back home. He was disturbed by how distant it seemed; by his reckoning, he'd been gone only about a week, maybe a little more, but it felt like a lot longer. He wondered how his Abuela was. He knew one or both of his aunties would be taking care of her, but she must be worried sick about him. He'd never been away for this long. Even when he'd 'run away' in high school, he'd only stayed the weekend at a friend's house. He tried to picture Marcy and found he kept picturing a different girl he'd had a crush on during his sophomore year. What a weird thing to happen! He strained his mind for several minutes, picturing one friend after another, all the girls he could remember from his classes, and finally, it clicked in - there was Marcy. He'd never had that happen before, and he wondered what was happening. He figured it must be a combination of his mind being amped up about the fight and all the stress he'd been under since he'd gotten kidnapped.

"Hey, Victor, just win. They won't put you against anyone too high level - there's no sport in it. Well, unless they put you in a group against a stronger enemy like last time, I guess." Yrella smiled at him from her corner of the cage, and he blew out his breath, trying to banish the memories he'd purposefully been calling out of the depths of his mind.

"Yeah, I just want to get it started. I hate waiting around for my match."

"You'll have more fun during this Pit Night - since there's only one pit, you'll get to watch all the fighting," Vullu supplied, speaking into the air as he lay on his back with his eyes closed. Victor grunted and rolled over, cranking out some pushups. He had so much nervous energy that he felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin. Vullu sat up, grunting, and laughed at Victor. "Imagine getting as fit as he is without any Energy, Yrella. You have to give him credit; I don't know how I'd cope if I didn't have my levels and Core."

"True. Your people must have strong wills to thrive in a dead world."

"Nah. First of all, not everyone thrives, and secondly, we have a shit load more tech than this world. We have all kinds of gadgets to help us cope with our weak-ass bodies."

"I think you're being modest," Yrella snorted, "which is very unusual for you, I might add." Victor sat up and laughed with her.

"You're busting on me? Does that mean we're becoming real friends, Yrella? You're not just helping me for a bonus from the Boss?"

"Don't get too sure of yourself, kid." She laughed, though, and Victor could see she was happy with the banter. The door slammed open, and Yund came striding down the central aisle, banging his long inscribed metal rod against the cages as he walked.

"Get ready to fight! I only need twenty-four fighters tonight, so line up by your cage door when you hear your name!"

"Awe, boss! Can't we watch the fights if we ain't fighting?" A tall goat-person, er Cadwalli, bawled out from a cage near the back wall.

"No! I barely have room out there for the paying customers and the fighters. Now shut up!" Yund yelled, then he lifted a clipboard and started calling names. Victor and Yrella got called, but Vullu didn't.

"Good luck, you two."

"He probably didn't have a suitable opponent for you, Vullu," Yrella said, reaching out and clasping hands with him. Vullu nodded, then held a fist out toward Victor. Victor nodded and bumped his fist, standing behind Yrella by the gate. Ponda and Urt went down the row of cages, letting out the fighters, then led them all out the door into the crowded, smoke-hazed, steaming hot exhibition hall. He led them to a roped-off area where the corners of two bleachers met. Just enough room between the two corners for a fighter to slip through and drop into the pit.

Yund was standing on one of the bleachers about halfway up, where he could look over his fighters and see into the pit easily. He looked down at the twenty-four fighters and shouted, "Yrella, you're up first. Into the pit!" Victor held his fist out for her, and she bumped it, smiling in that way of hers that made her yellow-green eyes twinkle, then she hopped down into the pit. Victor was taller than most of the other combatants, so when he pushed as far forward as possible, he could see most of the pit. He saw Yrella standing down in the sand, stretching her arms behind her back. A moment later, from the opposite corner, a lanky blue-skinned Ardeni man dropped into the pit.

"First match!" A black-furred goat-like Cadwalli man shouted from a tall wooden stand overseeing the pit. He reached behind him and spun a crude-looking wagon wheel with pictures of various weapons drawn in charcoal around its circumference. The wheel stopped spinning, and the little arrow pointed at a picture of crossed axes. "Axes!" He shouted, and a person near each corner threw an axe down to their fighter. On Victor's side, the weapon was supplied by Ponda. Yrella knelt and picked up the single-bladed hand axe. Victor groaned quietly - she didn't like fighting with axes. The Ardeni man picked up his axe and flipped it nonchalantly between his hands. "Begin!" shouted the judge.

Yrella was fast, and this was the first time Victor had seen her go all out. She moved like a blur, gliding over the sandy bottom of the pit, dropping into a low slide, as she swung her axe, aiming to relieve her opponent of his leg below the knee. He saw it coming, though, and dodged to the side, flinging his axe. It tumbled through the air to land with a wet thud in the back of Yrella's skull. She fell to the side, twitching in the manner bodies do when they haven't yet realized they're dead.

"Victory! One match for the Broken Rope!" the judge screamed. Yund cursed and spat, uttering a bunch of words Victor didn't have a translation for, though it wouldn't have mattered because Victor couldn't hear anything. His vision had gone red, and his heart had started beating like a runaway drum solo, pounding in his ears like the rushing of a waterfall. Yrella was dead, just like that. He couldn't believe it, he couldn't accept it, but he kept seeing her body topple and twitch. He felt himself suffocating and had to lean over, holding onto his knees and trying to breathe. Air wouldn't come, though, and the redness in his vision continued to deepen. His hands began to shake, gripping his knees tightly, squeezing the denim of his jeans into his flesh.

"I said you're up, kid!" Yund hollered. "Put him in, Ponda!" Victor thrashed and jerked away from the hands that grabbed his shoulders, but they were huge and strong, and though he struggled, he was tossed into the pit to fall sprawling into the sand. He struggled to his hands and knees, looking out over the sandy pit, wondering at how red everything was. There she was, her corpse just ten feet away. They hadn't even taken her out before they started the next fight? He gripped the sand, grinding it into his fists. He was still on his hands and knees, still shaking and grinding sand into his fists, when he felt the ground shudder slightly. He looked away from Yrella's body to see that his opponent had dropped in.

He stared at the big otter-man. He looked a lot like Ponda, but his fur was darker, with a slight red sheen. He was younger than Ponda, Victor figured, but he didn't care. All he cared about was that Yrella had just been slaughtered like one of his auntie's chickens. The idea of going back to that cage to just Vullu, of spending time here in this troupe of prisoners without Yrella, was unbearable. A choked scream of rage started to come out of his throat. "We have a rowdy one there, folks!" the goat-man judge yelled. A moment later, he shouted, "Maces!" Victor wasn't listening, though; he was pushing Energy out of his Core, into his pathways, letting it run rampant. He didn't try to control the flow; he didn't aim to turn it back to his Core. He just let it surge through his pathways, toward his hands, and into his mind. His vision had turned a deep red, and in his inner eye, replaying over and over, he saw Yrella dying, falling over to twitch like a broken thing.

"Begin!" the judge hollered, and Victor didn't even look at the mace that had been tossed near him. He exploded up from all fours, a wake of sand following behind, and smashed into his huge opponent. He moved like a wolverine, with no regard for himself or defense, simply lashing out like a wild, furious animal. His Energy-infused fists smashed into the otter-man, cracking bones and pulverizing flesh, pounding it into jelly. The otter-man's one feeble attempt to hit him with a mace was woefully too slow. Victor's right fist destroyed the otter-man's left knee. Victor slid around, dragging himself

in close, using his opponent's thick leather belt as a handle, and landed a devastating left hook into his opponent's blubbery kidney. After that, everything was a red-hazed blur, with Victor simply pushing as much Energy out of his Core and into his fists as possible, savoring all the dark images that filled his mind as rage consumed him.

When he came back to himself, Victor was lying in a curled-up ball in the roped-off area behind the other fighters. He had a message from the System in his vision:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 5 base human. You have 10 attribute points to allocate. You've learned the skill: Berserk - Basic.

Berserk - Basic: Prerequisite: Affinity - Rage. You double your strength and speed for a short while, losing yourself in the glory of combat. Your body becomes more resilient, and you benefit from rapid regeneration during the duration, though you'll lose all sense of self-preservation. You may suffer from the inability to discern friend from foe while under the effects of Berserk. Energy Cost: Minimum 75 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.

Victor dismissed the notifications, then sat up, looking at the backs of the other fighters, cheering and hollering. Yrella was gone. Victor pressed his fists into his eyes, completely drained of emotion and exhausted; he didn't feel any tears, but he didn't want to look at the world.

"Thunderak shit, kid, that was a massacre!" Ponda said, squatting down beside him. "You alright? I had to drag you off that guy's corpse."

"No, I'm not fucking alright, dude. I'm not fucking alright at all."

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Chapter 10: Alone

"It's a shame, but it's the reality we live in, Victor." Vullu was trying to sound composed, but Victor could see the pain in his eyes. He felt guilty for making the older guy feel like he had to comfort him. Vullu should be dealing with his own grief, not trying to console someone he hardly knew.

"Yeah. It sucks. Anyway, I'm sorry for your loss, Vullu." Victor moved to his corner of the cage and put his face toward the corner post, resting his forehead on the iron. He closed his eyes and tried to think of anything other than Yrella's twitching corpse.

"She was your friend, Victor. Just so you know. She joked a lot, but she told me she was glad Yund threw you in our cage."

"Jesus, man. I don't wanna hear that! What good does it do anyone? She's fucking gone!"

"She's not gone if we carry her with us, Victor. Your relationships with the people you meet shape you, you know. Knowing she was fond of you changes the paths you will walk, whether you realize it or not. So, it's good that you know." Victor gently banged his forehead against the iron post, feeling the way it vibrated his skull.

"If you say so, dude." He heard a cell door clang, and he looked up the aisle to see Ponda walking away from a cage toward the exit. "Hey, Ponda," he called.

"What, kid?" The big furry man glanced at him as he strode by.

"When's the next fucking fight? I need to get five done as soon as possible."

"I wouldn't wish too hard, kid. Boss saw you massacre that guy, you know; he's gonna try to make some money off you. Your next match might get a little uglier if you get my meaning."

"Chingado! Of course, he is. Well, I don't care; when is it?"

"Four days, and it's at the Nail, so you might get more than one fight. Boss's stable is running light." Ponda didn't wait to see if that answer satisfied Victor; he kept walking, slamming the door behind himself.

"Well, I got ten points to spend. Any advice, Vullu?" He turned and slid down onto his ass, folding his legs in the position that Yrella had taught him.

"I know it might seem counter-intuitive, but you might want to put some points into will and intelligence; they help with Energy manipulation. It might help you figure out a cultivation drill if you increase those attributes." Vullu sat down, laid back, and closed his eyes, apparently done talking. Victor looked at his status sheet and decided to put two points each into intelligence and will, bringing them to an even ten. Then he dumped his other six points into strength. His berserk skill said it would double his strength and speed for the duration - might as well capitalize on that. He knew that if Yrella were there right now, she'd nag him to try to figure out his cultivation method, so he rubbed a knuckle into his forehead, trying to focus, and then he took a deep breath and looked into his Core.

As he studied the throbbing red star, he began to make out details about it that he hadn't noticed. The pulsing almost seemed like breathing, and as it swelled and contracted, he saw little waving tendrils of Energy that existed only briefly. As he studied those tendrils, his mind began to wander, and it went where it always seemed to go since the pit fight - Yrella. He saw Yrella smiling, her eyes lighting up. Then he saw her scowl when he complimented those eyes. He remembered her laughing when he lost over and over at dice. He remembered her standing next to him after the first pit night, drinking warm ale like it was Christmas dinner. Then he remembered her getting killed, and all of his memories began to run red in his mind.

Victor jerked out of his memory of Yrella when he noticed his Core was pulsing more rapidly and brightly, then he felt something subtle at the edge of his awareness, and he tried to track it down with his mind. He traced his pathways, and then he became aware of the Energy outside his body. He could feel the warmth of it as it drew near, slowly changing from bright, yellow Energy into red, angry Energy that slipped into his pathways, drifting slowly toward his Core. Was he cultivating? What had triggered it? Had it been him thinking about Yrella? Victor blinked back tears as he thought how happy she'd be if she knew he'd figured something out.

He determined that he needed to prove his hypothesis, so Victor started reminiscing about things that pissed him off. His old gold standard had been his parents' deaths, but that had grown dull over the years, no longer the cutting blade that filled him with rage. Instead, he thought about the pit fights; he thought of that friendly otter-woman. He thought about how he never learned her name or even bothered to learn what her race is called. He dealt with those otter-people every day, and he hadn't bothered to find out what they're called. What a self-centered asshole! He felt his Core throb, and a wave of hot rage surged through his pathways.

Victor remembered what it felt like to be helpless while that wizard asshole had dragged him through the streets and sold him to his place. He remembered his dismissive, snobby attitude and how he'd made him feel as helpless as a little kid. Victor imagined breaking out of his spell and beating the shit out of him, and his Core pulsed. This time he was ready for the surge of rage, and he watched it as it cycled his pathways, drawing ambient Energy into him as it circulated back to his Core. He was doing it! Victor spent the next hour dredging up painful memories, really examining them, and soaking in the rage that boiled out of his Core. He was startled out of his meditation when a System message appeared in his vision:

Congratulations! Your Core has advanced to: Spirit Class - Base 2

He studied his pulsing, burning Core and could see that it was larger and the flames more violent than when he'd started. He began to take deep breaths and think calming thoughts, but it took a good half an hour before his vision was no longer tinted red, and he could breathe without wanting to snarl.

"You figured something out, didn't you?" Vullu asked. Victor looked at him; he'd sat up in his corner. He sat, watching Victor, waiting for an answer.

"Yeah. Seems I need to focus on shit that pisses me off, and then my Core starts to pull Energy from around me, converting it to rage Energy." Victor sat back, feeling exhausted and, for once, able to close his eyes without picturing Yrella.

"Is that healthy?"

"I don't fucking know, man. I doubt it, but I'm kinda fucked anyway, right? Not like I can take this Core out." Victor couldn't help snapping, his frustration rapidly reigniting his anger.

"No, I suppose you can't. Not with the resources available to us, that's for sure. How do you feel now?"

"A little annoyed at the twenty questions, but I was feeling better. I can close my eyes without thinking of, well, you know." Victor shrugged and sighed deeply, laying back and throwing an arm over his eyes. "Anyway, I gained a Core level, so that's something. Let's talk more in the morning; I'm wiped, bro."

"Alright, Victor." It sounded like Vullu laid back down, but Victor didn't open his eyes to check. He just focused on the blackness behind his eyes and tried to drift into it. Before he knew it, he was asleep.

For the first time since he'd been brought to this world, Yrella didn't wake him up the next day. Victor and Vullu went through their routine like usual, and when they returned to their cages in the afternoon, Victor spent another few hours steeped in memories that filled him with frustration and rage. When he finished, his Core was hot and dense, and he felt like it might level again soon. He was spent and slept again, not chatting with Vullu and not playing dice. This cycle repeated for two days. On the third day, Victor's Core leveled again, and he noticed he had over three hundred Energy points available to him now. He opened his eyes, breathed deeply, and painstakingly began the process of pushing all his rage-attuned Energy into his Core, slowly coming out of the fury his cultivation drill seemed to induce.

"Your Core leveled again." Vullu didn't phrase it as a question, so Victor didn't answer. They'd not spoken much over the last few days - something was off with their dynamic that Victor didn't think could be fixed. The piece that made them connect had been Yrella. Maybe that wasn't true, but Victor believed it, and so did Vullu, which made it true enough. His rage contained, and his vision clear again, he exhaled slowly and looked at Vullu. The Cadwalli was a dangerous fighter; Victor knew he held back a great deal when they sparred. He looked miserable, though, and Victor wondered what the old guy had to live for if he ever got out of here. Did he have a family? He'd known Yrella outside this place; had they built plans together for when they might someday be free? Were those plans dead now?

"You doing alright, Vullu?" He didn't know where the question had come from, but Victor was glad he said it. Sometimes stupid things escaped his mouth, but this had been right - he could feel it.

"I think I'm going to leave, Victor. I earned my freedom a while ago; I'd been staying to help Yrella pay down her debt."

“Oh? Well, shit, man. I can’t blame you. I’d wanna get out of here too.” Victor was screaming inside his mind, but he managed to keep it out of his voice.

“Really, Victor? I’m worried about you, but my heart is broken, and I think I need to seek out loved ones.” Victor’s mind spasmed at this latest statement. Was he a complete bonehead? Had Yrella and Vullu been, like, together the whole time? He thought they were something like friends or partners in crime; he hadn’t noticed romance between the two. His mind flashed back to how Yrella used to sleep with her head on Vullu’s thigh, and he groaned inwardly. He was an idiot.

“Vullu, you’ve been through hell, bro. You should get the fuck out while you can. I’ll fight my way free; I’m determined. If nothing else, I’ll do it for Yrella.” Victor knew it was bravado, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t stomach the idea of Vullu sticking around this place because he was worried about him. Vullu studied Victor for a few long moments, and then he stood up and started kicking at the cage door, making it rattle loudly with each blow of his hoof.

“Victor, I’m not going to forget about you. Keep working on getting out, and I’ll see what I can figure out from the outside.” The exit door slammed open, and Ponda came waddling down the aisle.

“What?” he barked.

“I’m checking out, Ponda. Take me to Yund.”

“Har, we was betting on when you’d do this. Urt’s gonna be happy.” While Ponda fiddled with the cage door, Vullu stepped over to Victor and held out a hand. Victor took it and, for maybe the last time, gripped his sparring partner’s hand, wincing at his iron grip.

“Take care,” Victor said. He wanted to say more, but he didn’t trust himself. He’d almost choked up on “take care.”

“Remember what I said - keep working for it. I’ll try to help you out.” With that, he strode out of the cage and down the aisle with Ponda, and when the heavy door slammed shut, it felt more final than ever before. Victor sat down, looked at his empty cell, and wondered what he could have done to change things, what he could have done not to be alone.