

Victor stood in his shower, washing away the sweat of a hard day's practice. He was a little late for Lam's party but figured he had a little time before people—Lam and Valla mostly—began to get irritated with him. He and Lesh had been sparring for hours, and he was a mess. The dragonkin had put him through a rough one, eager to demonstrate his scales' new resilience and the strength and agility he'd gained from his bloodline upgrade.

Victor chuckled at the thought, turning his face toward the mini rainclouds, washing the soap out of his hair. While he had his eyes squeezed shut, he turned his gaze inward and marveled proudly at his new Core. Once he'd started using the cultivation technique that Dar taught him, the bands of courage, rage, and fear-attuned Energy had begun to rotate around his compact, central sphere of inspiration. The gleaming, sparkling band of courage-attuned Energy moved quickly, while the overarching ring of smoky, purple-black fear moved more ponderously. Rage was somewhere in between.

It amazed Victor to no end, watching the interplay between his different affinities. He could see the slow trickle of fear, rage, and courage toward the center, but he saw how they changed as they passed through each layer. Dar hadn't been lying; his Energy fed his spirit, and now none of his rage or fear got through unaltered by his other affinities. He wasn't sure if it was a result of his Core's redesign or if he was just experiencing some sort of placebo effect, but Victor had felt great the last couple of days. His mood had been good, his outlook positive, and it seemed like he was getting more out of everything he did.

Smiling at the idea, Victor got out of the shower, intent on being amicable at the party. He was a little apprehensive; there was the chance that some hard feelings might come up. After all, he'd been fighting, no-holds-barred, against many of Lam's guests not too long ago. Still, the challenge dungeon had been a competition, and he hoped some grudges could be forgiven after some pleasant conversation, drinks, and food.

He dressed in the clothing version of his armor, choosing a midnight blue color for his shirt. The other pieces, his pants, boots, belt, bracelet, and headband, all shifted to a deep black that complemented the shirt. "Nice," he grunted, looking at himself in the mirror. The headband took a little getting used to, but it was supple leather, tooled with silvery thread, and, according to Valla, gave him an almost regal appearance.

As he left the bathroom, he glanced at Lifedrinker leaning beside the bed and thought about wearing her. He decided it was a little much, considering it was "his" home. Still, he didn't trust all the people Lam was inviting, so he summoned his coyotes and left them in the room to keep watch. They yipped and cried a little, but when he expressed his intentions, they curled up like they were sheltering for the night on his bed. Grinning, Victor walked out and nearly bumped into Sora.

"Oof," he said, falling back against his door, "almost ran you over."

She looked up at him, smiling. "Victor! I was just wandering a little, trying to avoid Cam."

"Yeah? Cam's here?" Victor got a little frustrated looking down his nose at her, so he cast *Alter Self*, reducing his height to something more like seven feet.

"So weird that you can do that! What an interesting ability!" She giggled and sipped her drink; from the flush of her cheeks, he didn't think it was her first. She looked nice, Victor couldn't deny—a slim-fitting dress that didn't cover much of her lithe, tan figure. Her grayish hair was

curled and shone vibrantly, almost like silver, and she had a mischievous twinkle in her big, bright eyes.

“So, you’re hiding from Cam?”

She nodded, brushing a droplet of condensation from her drink off her chin. “He’s going to deny everything I told you about his betrayal. Be warned.”

“Well, come on. I’ll shield you from his wrath,” Victor chuckled and turned down the hallway. “I should get to the party before Valla kicks my ass.”

“I get to meet her? The mysterious woman that holds the leash of a mighty titan?”

Victor sighed and chuckled. He had no doubt that there were plenty of rumors around Sojourn about him and, of course, anyone connected to him. “You’ll meet her, all right.” He could hear music, surprisingly modern Earth-like music, with instruments playing that reminded him of synthesizers, guitars, and even drums. It was mellow, nothing like rock and roll, but definitely not the jaunty medieval stuff he’d gotten used to on Fanwath. “Is that local music?”

“Strista brought a minstrel box, a good one, loaded with music from dozens of nearby worlds.”

“Strista . . .” Victor ran the name through his mind. “The avian woman with the whip? Her master is a Consul, right?”

“Yes, Master Yon.” As she answered, Victor stepped out of the hallway into the main parlor of Dar’s house and was a little surprised by the size of the crowd. There had to be more than thirty people in the room, and he could see, through the floor-to-ceiling windows, an equal or greater number out on the deck. “Damn, Lam,” he breathed, scanning the room, seeing some familiar faces but many he didn’t recognize.

Sora leaned close, speaking low, “Quite a showing. I don’t think any invites went unanswered. Can you blame them all? Everyone in the city is *still* talking about the thrashings you handed out in the Vault of Valor. Then there’s the venue—Ranish Dar’s lake home! He’s never had a gathering here. Many masters are feeling irritated that their apprentices were invited here before they were.”

Victor nodded absently, scanning the room for Valla and trying to avoid locking eyes with any of the dozens of people already staring his way. He saw a glimpse of silvery, teal wings out on the deck and started moving that way, only to have an enormous figure, someone he first thought was Dar because of his colorful, loose clothing, step into his path. “Oho! There she is, and there’s the man of the hour!” Victor looked up into Brontes’s brutish face and couldn’t help smiling at the giant’s crooked-toothed grin. He also couldn’t help noticing how Sora inched closer to him, practically pressing her side against his as Brontes stuck out a meaty hand.

“Brontes,” Victor said, clasping the meaty palm. “I’m glad to see you didn’t bring your club.”

“Oh, Ballsmasher?” he laughed. “I have him resting in a pool of hot clay back home, still recovering from your axe’s wicked edge!” His grip felt like a sandpaper-wrapped ham hock, and as he squeezed, Brontes said, “Shit! Have I gone mad, or have you shrunk?”

“Careful, Brontes,” Sora sighed.

Victor chose to ignore the question and pulled his hand back. “Nice to see you, big guy. Wanna do some sparring sometime soon? I have a friend I want you to meet.”

“Do you jest?” Brontes boomed. “Of course!” He gestured expansively and enthusiastically, and Victor felt very glad Dar’s home had been built with giants in mind.

“Cool, well, let’s talk some more in a bit. I need to go ask the hostess if she needs any help.”

“Cool?” Brontes frowned, then grinned and said, “I like it. You were right, Sora, he’s not half bad!” Victor just smiled and pushed by the big man, only to be accosted by another group of people, all avian, one of whom was Strista Kono, the hawk-feathered lady with the whip he’d knocked out by charging and smashing her through a dozen trees. The two avians flanking her both looked decidedly feminine and clung to her arms as though she were a flotation device keeping them above water.

“Victor!” she said, her voice surprisingly melodic. He could hear Brontes talking to Sora behind him—it was hard not to hear the giant—so Victor took another step closer to Strista and her entourage.

“Hello, Strista.”

“You remembered my name?” Her golden eyes widened, and though her beak couldn’t smile, he recognized the pleased-sounding clicks she made in her throat; he’d learned them from Tria, his yellow-feathered, avian Artificer friend. “Victor, can I speak to you alone for just a moment?” She leaned close, “Before Arcus finds us?” She glanced at her friends—dates?—and said, “Mingle! Shoo! I’ll be back in a moment.” Then, before Victor could even reply to her request, she grabbed his wrist in surprisingly strong fingers and tugged him toward the hallway leading to the kitchen.

“Strista!” He pulled against her grip, and it was only when his pull didn’t slow her that he had to take into consideration that this woman might be stronger than he was at that moment. He wasn’t channeling Sovereign Will into his strength, he wasn’t Berserk, and worst of all, he’d hobbled himself with Alter Self, reducing his attribute maximums by close to thirty percent. As far as he knew, Strista was tier-eight, and he had no idea how strong she might be. She pulled him around the corner and then let go, turning to face him.

“I’m so sorry about that. I know it was rude. I know you could have gone mad and thrown me around like a child, so thank you for holding back. I wanted to grab you before you became too busy with all the fawning people in that room and before Arcus realized I was here. You see, Victor, I believe he means you harm! In fact, I know he does! He tried to involve me.”

Victor sighed. Dar had already told him that Arcus Volpuré would probably try to kill him before they were clear of the Iron Prison. He was Lord Roil’s protégé, and Lord Roil and Dar had a lot of history. He smiled at Strista and shrugged. “I know.”

“You do?” Her throat clicked awkwardly as she clutched her hands together. “That’s embarrassing. I seem to have betrayed a friend for naught.”

“Eh, relax. I appreciate the head’s up, but yeah, I figure he’ll pull something while we’re in the prison. You’ve heard about that, I suppose?”

Strista nodded, her throat clicking rapidly. “Yes! Arcus has been crowing nonstop about the mission to rescue Rasso Hine. He anticipates great rewards and, of course, a chance to avenge his pride against you. I’m glad you’re aware. He told me that Arona will also be a part of the mission, yes? Be wary of her. I don’t know her well, but Arcus does, and he speaks about her as though she’s an ally.”

Victor nodded absently, certain he heard Valla’s voice, slightly raised, saying his name. He turned back toward the hallway and nodded that way. “Hey, thanks again, Strista. You’re all right. I gotta get back in there; I think I heard my name.”

She nodded but deftly snatched his wrist again, saying, “Please don’t mention my warning to anyone. I don’t want Arcus to turn his schemes against me. He’s already furious that I backed out of his plan to ‘avenge’ himself. How ridiculous! We all went into that dungeon knowing the risks, and he’s the one who struck first! I’ve seen the full battle review in the Daily!”

“The, uh, Daily?”

“The Sojourn Daily? It’s the biggest newspaper in the city . . .” She trailed off, giving him a chance to interject, so Victor did.

“Ah, right. Of course.” He nodded and jerked his head back toward the parlor. “I’m heading back. Have a good time, all right?”

“Thank you. I see a restroom down the hall. I think I’ll use that before I rejoin the party.”

Victor grunted in acknowledgment, already walking away. He supposed he should be more grateful to her, but what more could he do than say thank you? He wouldn’t tell Arcus or anyone else that she’d tried to warn him, so it wasn’t like she’d get in any trouble. When he stepped into the parlor, he saw several people angling his way, but he refused to make eye contact and hurried toward the door to the deck. He could see Valla standing out there speaking to a man in a bright red robe with a high collar that obscured his head. If he were the kind of guy to say things like “speak of the devil,” he might have uttered those words.

Feeling just a hint of agitation, despite the buzz of conversation, music, and general good humor around him, Victor shoved his way out, muttering, “Excuse me,” as he nudged people aside. When he stood a bit behind and to the right of the man in red, he grinned at Valla as she shifted her eyes to meet his gaze. He felt his anxiety plummet as he listened to her, “. . . several different instructors over the years, but haven’t yet met anyone who practiced that particular style.”

The man nodded, or at least Victor thought he did; he could only see the top of his head over his high collar. His voice was smooth and cultured as he replied, “Ah, well, as I said, my father’s man-at-arms is a master, and I’m sure he’d be interested to see how your style might differ.”

Valla smiled and nodded to Victor. “Arcus, this is Victor. I believe you’ve met.”

Arcus whirled, his silken robe’s hem flaring out expansively at the movement, and turned to face Victor in surprise. He wasn’t wreathed in flame as he had been at the start of the challenge dungeon, but his eyes glowed like smoldering coals beneath his dark brow as he smiled and bowed shallowly—really, more of a respectful nod. Victor shifted closer to Valla, looked into

Arcus's eyes, and nodded while the man said, "I'm pleased to meet you outside of a contest, Victor. I hope there aren't any hard feelings?"

Victor grinned, perhaps a little savagely. "Why would there be? You might have struck first, but I believe I hit back harder. We're all good in my book."

Arcus had thin lips, and they became even more so as he pressed them together in a smile that his eyes didn't reflect. No, his eyes spoke more of murder than pleasantries. "You certainly are a sturdy fellow, no doubt about that. I underestimated you to my folly. Safe to say, I won't make that mistake again." He glanced to Victor's left and right, and Victor saw what had gotten his attention; they'd drawn a small crowd. Looking at Valla, he said, "I can see why the council has chosen your man for such a dangerous job."

Victor felt a growl starting to take shape deep in his chest. The little asshole was trying to get Valla upset. He'd told her about the Iron Prison, of course, but, as he was wont to do, he'd downplayed the danger. She, of course, wasn't one to be easily manipulated, however. "Oh, Arcus!" she laughed. "It may seem dangerous to you, but that's only because you've only just met Victor. He'll be fine." She moved close to Victor and grabbed his arm, leaning against him. "Won't you, my sweet?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, kissing her forehead, "of course."

"You're not worried?" Arcus pressed. "The council has lost five iron-rankers trying to make a foothold in that place!" The muttered conversations on the deck told Victor they had done more than draw a small crowd; everyone was listening. He was about to spout some bravado to try to change the topic and prevent Arcus from actually getting to Valla, but then another voice spoke up, raspy and low—Arona.

"Haven't you read the reports of the fights after you were eliminated, Arcus? I think Victor will be fine." The Death Caster stepped up to Victor's left as she spoke, and he glanced at her; she looked similar to the other times he'd seen her—black lips, dark eyes, and sharp teeth. He only glanced her way, quickly shifting his gaze back to Arcus, when he saw that she wore a very slinky black dress that exposed a lot of pale flesh rather than her usual layered black robes. At her arrival, he felt Valla's hands tighten on his biceps.

Arcus chuckled, waving a hand dismissively. "Right, yes. I suppose if they couldn't get one of the top-ranked bulwarks in the city to clear the entrance, someone like Victor will have to suffice."

"I'm a top-ranked bulwark. Number two in the city. Thank your fiery gods that Victor will be going in there." The new speaker had a deep, rumbling voice. Victor turned to identify the speaker, only to see it was a man he didn't recognize, easily eight feet tall but leaner than Brontes, with a rigidly straight posture. He was dressed in a fine suit layered in different shades of purple, and his face was classically handsome with a square jaw, straight nose, and lips that curled in a pleasant smile. "That man is the sturdiest, hardest-hitting bastard I've ever crossed blades with."

Finally, it clicked for Victor, and he realized it was the man who'd been encased in plate armor. He glanced at the woman by his side to confirm—she didn't have her crossbow, but there was no doubt she was the woman he'd eliminated, his wife. Victor smiled at her and asked, "How's your bow?"

“She’s fine, sir. Thank you for your honorable mercy.” She let go of the man’s arm and bowed, and the tall man stepped closer, reaching out a hand.

“Victor, you have my thanks as well.”

Victor took the hand and squeezed, nodding and smiling, pleased that most of the people he’d fought seemed to be good sports about their losses. He wracked his brain, trying to remember the big warrior’s name, but it wouldn’t come to him. Finally, he sighed and shrugged helplessly. “I’d introduce you to Valla, but I’m an idiot when it comes to names.”

Valla let go of his arm and reached out a hand to the woman, who smiled and said, “I’m Lyla Rose, and this big fellow is Dovalion Boarheart.”

It seemed that Arcus didn’t like being left out. He shouldered closer, bumping Arona, and asked, “Boarheart, why didn’t you accept the council’s offer?”

“Because I’ve lost enough this decade. I’ll be spending my time grinding away at the Dread Spire for the next few years.”

“We will be,” Lyla said, clasping Dovalion’s hand with hers.

Arona, done being patient, shifted to lock eyes with Victor. “Don’t let Arcus discourage you, Victor. If you can hold the entrance until the portal opens again, I’ll help you subdue that dungeon. I’d go first, but the council thinks that prisoners are lying in wait, killing the council representatives, not the dead, but even so.” She frowned and Victor felt some cold Energy waft off her as she struggled to contain some emotion—anger? Irritation? She sighed and said, “I wanted to go in first. My bone thralls are made for such a situation, but Master Vesavo refused to allow it.”

Arcus started talking then about how he’d handle it if he were “allowed” to go in first. Victor didn’t buy it; he knew damn well that Arcus and his master hoped that Victor would die when he stepped into the dungeon. Then, they could drop the whole charade. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he doubted there was any real reason to get Rasso Hine out of the dungeon. As that thought occurred to him, he waited for Arona to finish saying something about monsters respawning in a dungeon and asked, “What’s the deal with this Rasso Hine guy, anyway? They’re risking all these lives to get one man out?”

“Justice!” Arcus cried. “We cannot allow the council to punish an innocent man!”

“It’s more than that,” Arona added. “My master thinks Hine knows something about the half-finished invasion circle that Consul Rexa found and destroyed last month.” The conversations around them had picked back up, but a new hush descended at Arona’s raspy declaration.

“Imagine that!” Arcus scoffed. “Who would think to invade Sojourn? We’ve nearly a thousand veil walkers in the city at any given time.”

“The circle was real,” Strista said. Victor hadn’t seen her approach, but she stepped forward on the other side of Valla. “My master saw it with his own eyes. I saw him sketching it from memory later that day.”

“Consul Yon?” Again, Arcus scoffed. “You know what the other consuls call him, yes?”

“Don’t be rude,” Arona said.

“Arcus is brave,” Strista said, irritated clicking sounds coming from deep in her throat, “when he has Lord Roil’s robes to hide behind.”

Victor saw Arcus’s face tinting toward crimson and could even feel some heat emanating from the man, so he stepped forward and cleared his throat, “Let’s keep it cool, huh? This is a party. Strista, I liked the music I heard earlier; it had a different kind of beat—a little faster. Can you play it again? On your device, I mean? Valla, where’s Lam? I wanted something to eat, and the table was picked over when I walked by. Also, damn, but I’m thirsty! Anyone else want a drink?”

His interjections seemed to have done the trick. Glowering but visibly restraining himself, Arcus turned to speak more quietly with a young woman who looked like she might have been his sister. Victor frowned at that thought—hadn’t Edeya said something about his sister? Everyone else started speaking at once about drinks, snacks, the view, the fabulous setting, or Strista’s music. Valla pulled his arm, and he turned to see her pointing out Lam, who was waving her hands, speaking to some of Dar’s house staff. Victor chuckled and walked over; it would be a long night, but he was already having fun. He hoped he’d run into the turtle-guy, Drobna.