

Ronkerz turned to face the three of them, and that's when the nature of their situation became clear to everyone, not just Victor—the giant simian had no intention of bargaining, at least not with words. To drive the point home, a line of hulking, armored figures filed out of the center-most cave opening and took up positions in a semi-circle behind Ronkerz. Victor felt his lips begin to stretch into a grin as he took their measure.

If he'd wondered why everyone he'd run into, save Ronkerz, had been dressed in rags and wielding low-quality weapons, the answer was becoming apparent. If Victor had to guess, he'd say that the denizens of Rumble Town paid for their relative safety by pooling their resources. They took their loot from monster spawns and their scavenged items and gave them to Ronkerz, who distributed the equipment to these men and women.

"These are my Big Ones," Ronkerz announced, spreading his arms in an impressively wide gesture. As he said "Big Ones," the thirteen men and women pounded their weapons in a reverberating *boom-boom*, smashing them on shields, against one another, or onto the hard stone ground.

"Lord Ronkerz," Arcus said, looking left to right at the line of heavily armored, mostly gigantic, warriors. "I must confess that the ambiance of this gathering has begun to evoke a rather unsettling premonition. I might go so far as to speculate that the atmosphere suggests an imminent display of hostility—"

"Hah!" Ronkerz barked a deep, rough laugh that sent spittle flecking over the short black hairs on his chin. "Hostility? We live in *hell*, boy!"

Arona tried another approach, "We're your *guests*. You invited us in."

"I invited you to bargain, and we've got only one way of doing that in Rumble Town—"

"Fighting," Victor interrupted. He sent a stream of Energy into the runes on his armor, and suddenly, he was bedecked in his snarling draconic helm and armor. "Great. How's this work?" His voice echoed, enlarged by the magic in the lava king's maw. He didn't remember reaching for Lifedrinker, but she was in his right hand, her head aglow with glowering red Energy and her haft twitching with eagerness.

"Victor." Arona reached for his arm, but if she grabbed him, he didn't feel it; she was too small and his gauntlet too thick. He had eyes and ears only for Ronkerz. Ever since Arona had told him about how Ronkerz had wound up in the prison, something in him had wanted to fight the warrior. He wanted to test his mettle against a man who was—

"You think you can touch me, boy?" Ronkerz interrupted his rambling thoughts, leaning toward him with a curled lip. "I was chewing up steel seekers before I got put in here, and that was four centuries ago! You think I haven't found my own steel by now?"

"You're a veil walker?" Arona asked, her voice hushed. Victor glanced down at her and saw her eyes were wide and that she'd taken a step back. He was just turning back to Ronkerz when the giant blurred and, with a sickening wet pop, snatched ahold of Arcus's right arm and ripped it off at the shoulder. To Victor's amazement, the arm shimmered with bright blue light and then disappeared. Meanwhile, Arcus had fallen backward, stumbling for two steps before succumbing to gravity and falling onto his butt. Crimson blood pumped into the torn sleeve of his robe, sluicing onto the stone ground.

The crowd cheered, and the assembled “Big Ones” smashed their weapons again. *Boom-boom.* “Tried to leave the party early, boy?” Ronkerz rumbled a deep, mocking chuckle. “Drink a healing draught before you’re too weak to entertain the people.”

Victor felt his eagerness to fight evaporate. Ronkerz had ripped Arcus’s arm off so fast that he hadn’t been able to track it. Moreover, Arcus hadn’t even been able to utter a spell to defend himself. In fact, Ronkerz had moved so quickly that he’d interrupted the recall spell, sending the recall charm and Arcus’s severed arm out of the dungeon. How could someone that bulky and powerful move so damn *fast*? The Quinametzin pride that had been eager to test itself against the brute was suddenly nowhere to be found; it was almost enough to make Victor laugh.

“That was unkind,” Arona said, and Victor noted she’d moved her staff into a defensive position. She wasn’t planning to let Ronkerz rip her arms off. Arcus’s face was ashen, and he hadn’t moved to drink a potion. He seemed dumbstruck, utterly shocked by the horror of his ruined arm. Victor didn’t want him to bleed out, especially if they were going to be fighting for their lives for Rumble Town’s amusement, so he lifted one of the healing potions Master Yon had given him from his baldric and pulled the cork stopper. While Ronkerz watched, Victor leaned over and tilted the oily red liquid into Arcus’s mouth.

The crowd’s raucous cheer had died down, and Victor began to get the feeling that they were sort of play-acting, responding as tradition dictated. The people, the “Big Ones,” even Ronkerz—they all behaved like they were putting on a show, and he wondered how much of their lives in the bleak dungeon-world were dedicated to strange ritual entertainment.

Arcus greedily slurped the potion down, and his color immediately improved. The blood sputtering from his shoulder ceased, and he gasped, taking a deep breath. He looked at Victor and nodded. “Thank you. I . . .” He frowned and looked at his shoulder. “I . . .” Victor followed his gaze to see something wriggling under the torn fabric of his robe. “I—ah! D-did, er, was that a regeneration p-pot—” Arcus’s words broke off in a wail of surprise and disgust as a black, slippery tentacle began to probe its way out of his robe.

“What the *fuck*?” Victor stepped back as the tentacle continued to grow longer and thicker, stretching outward from Arcus’s shoulder. It was lined on one side with tiny, pink suckers but was otherwise jet-black. “Dude, Master Yon told me they were regenerative potions. He said they were his best work!”

“Yon? That shit-eating bird gave you those potions?” Arcus wailed, leaping to his feet. His new appendage waved about, out of control, and Arcus grimaced with a mixture of pain and disgust as he fought to get it under control. “One of his experiments, no doubt! Gods *damn* it!”

Halting at first, then with more and more volume and intensity, Ronkerz began to laugh. His great chest heaved with the sound as he roared, “Hah! Ha! *Hah!* Oh gods, the beauty of it. Yes, young Pyromancer, rejoice, for now, a part of your body reflects the dark stain on your soul.”

Arcus whirled on the man, his eyes wild with frustration, pain, anger, and a dozen other emotions—Victor had no doubt. “What do you know of my soul, fiend?”

“Only what I can see, which is *much*.” Ronkerz stared at Arcus for a couple of heavy seconds, but the pyromancer had stopped scowling at him and was now preoccupied, staring intently at his new tentacle as he attempted to wrap its narrow end around his fallen black metallic rod.

Ronkerz directed his gaze at Victor and Arona. “Well, are you three ready to hear my offer, or will we have more theatrics? Do either of you other fools wish to attempt to flee?”

Victor shrugged. “I’d rather keep my arms.”

Arona watched Ronkerz warily as she rasped, “You have an offer?”

“I do!” he roared, lifting his arms wide again. His Big Ones bashed their weapons and shields, and the crowd cheered. The cacophony died down immediately when Ronkerz lowered his arms. “I’m sure you came here thinking to ply us with threats or a few trinkets or piteous scraps of food and liquor, hmm? Well, your fool masters should have warned you! They know I live! They fed the dungeon my *blood*, just as they took that vital force from every one of the people they sacrificed to live in this hell! The dungeon crystal would have told them I reached my test of steel more than three centuries ago. The dungeon crystal would have told them I broke through!”

Ronkerz stopped to pace back and forth before his Big Ones. Some were larger than he, physically, but his presence made them seem small. They didn’t shrink back, however. They stood straight and tall, and Victor began to realize something—the denizens of Rumble Town didn’t fear Ronkerz; they worshipped him. He was a god incarnate to them. Being a Big One, in close proximity to the great man, was an honor everyone lining the cliff walls, the rooftops, the dirt streets, and the cave openings aspired to.

Ronkerz continued his rant, “So, they sent you to your doom, or they had some sort of mad confidence in your ability to deceive someone an order of magnitude more powerful than yourselves. No, we won’t take your pitiful offerings. You’ll play our games, and, if you prove worthy, we’ll give you Rasso Hine. If you prove unworthy, we’ll take everything you own and either kill you or add you to our ranks.”

“Ronkerz, wait—” Arona started to say, but he whirled on her and growled.

“Just Ronkerz, now? No ‘Lord of Greatscarp’? What happened to your pretty tongue, death sparrow?”

“I-I just want—”

“Irrelevant!” Ronkerz clapped his hands thunderously. “Let me introduce my thirteen Big Ones! My pride! After I honed my steel and breached my veil, I stopped hunting these lands and took on my first apprentice. That was two hundred years ago.” Ronkerz stepped to the center and rested his hand on a tall, avian woman’s shoulder. She had a notched beak and dark, dirty-looking gray feathers, but her chainmail armor gleamed with power, and her curved saber rang like a crystal chime when she whipped it from its sheath. “Lira Stormclaw is that apprentice. Like most of my Big Ones, she’s a steel seeker, but I think she’s getting closer and closer. Aren’t you, my pretty bird?”

“I am, Lord Ronkerz.” Her voice was lyrical and breathy, and Victor could see the adoration in her big golden eyes as she stared at Ronkerz. Victor looked up and down the row of powerful warriors and wondered if the apish man was really going to introduce them all.

“Next to Lira is Gorruk the Crusher!” The crowd cheered, and Gorruk smashed his enormous gray hammer into his heavy, spiked shield. Ronkerz continued down the line, and each name

brought forth cheers and a display of power from the Big One. Victor, never great with names, sort of zoned out and tried to concentrate on which warriors seemed like they'd be a threat to him. The answer was simple: all of them.

Despite his mind's tendency to tune out details like names, some of them stood out—Zara Bloodmoon, an eight-foot, four-hundred-pound lupine woman with stark white fur and glowing crimson eyes, Thrak Ironfist, a man with hands and arms that were, literally, made of dark, blue-black metal, and Ulgor the Brutal, a mountain of muscle that loomed half-again as tall as Ronkerz. He was hunched with piles of veiny muscles stacked on his shoulders and back. His red, bloodshot eyes peering from beneath his thick, hairy brows looked decidedly insane.

After he finished, Ronkerz turned from the last of his Big Ones and regarded Victor, Arona, and Arcus. "Well? Are you suitably impressed?"

"Are—" Arcus started to speak, but his tentacle twitched violently, and he scowled and tried to grab it with his right hand, dropping his red scepter in the process. "Dammit!"

"Are?" Ronkerz glared his angular violet eyes at Arcus, then turned to regard Victor. "Will you speak for your distracted companion?"

"Um, I think he can speak." Victor stepped closer to Arcus and reached down to snatch his writhing tentacle arm in his fist. Thankfully, it wasn't slimy, but it certainly felt weird—pulsing and throbbing as it flexed, trying to move. "Pay attention, man! He's going to rip your other arm off."

Arcus scowled at him but nodded as the misbehaving appendage settled in Victor's firm grasp. "I say, Lord Ronkerz, am I right in my understanding that these fine warriors are all beyond the iron ranks? I don't understand how. Aren't only iron rankers allowed in this dungeon?"

"Allowed in, yes, fool. We all were iron-ranked when we came to this hell." Ronkerz ambled closer to Victor and Arona, his right fist acting as a third leg as he leaned on it, pressing his massive knuckles into the stone. "By now, you must be putting things together, yes? I said we settle bargains by fighting here in Rumble Town, and then I introduced my Big Ones. What's in store for you? Hmm?"

"You want us to fight your champions," Arona rasped.

"*Big Ones!*" Ronkerz roared and, for the first time, unleashed his true aura. Arona fell to her knees, tears of blood streaming out of her obsidian eyes. Victor stumbled back, and the tiniest voice in the back of his mind, crying out from a dark corner where he kept his deepest fears, told him to run. He glanced left and right and caught sight of Arcus, lying flat on his back, eyes squeezed shut, struggling to writhe away from Ronkerz. Seeing him like that, wriggling like a worm, woke something in Victor and, almost like a palpable whisper tickling his ear with her hot breath, he swore he heard Chantico's voice again. "*Do not break, child of the Sun. You are made of sterner stuff than that one.*"

He looked away from Arcus, squared his shoulders, and stepped into the pressure of Ronkerz's will. He heard the screams of countless foes, felt the anger of a dozen lifetimes lived in captivity, tasted the bitterness of defeat, the hatred of a righteous man condemned, and the killing intent built from a hundred thousand brutal massacres. He had no right to stand against that weight but did it anyway. With eyes quivering in their sockets, vessels bursting and turning the whites

red, he stared into Ronkerz's violet eyes as sweat erupted from his pores and his body shook with adrenaline.

"Oh, they chose you well, didn't they, boy? Do they hate you so much?" Like a switch being flipped, the aura was gone, and Victor could hear his heaving breaths and the rushing of his blood. He could hear Arona's soft gasps and Arcus's sobs. "Well, as your Death Caster Princess has surmised, you'll need to best one of my Big Ones. You'll each need to—one by one. No team fights, and, no, you don't get to pick which ones you'll be matched against. Tonight, I'll allow you to feed my people. We'll have a feast, and come the morrow, Rumble Town will watch you do battle!" He raised his voice at the last pronouncement, and, once again, the townsfolk cheered, and the Big Ones slammed their weapons.

Ronkerz stepped closer and lifted one of his massive hands. "Agreed?"

Victor regarded the hand, then looked at Arcus, still flat on his back, and Arona, slowly, shakily, struggling to stand. "To the death?"

"Death, unless you yield, yes. Understand this, however: should you yield, you will remain in this world with us. Don't get any ideas about using your recall charms—I'm watching."

Victor knew he couldn't argue. Ronkerz had already proved that he could kill them all easily. Just because he'd managed to remain on his feet while his aura was on display didn't mean Victor could fight under that strain. He had trouble following the man's movements *without* that pressure; he had no delusions of being able to stand against him in combat. Something about breaking through to the "lustrous veil" seemed to lift powerful Energy users into legitimate demigod status. Was that what Ronkerz had going for him here? Was he a god among mortals in the prison dungeon? As he began to judge the man, Victor reminded himself that Ronkerz wasn't there by choice.

He reached out and clasped the rough-fleshed hand, and Ronkerz squeezed firmly but didn't try to dominate him. When he released the grip, the veil walker grinned, exposing his lupine fangs, and then he *moved*. One second, he stood before them, and the next, he was standing in the mouth of a cave a hundred yards up the cliff face. He bellowed, his basso voice booming and echoing in the canyon, "Rumble Town! Tonight, you FEAST! Tomorrow, there will be FIGHTS!"

The cheering was thunderous, and, despite everything, Victor found himself basking in it. He raised his arms and slowly turned in a circle, and the cheers intensified, bringing a fierce grin to his face. If he had to fight, then he'd give the Big Ones something to think about. He continued grinning as he tried to make eye contact with as many of them as he could. "Okay, *pendejos*," he said into the cacophony. "Which one of you suckers has to fight me? Don't everyone jump at once." His desire to intimidate them fell flat as most of the Big Ones roared and cheered, flailing their weapons in the air.

"Don't taunt them, fool!" Arcus hissed, and Victor looked to see he'd managed to get to his feet. Even so, Arcus looked terrible despite the healing elixir, or maybe *because* of it. The tentacle was still, apparently, struggling to move on its own, and Arcus was currently fighting to hold it still with his other hand, having stowed away both of his magical scepters. "Man, I'm sorry about that *pinché* tentacle. That asshole didn't tell me it would do that."

"I don't hold you to blame. I saw the bastard hand them to you before you stepped in. Besides, I was stupefied. I might have died had you not stepped in."

Arona moved beside Victor and coughed, clearing her throat before asking, "What are we supposed to do now?"

Victor looked around, noting how the Big Ones had all gone off to wherever people of their status spent their days. The townsfolk were moving again, no longer lining the "arena," as he'd come to think of the space. They were walking about, talking, carrying things—going about their usual business, he supposed. "I dunno. I have a lot of food, but I'm not sure I can feed hundreds of people. What about you two?"

Arcus ignored the question. "How, by the fate of all the elder gods, did that man enter his lustrous veil while trapped in this damned dungeon?"

"Hundreds of years of killing tier-nine monsters, I suppose." Arona shrugged. "He was a prodigy before he was sent in here. I'm sure he made breakthroughs that some of our masters would kill to learn."

"They'll never let him out to ask. Think of the damage he could do!"

"Something tells me," Victor said, rubbing his chin, turning slowly to look around the strange scenery of Rumble Town, "that Ronkerz is kind of biding his time. I'm not so sure a dungeon meant for iron-rankers can really hold a guy like him."

Arona and Arcus grew quiet at that, and then they, too, began to look around, evaluating the place in the light of Victor's words. It was Arona who spoke first. "He's building an army."