

The onlookers didn't exactly cheer, but a definite hubbub arose at Lord Volpuré's proclamation. More of the finely dressed fae-human-looking members of Volpuré's household had quietly begun to crowd the edges of the courtyard, and Victor started to wonder if the duel would take place right then and there. He looked up at the proud edifice of Arcus's family manor and wondered how it would weather an earthquake. As though he'd read Victor's mind, Bohn cleared his throat noisily, and the buzz of conversations died down.

"The duel shall take place atop Arkhun's Hill at sundown. Will that be amenable to you, young man?" Bohn Volpuré's smug tone was so rankling to Victor that he almost dropped all pretense. His muscles tensed, but he held himself in check, the only evidence of his rancor a small muscle twitching near his eye.

"That's fine with me. What does that give us? A couple of hours?"

Before Bohn could reply, the slender, prim woman with the golden curls stepped forward. "I'll guide him to the hilltop, Lord Volpuré. Someone should attend him while he waits."

Again, before Bohn could speak, Fak Royle growled, "Might I suggest, generous lord, that you send a scribe along with the young challenger that he might employ his services to meticulously document his final wishes for those he holds dear. After all, one must prepare for the inevitable, no matter the bitter taste."

"An excellent and kind suggestion, Royle. Efanie, do keep Victor company. I'll send one of Preceptor Lovus's boys out to take down Victor's final words." He turned and immediately started up the steps, Victor and everyone else, apparently, dismissed from his mind. Bohn's smug confidence was so over the top that Victor's eyes widened with disbelief. Could a man truly be so contemptuous?

Fak Royle watched his lord disappear back into the manor, then turned to Victor. "Worry not, lad. Your name won't be forgotten. My personal historian documents each of my duels. You'll be in good company on the pages of my exploits." Victor closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, but he didn't speak as the red-robed mage turned his back and mounted the steps.

Efanie unclasped her hands from behind her and took another step toward Victor. She didn't speak, though, watching his face as he marked the progress of the steel seeker on his way up into the keep. Maybe she saw the murder behind Victor's amber irises. Perhaps she felt the tiny flicker of his aura that slipped the firm bindings of his iron will—whatever the case, she didn't say anything until Victor exhaled noisily and turned his gaze on her. "Shall we walk, sir?"

Victor looked at her for a long moment, caught up in the bright spots of white light where the sun reflected off her emerald irises. She seemed too good, too pleasant for a place where a man like Bohn Volpuré reigned. As he had the thought, he lifted his gaze and surveyed the gathered onlookers. Not the guards who'd made a show of returning to work, but the nobility, the rich, finely dressed members of the Volpuré household. They, too, looked pleasant, for the most part. Could a detestable man raise such pleasant folks? Were they all putting on a false front? His gaze shifted back to the tree, to the children he'd watched playing earlier. No, he decided. For some reason, not all of Bohn's children were devoid of redeeming qualities.

"Sir?" Efanie prompted again.

"Hmm? Oh, right, the hilltop. How far is it?"

“A few short miles down the lane. I could call us a carriage, but, unless you’ve something else to do, I thought a stroll might do nicely to ease your nerves.”

Victor smiled. “My nerves?” He reached up and scratched the rough, dark stubble along his jaw. “Yeah, I guess a walk could do me some good. I’m enjoying the sunlight.” She nodded and walked to his side, and for a panicked moment, he wondered if he was supposed to offer his arm or something, but she cleared her throat and started ahead, guiding him back toward the gate.

As they approached the dark opening of the gatehouse tunnel, one of the finely dressed younger men approached, doffing his velvety maroon hat and holding it to his chest as he cleared his throat. “Ahem. Excuse me, Efanie, might I speak a moment with your charge?”

“Lord Volpuré.” Efanie paused and inclined her head, taking a step back.

“Volpuré?” Victor raised an eyebrow.

“Channer Volpuré. I believe you know my brother, Arcus?”

Victor folded his arms over his chest. “Yeah, I did.”

“Did? Has something befallen him?”

“Your dad didn’t tell you, huh?”

“Tell—what is it, man?” Channer looked a bit older than Arcus but seemed a great deal softer, and Victor didn’t feel a whiff of power leaking off him.

“Well, your brother got killed in the, un, prison dungeon in the Council Spire. You know the one?”

“I . . .” Channer looked appropriately disturbed by the news, and Victor’s frown turned more genuine. Hadn’t Arcus said his siblings didn’t care for him? Or had he said *most* of them? Victor honestly couldn’t remember and was beginning to feel a little bad for being so blunt with the man.

“Look. Sorry to break the news to you. You should let your brothers and sisters know that he died bravely, fighting a, uh . . .” As he spun the tale of Arcus’s demise, doing a favor for his Pyromancer friend, he nearly broke his promise to Ronkerz about revealing the power of the great simian and his Big Ones.

“A what, man?”

Victor shrugged. “A really dangerous criminal. I think your dad and Arcus’s master underestimated the danger of that place.”

Efanie cleared her throat and stepped partially between Victor and Channer. “We should keep moving, Sir Victor. It’s best not to linger on the estate of a gentleman you’ve just challenged.”

“Right.” Victor grasped Channer’s shoulder, engulfing it with his broad, powerful hand. “My condolences. You should probably let your family know about Arcus.” He released him and turned, following Efanie out the gates. Channer tracked him with his eyes—Victor could feel them on his back—but he didn’t say anything more.

Efanie turned to the left, away from the main, cobbled road, and followed a narrower path of pavers on grass. After they’d gone a few dozen strides beyond the gate and away from the people living in the Volpuré manor, she turned to regard Victor through narrowed eyes. “That was rather callously done.”

“Hmm?” Victor’s mind had begun to wander toward his upcoming fight, and he wasn’t sure what she meant.

“Telling a man his brother was dead. You could have been a bit gentler.”

“Well,” Victor sighed, “to tell you the truth, I didn’t think that guy would feel bad about Arcus’s death. He gave me the impression that he and his siblings weren’t too fond of each other.”

“I suppose that’s a fair explanation. Arcus wasn’t well-loved, but at least as many of his siblings *liked* him as hated him.” Victor noted her emphasis on “liked” and chuckled.

“Not loved, though?”

“Perhaps a small handful of sisters, one brother, and some nieces and nephews. He will be missed.” Again, Victor felt stupid when he caught the glint of moisture in Efanie’s eyes.

“Ah, shit,” he groaned. “I should have realized you probably knew him damn well. Sorry about that.” He thought about telling her the truth—that Arcus was still alive—but bit his tongue; just because she was pleasant and pretty didn’t mean she wouldn’t report every word he said to her “lord.”

Efanie looked away and shrugged. “It’s understandable, you’ve got—”

“Nah, it’s not okay. I should have thought of your feelings. You should know Arcus died like a hero, fighting off enemies who greatly outnumbered him. He saved me from more than one deadly blow. I hope you all remember him that way.” It was a lie, but only because Victor had promised Arcus not to tell the truth. He wondered just how long Arcus would be in the dungeon. Would it be relatively soon, or would new generations of nieces and nephews be living in this great house before he found his way home?

Efanie didn’t look at him, her gaze firmly fixed ahead and to the left, and she reached up to rub her eyes briefly before saying, “Thank you. I, um, well, I helped raise him. I spent a lot of time training him as a boy. He wasn’t the easiest person to get along with, but he had . . . a difficult road. I’m glad he made a friend out of you before he died.”

Victor nodded, unwilling to add more lies to the mound he’d already dished out. They walked in silence for a while, but as they left the manor’s outer wall behind and wended through a small citrus orchard to the north, he caught his first glimpse of their destination. A great, grassy hill rose from the nearby farmland. At its base were a series of enormous, dark gray obelisks that jutted out of the grassy soil in a faintly curved line toward the east. If Victor squinted, he could almost imagine the stone monuments were fingers and the hill a giant, swollen thumb.

“Arkhun’s Hill.” Efanie pointed to the distant grassy slope.

“Practically a mountain,” Victor grunted.

“Tell me, Sir Vict—”

“Just Victor.”

Efanie inclined her head. “Tell me, Victor, why do you throw your life away this evening?”

“Hmm? The duel?” He knew he was being obtuse but was having fun, so he waited for her to answer.

“Yes. Surely you don’t hope—”

Victor cut her off, squeezing his left fist until his knuckles cracked. “Well, what else can I do? Volpuré wants to teach me a lesson, and he’s using—”

“Your friends and his own daughter as instruments in that lesson? Yes, I understand that, but they won’t be any safer if you lose a duel—” Her eyes widened, and her mouth formed an “O” before she covered it with her hand. “If you lose, he’ll have no reason to punish them.”

Victor smiled and nodded. “Yeah, the duel’s a win-win for them.” He shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets, smiling into the clouds. “Besides, there wasn’t another solution. I could have tried to sue the guy, you know, dragged him before the council, but that would take time, and I don’t think my friends have much time, yeah?”

“You could have swallowed your pride and brought your master to intervene.”

“Ah, well, that’s the issue, isn’t it? My pride. It’s a mighty big mouthful, and I didn’t feel like choking it down.”

Efanie turned to him and stared while he continued to walk, almost blithely, smiling into the sunny sky, a carefree spring in his step. “Are you suicidal, then? You’ve no loved ones to miss you?”

“Actually, I appreciate you mentioning it. When we get up on that hill, I’d like a few minutes to write notes to my loved ones.” He winked at her. “You know, just in case.” He’d planned to use his Farscribe book but found the idea of using Volpuré’s scribe to send notes to his loved ones amusing. He thought about that—loved ones. He had more than a few, and it felt good to remember that. “I’m not sure if it’s bad luck,” he said, chuckling as he gave voice to his thoughts. “I mean, if I write them all notes about what to do when I die, doesn’t that open the door, at least subconsciously, to the thought that I won’t win? Nah, I think I’ll just send them notes telling ‘em how much I love and appreciate them.”

“Victor!” Efanie stopped and whirled, reaching out to take his wrist. “I *appreciate* that you’re doing this to save your friends and, consequently, a young woman that I think of almost like a daughter, but you must realize you’re doomed! You couldn’t even stand inside Royle’s aura! How do you propose to fight him?”

Victor smiled at her, then lifted his gaze to the hill that had grown significantly closer as they'd spoken. He thought he could make out a grassy path carved in switchbacks leading up the southern slope. "It's bigger up close."

Efanie sighed and turned to follow his gaze. "Yes, and well-watered with the blood of heroes. I've watched Royle kill at least a dozen men on that hilltop."

Victor grunted and started walking again. As Efanie hurried to catch up to him, he looked at her. "Just Royle? Do other people fight up there?"

"Yes. It's used by all the local lords and their families—a storied, bloody piece of land. You'll have that, at least, Victor. Your blood will mingle with that of some very great men and women."

Victor thought about it, a macabre sense of satisfaction washing over him as he pictured his spirit rising up from that hilltop, meeting some of the great spirits who'd stayed behind to haunt the place. "Yeah. Yeah, that wouldn't be a bad place to die."

Efanie gave him a sideways look, then turned back to the hill. "I don't know why I care. I don't know why I don't simply encourage you. I should be glad you're doing this. I think I'm just angry that, once again, Bohn Volpuré's pride will cost the world at least one good life."

"It's too bad, isn't it? I mean, about the dueling laws of Sojourn. It's kind of bullshit that he gets to buy his life today, you know? Even if I beat his champion, he doesn't *really* lose anything."

Efanie chuckled, shaking her head. "Oh, that's where you're wrong, Victor. If it were *possible* for you to win, then the dear lord of the Volpuré clan would lose a great deal of *face*, and to the people who rule Sojourn, face is everything. Worse, he'd lose his champion, and, once people learned of the great Fak Royle's demise, Bohn would find dozens of challenges coming his way. Each refusal he made would reduce his standing and open him to civil suits. Inch by inch, he'd be ruined and forced to step down as the Volpuré patriarch, elevating one of his sons." She gave him a look, narrowing her eyes as she smiled ruefully. "A pretty fantasy, but still just a fantasy."

Those were details that Arcus hadn't had time to impart, and Victor found Efanie's words quite heartening. His smile must have made that apparent because she scoffed, looking away and hurrying her steps, leading from several yards ahead as they mounted the trail that climbed the hillside. He could imagine families with children and elderly parents climbing the wide, well-worn path on their way to attend a duel. Frowning, he called out, "Is that all that goes on up there? Duels?"

Efanie didn't respond at first as she continued to hike up the hill. When they reached the next switchback, though, she paused and looked down at Victor as she rounded the corner. "No. Celebrations for the seasons, for various old gods, and even events like weddings take place atop this hill."

"Huh." Victor nodded, and they resumed their climb in silence. When they reached the top, Victor looked past Efanie to see a broad, grassy field, much flatter than he would have expected. Delicately carved stone pillars formed a loose circle about twenty yards from the edge. Victor counted thirty-three of the pillars surrounding a space about half the size of a football field. Other than that, the top of the hill was bare of anything but ankle-high grass. "I guess we're supposed to fight in the middle?"

“The pillars are enchanted to absorb Energy. They’ll keep spectators safe from . . . misguided spells.”

Victor chuckled at her choice of words. He wasn’t too sure some pillars would protect people atop a hill if he used Wake the Earth, but he was hopeful they’d at least give people time to flee. Efanie walked over to one of the nearby pillars and leaned against it, folding her arms and watching him. She seemed to have grown tired of his refusal to take the duel seriously and didn’t have anything more to say.

Victor trudged past her into the circle, and he could feel the pressure and hum of potent Energy as he passed between two pillars. It was like stepping through a layer of dense, thick air. The depth of the power made him reconsider things; perhaps there was something far more potent buried in the hill, some Energy source that could, indeed, absorb his spells’ power or redirect it away from the spectators. He’d only taken a few steps when a woosh in the air caught his attention. He turned his eyes upward to see an avian man with bright orange feathers spiraling downward.

He wore Volpuré livery and carried a well-worn leather satchel. He landed, stumbling forward, and barely caught himself before falling. “Oof! The updraft was more than I bargained for!” He turned, fluttering his wings and making clucking sounds in his throat as he straightened his uniform.

“Don’t be alarmed!” Efanie called from the circle’s edge. “He’s one of the scribes.”

“Ahem, yes.” The avian fellow stepped toward Victor and held out a hand. “Tibbion at your service, sir. I’ve been ordered to take your last wishes down and deliver them to your family.”

Victor squeezed the man’s slender, downy hand in his own, careful to only apply a slight pressure. “Could you give me some stationary and envelopes? I’ll write a few notes for you to deliver.”

“I was told to take dictation—”

“Tibbion,” Victor interrupted, “I may look like a brute, but I know how to write.” With that, Victor sat down, folded his legs, and held out an empty hand. A moment later, the scribe set a stack of blank, surprisingly white, uniform pages in his palm along with a fancy, curlicued magical pen. As he began to write his first note, one to Ranish Dar, Victor remembered that he would be handing it off to a man who worked for Bohn Volpuré, so he decided to keep things short and amusing.

He wrote about his training and his plans to keep working on his cultivation. He said trite, meaningless things like how he was looking forward to swimming in the lake or how he hoped to have a rainstorm in the shower of his own future home. Overall, it was just a pleasant little note culminating in Victor’s thanks for being such a good mentor. By the time he folded Dar’s note and put it in an envelope, nearly a dozen people had arrived on the hilltop and were sitting in comfortable chairs or on blankets outside the stone circle.

Victor handed the envelope to Tibbion, then began writing quick notes to his closest friends. He wrote to Lesh, Edeya, Lam, and Darren, and then, just to be thorough, he wrote notes to Thayla, Deyni, Chandri, Chala, and even Rellia and Kethelket. When he finished, he glanced around the

clearing and saw that maybe a hundred people had arrived, and the hilltop had taken on a certain festive air. As he handed the stack of envelopes to Tibbion, he asked, "How much time before the duel?"

"Nearly half an hour, sir."

Victor nodded and bent his head to the last letter he intended to write:

*Valla,*

*I've just gotten out of the dungeon, and I know I should have written to you immediately in the Farscribe book, but I had some business to take care of. Now I'm writing you this letter, partially to pass some time and partially because I think it's amusing that my enemy will deliver a love note for me. "Love note" is a funny phrase as I think about it, but that's what I'm writing. I just want you to know how much I appreciate you and how much you mean to me. I'm young and sometimes stupid, but I know a good thing when I see it.*

Victor frowned and tapped the pen against his chin for a moment. He'd meant to write something light-hearted, something that wouldn't mean much to anyone other than that he cared about Valla, but suddenly, a dark musing passed through his mind: what if these were the last words he ever said to her? Frowning, suddenly more serious than he'd been since issuing his challenge to Volpuré, he continued to write:

*If I died today, I hope you'd miss me for a while, but I also hope you'd let our love become a warm memory and that you'd find new people to love and new hopes and dreams to chase. Let your life be filled with good things, and always look for ways to enjoy the better parts of living. Don't ever dwell on vengeance or hate, on fear or envy—remember that our spirits take those things with them when we die. I want your spirit to find me in our next lives, even if it's just to say 'hello.'*

*I love you,*

*-Victor*

Victor smiled, folded the paper neatly, and then slipped it into the envelope. On the outside, he wrote Valla's name and handed it to Tibbion. "Take all of those to Lord Ranish Dar's lake house."

"As you command, sir!" To Victor's surprise, the avian slipped the letters into his satchel, spread his wings, and launched himself aloft, rapidly pumping his wings as he gained altitude.

"Shit," Victor chuckled, "I didn't think he'd leave right this second." He looked around and was surprised to see hundreds of people lining the circle of stones. When he saw peoples' mouths moving, their hands gesturing, but didn't hear anything but a low background murmur, he realized that the magic of the stone circle must be creating a sort of bubble, a barrier that made it hard for even sound to penetrate.

With a grunt, he pushed himself to his feet and scanned the crowd for Lord Volpuré. Sure enough, he spotted him on the southern edge of the circle, sitting in an oversized, throne-like chair, surrounded by finely dressed people in similarly comfortable-looking chairs. Victor looked

to the east and saw the orange and red streaks in the sky that marked a Sojourn sunset. It was nearly time.

When he turned back, he saw the short, round, crimson figure of Fak Royle pushing his way through the crowd and into the circle. As he began striding toward Victor, the chamberlain's voice boomed out, loud enough for even Victor to hear inside the magical circle, "As dusk is upon us, the duel will commence. Victor Sandoval, challenger to Lord Bohn Volpuré, are you ready?"

Victor reached over his shoulder and drew Lifedrinker from her harness. She vibrated with eager fury, not a small part of which was directed at Victor for making her wait so long. He chuckled as he sent a small surge of Energy into the runes on his clothing, instantly cladding himself in his heavy red-black wyrm-scale and lava king hide armor. From within his fearsome helm, he bellowed, "I am ready."

The hugely rotund chamberlain immediately bellowed, "Fak Royle, champion of House Volpuré, are you ready?"

The stocky, red-robed figure stopped about ten paces from Victor and lifted his twisted green-gemstone wand high. "Ready," he growled.

"Let the duel begin!" the chamberlain roared.

Victor held still, watching Royle, waiting to see what he'd do. The wizard chuckled, and, with a palpable weight, he unleashed his aura. It was so real and thick that the grass between Victor and the wizard flattened. Victor felt it touch him, slamming down like a lead blanket adorned with need-tipped psychic thorns that sought to pierce his very spirit. This time, however, he didn't flinch, and he certainly didn't stumble back or fall to his knee. Instead, Victor relaxed his formidable will, unleashing his own aura that rippled out like a wave of murderous fire.

It was Royle's turn to take a stumbling, hesitant step back, and he threw his hood back in disbelief. When Victor saw his blood-red eyes sunken in deep, pale flesh, he grinned, exposing his white, powerful Quinametzin teeth. "What?" he growled. "Did you think your aura was so fearsome? I've felt worse." It was true—Ronkerz's aura was a hundred times heavier than Fak Royle's. Even Lira's had been weightier. Of course, the surprise on Royle's face only added to Victor's enthusiasm, so his grin was something mad, indeed, as he canceled his Alter Self spell and surged with power. The fight was on.