

“And this fellow, this ‘Ronkerz,’ made you fight his champions?”

Victor shrugged. “Well, only one.” He hadn’t said anything about Ronkerz being a veil walker or his champions being steel seekers, but it wasn’t because he was trying to be dishonest with Valla; he simply felt he had to honor his vow to Ronkerz not to talk about his strength with anyone other than Ranish Dar.

Valla nodded slowly. “So, they underestimated you. I suppose when your companions lost their fights, it only encouraged the prisoner king’s confidence.” She smiled and squeezed Victor’s wrist. They were sitting together in one of Dar’s smaller parlors, waiting for the lord of the house to summon Victor. As soon as he’d put Darren to bed, Dar’s steward, Mr. Ruln, had told him to wait there. “A mistake too many make, hmm, love?”

Victor chuckled, perhaps a little nervously. He felt like he was walking a fine line between truth and lie. “I don’t know about that. The Big One he chose for me put up quite a fight. I had to get creative to find a way to harm her.”

“What an odd name—‘Big Ones.’ It’s very strange to imagine a town inside a dungeon. What were the people who lived there like?”

“Um, for the most part, desperate and dirty. I think that’s part of Ronkerz’s thing—the whole ‘Big Ones’ act and naming the place ‘Rumble Town.’ I think the fighting and the showmanship all have to do with his attempt to keep people motivated for his cause.”

“And what is that? His cause, I mean.”

“Well,” Victor sighed, hating that he was hiding things from Valla, but if he were to take Dar’s warnings about karmic bonds seriously, shouldn’t his promise to Ronkerz have “rippled” through the universe? As Valla stared at him and a scowl began to mar her smooth complexion, he sighed and shook his head. “Listen, I don’t want to make shit up, but I promised Ronkerz I wouldn’t talk about his goals with anyone but Dar. He could have kept me in there, Valla. I made the promise so I wouldn’t be stuck.”

“So you can tell Ranish Dar but not the woman you love? The woman who spends all her time with you?” The frown line between her eyes deepened, and she leaned back in her chair. “With whom do you fear I’ll share this secret?”

“No one! It’s not that I think I can’t trust you; it’s just that, shit, Valla, I’ll *know* I broke the promise. It’ll bother me. Dar’s been talking to me about karmic ties and debts and—”

“Oh, put it aside, Victor.” She folded her arms over her chest and looked through the window toward the night sky and the distant but very bright moon. After a moment of awkward silence, she asked, “Are you allowed to tell me what happened when you left? Can you tell me the story behind your duel and the situation with Lam and the others? Must I be the only one who has no knowledge of your dealings?”

“Don’t be like that, Valla. It’s a pretty straightforward story. Arcus told me that his father was holding Lam and the others inside his dungeon, so I went there to—”

“So he made peace with you before he died?”

“Um, yeah.” Victor looked down and knew he’d made a mistake when Valla snorted and stood up.

“I don’t know why you’re being so duplicitous, but I can’t imagine this conversation will get any better. If I’m not wrong, the next thing you’re about to tell me is that you challenged Lord Volpuré to a duel, then fought his steel-seeker champion without first letting me know. Would it have been so hard to come here before flying off in a rage to the Volpuré estate? Would it have been hard for you to write me a plainly worded note in the Farscribe book? I suppose I should be thankful that you remembered me at all, what with that strange note that demonstrated your willingness to die in that duel—*without seeing me!*”

“Valla, they were in trouble in that dungeon! I had to hurry—”

“They’d been in there for more than a week. I think another hour or two—”

“Maybe not! Their next battle was imminent!”

“Did you *know* that?” She didn’t wait for an answer. She fled the room in a flutter of tinkling feathers, leaving Victor sitting, stunned, alone in the parlor. He didn’t know what to think of her sudden anger, but he knew he felt like the bad guy again, and he was getting damn tired of feeling like the bad guy. When one of the servants, a man whose name he hadn’t yet learned, cleared his throat from the doorway, Victor looked up, his growing anger and frustration instantly replaced by embarrassment.

“Terribly sorry, sir, but Lord Dar awaits you in the Library.”

“Oh, um, thanks.” Victor stood and smoothed his shirt, then moved toward the doorway. As the servant stepped aside, he nodded and reached up to pat Victor’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything, but the act was definitely out of character for Dar’s staff. Victor wondered if his face looked so troubled that a veritable stranger thought he needed comfort. He made a conscious effort to unfurl his brow and offered the man a nod and an anemic smile.

As he walked through the hallways of Dar’s home, he fought to bring his mind back into focus, but a particular train of thought kept pushing its way to the forefront, and he couldn’t help feeling some despair at it. Looking objectively at his feelings, Victor realized he felt bad about hurting Valla’s feelings but was also annoyed and exhausted by the drama. What was worse, he found his feelings of guilt weren’t any different from how he might feel if Lam or Lesh—the idea made him snort a short laugh—were hurt by his actions. Shouldn’t he feel despair in his heart at the thought of Valla being cross with him? She’d made a rather good point: shouldn’t he have been desperate to see and hold her when he survived the dungeon? Shouldn’t he have at least *considered* going to her before rushing off to the duel?

Altogether, the strange, conflicted feelings roiling through his mind as he walked to the library culminated in a series of questions he couldn’t answer—did he *love* Valla, or did he only care about her? Was his attraction to her more physical than emotional? Was there any difference? Victor knew why he couldn’t answer: he lacked experience, and, the more he thought about it, *that* was a problem, too. Groaning, shaking his head in frustration, he fought to push the unquiet thoughts from his mind as he approached the library doors.

He stepped into the dimly illuminated room and was greeted by the scent of woody incense and the unmistakable aroma of fresh coffee. Dar sat in one of the comfortable, high-backed

chairs, wearing one of his usual, brightly colored pajama-like ensembles, this one an eye-popping electric blue. When he saw Victor, he smiled and leaned forward, pouring some steaming black liquid into the mugs on the small table before him. He nodded at one of the empty seats and rumbled, "Have a seat, Victor. We're past midnight, and I doubt you'll sleep tonight, so have some coffee with me."

Victor did as he asked, sitting down with a sigh. "Is it that late already?"

"It is." Dar pushed the coffee to him, then, without preamble, jumped into the thick of things. "As you no doubt recall, I witnessed your duel with Fak Loyle. I took my leave after cooling your fury, so give me the details of what I missed before and after the fight. You may as well begin by describing what happened inside the dungeon. I can feel the weight of a bargain on your spirit. Is that why you fled the Council Spire so rapidly? Were you avoiding Roil and his lackeys?"

"You don't miss much, do you?" Victor picked up the little carafe of cream and poured a healthy splash into his cup. Dar only grunted, so he began to speak, pausing occasionally to sip the hot, soothing drink. "Well, first of all, that woman's bomb nearly killed me. Maybe pass along my thanks, though, because it blasted me right through one of the rune-covered pillars those ambushers were using to seal off the entrance area. Once I was out, I kicked their asses easily enough . . ."

Victor spoke for nearly an hour, going over the nature of his encounters in the prison dungeon and then talking about Ronkerz and how he'd made the three of them fight his "Big Ones." As he finished the tale, describing how Arcus revealed his father's plans for extortive vengeance, Dar chuckled and shook his head. "No wonder you raced out of the city. I'm quite pleased you didn't lose your temper before you managed to extricate yourself from the Council Spire."

Victor nodded, smiling ruefully. "It was a close thing for a minute, there. Before I go into the situation with Volpuré, can you tell me what you think of Ronkerz? Don't you think it's messed up that kids are being born in that dungeon?"

"Messed up?" Dar sighed and rubbed his temples between his two stony thumbs. "We'll need to work on your vernacular before I send you to be a court champion on Ruhn. I suppose your description is apt, however. I never considered the idea that people would form rudimentary societies within a dungeon nor that the System would continue to grow the place to accommodate them. I'm not too surprised to hear about Ronkerz, nor am I surprised to learn that Roil has been hiding the true nature of the situation from the rest of us—Consul Rexa would likely force him to close the place down, regardless of the lost investment with the System."

"Really? She could do that?"

"Rexa? She's more powerful than any three of us combined. Should your path cross with hers, always be deferential."

"Are you going to tell her—"

"I'll need to weigh the consequences. It seems to me that Ronkerz has made a sort of overture in that he's asked you to tell me and me alone about the situation in that dungeon." He paused to sip his coffee, then shook his head. "Let me handle the politics, Victor. You'll soon have your own schemes to manage. For now, be content knowing that I won't allow children to languish long in that dungeon. As for your debt to the council, it's clearly been paid, and now they'll need

to supply a promised bonus. I take it you still wish for me to request a cultivation item for your friend's breath Core?"

Victor nodded. "Yeah, I owe him."

"Very well. I'll meet with the council in the morning and extract what's due. Now, the duel. Were you not concerned that Bohn's champion was a steel seeker?"

"I mean, I guess so, but Arcus told me everything about the guy." Victor thought about his battle and shook his head. "Almost everything. It seemed he had one trick up his sleeve that he hadn't ever used before."

"His invasion of your blood?"

"Yeah, I forgot you watched the fight."

"Blood Mages are dangerous, and Loyle fought so much with his nature affinity that people often overlooked the true danger of his secondary aspect. I'm pleased you thought of burning the blood from your system with your magma-attuned Energy. I suspect your elder bloodline helped buy you time to think of it. Didn't you tell me that you have a feat that makes you naturally resistant to poisons?"

Like a lightbulb, the thought illuminated Victor's mind, and he nodded. "Yeah! I didn't think of that. I suppose someone else's blood in my veins could be considered a kind of poison."

"So, in the end, your victory was partly due to Loyle's affinities meeting very hard counters with your own. No doubt, a man of Loyle's power was able to read a good deal from your Core despite your aura veiling. It was his folly to underestimate the strength of your breath Core. I suppose he couldn't know that your Volcanic Fury increases the potency of the magma—on the surface, your breath Core is less than impressive." Dar chuckled. "Not for long if I were to wager."

"Heh, yeah. After the fight, I was thinking about how badly I need to cultivate my breath Core. I'll work on it before I leave." The idea of leaving brought some questions to Victor's mind, but before he could ask them, Dar cleared his throat and brought up a new topic of his own.

"I noted that I have new house guests."

Victor blew out an explosive breath, then leaned back in his chair. He'd almost let Cora slip his mind, and the reminder, combined with his stress about Valla, was enough to make him reach up and vigorously scratch the short hair above his ear. "I could use your advice about that."

Dar chuckled. "So the duelist's child was foisted upon you? I'm surprised Volpuré didn't insist on caring for the girl if only to save some face." He sipped at his second cup of coffee, then shrugged. "It was wise of you to steal away the other woman—the fae-blood. A familiar face will do wonders to ease the girl's transition. I assume Loyle had some riches in his dimensional containers?"

"Oh yeah. Millions of beads and plenty of precious metals and gems."

“Good. You were eager to visit your home, yes? I suggest you do so. Take a week—bring the child and your new employee to your estate there; ensure her education is well-funded and she has a place to call home. I will prepare your course of study while you’re gone and when you return, you will devote yourself to preparing for the trials and tribulations that await you on Ruhn. I’ve contacted my granddaughter—she expects you in one hundred and nineteen System-standard days.”

“Seriously? Um, yeah, actually, that sounds great. I could introduce her to Thayla and her little girl. I could—”

“Yes, yes.” Dar held up a hand, forestalling more of Victor’s mentions of people and places he didn’t know. “I suggest this not because I’m trying to be kind—I am, but that’s not why. I want your head clear, and having that girl here will only distract you. Now, while I’m on the subject of distractions, do you have something else weighing on you?”

Victor frowned, feeling some heat entering his pathways. Was Dar admitting to eavesdropping on his conversation with Valla? Inhaling deeply, he pushed out the rage that had begun to trickle into his pathways and, instead, consciously pulled inspiration-attuned Energy out. With a clear mind, he said, “I suppose our conversation wasn’t exactly quiet or private, huh? The door was open.”

“Even if I hadn’t heard a word, I’d know you were troubled. Victor, I know I’m not your peer, and I often express how valuable my time is, but I want you to know that you’re beginning to be . . . important to me. Don’t let that go to your head, but do understand that I am here if you need some advice. My long life has been lived in . . . phases for lack of a better word—sometimes alone, sometimes with companionship. Though I may not seem it, I’ve had many romantic liaisons and many long and devoted relationships. I’ve also been party to many failed loves. I’ve witnessed and analyzed those losses, and I might have a word of wisdom for you if you but ask.”

Victor nodded, slowly coming to grips with the idea that Dar had just indicated that their relationship was no longer simply contractual. He didn’t want to help Victor just because he wanted to use him—he cared. Of course, Victor knew he might be manipulating him, but his words felt genuine, and he *wanted* to think Dar was sincere. As he spoke, Victor slowly began to nod, and tried to gather his thoughts, tried to think of a way to express his feelings. Finally, he leaned forward and tried to express his fears in a hushed voice:

“I guess it boils down to passion. When I thought about Valla before my duel, I thought about what I ‘should’ do, not what I wanted to do. I *wanted* to fight, but I wrote Valla a note because it felt like the right thing to do. If I really loved her, I mean *loved* her, would I have wanted to go to her more than I wanted to fight? Wouldn’t I have wanted to feel her lips on mine?” Victor remembered who he was speaking to, and his face flushed with embarrassment. Still, he pushed ahead, “I mean, when think about passion—” He shook his head, trying to find the words, afraid to say the ones on the tip of his tongue.

“Go on, Victor. What are you passionate about?”

“I don’t fucking know, Dar.” Victor sighed. “I love Deyni, and Thayla, and Chandri, and Edeya, and yeah, Valla fits in there, but shouldn’t I feel something a lot *more* for her?”

“Putting people aside, Victor, what ignites your passion?”

"You know," Victor sighed, shrugging helplessly. "Fighting, winning—the rush of battle. I don't even know what your granddaughter is like—what her country stands for, but I'm excited to fight for her. Is there something wrong with me?"

"Not *wrong*. You are what you are. You don't pick fights, but you certainly love to win them. I can admire that trait, Victor. Perhaps love isn't something you should concern yourself with in this stage of your life—"

"But I *do* love, Dar! I feel it so deeply, so hard, sometimes that I can't think of anything else. If I love to fight, half the time, it's because I think I'm protecting someone I love! But . . . yeah, I'm not sure how to reconcile the idea that I feel just as strongly about protecting and caring for other people in my life as I do for Valla." Victor sighed, feeling empty and defeated and utterly unresolved.

Dar chuckled. "Love is a funny thing. It can be hot and fiery or warm and comforting. It can bring tears of joy or sorrow; it can make a man or break him. I'll tell you this: time apart from one's love can clarify things. If your heart begins to ache and you desperately want to be with your love more and more, then you might realize your love is more important than your desire to fight and your hunt for glory. If, however, you don't find yourself lying awake at night, thinking of your distant love, perhaps it might be time to be more honest with yourself and your lady."

"So, wait and see? Shit, thanks for the help, Dar." Victor laughed, and Dar chuckled.

"Yes, I began to curse myself the moment I offered advice. It's not an easy thing to figure out—the heart. Talk to Valla. Be honest. That's the best counsel I can offer. Perhaps she'll have more insight." Dar shifted in his chair, and Victor saw he was ready to be done with the subject.

"Right. I'll do that. Thank you, Dar."

"Take your week. Leave as soon as you can and bring her with you. It will be good." Dar looked ready to dismiss him, but he held up a hand and added, "On the topic of my granddaughter, you should rest assured that she is no despot. She rules with kindness, and her citizens are guaranteed certain rights and freedoms. I believe you should be proud to defend her—many nations on Ruhn are not so egalitarian."

Victor nodded. "Well, that's good to know. Yeah, I think, despite my earlier words, I would have had trouble standing up for her if she turned out to be a tyrant." He stood and smiled, and surprisingly, the expression came a lot more easily than he'd expected. Despite the lack of a resolution to his problems, he felt better having confided in someone. It was good to know he wasn't the only person in the universe feeling the way he did. "Thank you, Dar."

His mentor stood and clapped one of his stony hands against Victor's shoulder. "My pleasure. Make haste now. The sooner you're gone and back, the sooner your training can begin." His eyes opened wide, and he snapped his fingers with a *crack*. He leaned close and, in a much quieter voice, said, "I *do* have some advice for you! Dig through Loyle's belongings for something very beautiful, rare, and *expensive*, and give it to Valla. I think it might make her more receptive to your further confession."

"Confession?"

“Well, you’ve yet to tell her about your young ward, correct?”

“Oh, *shit*,” Victor groaned.