

When Victor crested a rise, and the Volpuré estate came into view, he urged Guapo to slow to a stop. He sat there, limned in orange flames, black smoke leaking from his nostrils astride a similarly furious-looking mustang. He still clutched Lifedrinker in one hand, and she hung down beside Guapo's flank, hissing and vibrating with her eagerness to kill. Victor knew better than to ride into Volpuré's estate in such a state. If he didn't get a grip on himself, witnesses would argue that he began hostilities before issuing a legal challenge.

If that were the case, Volpuré would be within his rights to have his household guard swarm him. Victor might slaughter many, but Arcus had made it clear that his father's champion wasn't the only formidable fighter in his family's employ. Reluctantly, despite his boiling blood, Victor lifted Lifedrinker over his shoulder. She just had time to send thoughts of confusion, anger, and even a hint of betrayal his way before the harness snatched her out of his hand.

"Sorry, beautiful. I have to do this with a level head." As if to reassure himself of that capability, Victor closed his eyes, inhaled deeply through his nostrils, and turned his gaze inward, staring at the beautiful balance of his Core. He'd *allowed* his rage to run rampant while he traveled. In a way, he'd been venting, and he figured riding hard and contemplating murder was a better way to vent than getting into fights or shooting his mouth off at the wrong person. Having done so, he felt some relief from the pressure of the anger that had wanted to take hold of him when Arcus first revealed his father's scheme.

Still, his pathways were brimming with magma and rage-attuned Energy, and he needed to put their influence in check. Slowly exhaling and then inhaling again, Victor drew the rage out of his pathways and pushed it into his Core. He watched as the baleful red band around his white-gold Core pulsed brightly and began spinning a bit faster as the hot red Energy returned. Nodding, already feeling much cooled, Victor exhaled and inhaled again; this time, as his breath surged into his lungs, he pushed the magma-attuned Energy in his pathways along with it, pulling it back into his breath Core.

"Better," he sighed, sliding off Guapo's back. "Thanks, *hermano*." He gave Guapo's shoulder a pat. "Go back to the Spirit Plane and charge around the meadows for a while. Burn off that anger!" He chuckled as Guapo whinnied and reared up on his hind legs, but before the stallion could argue further, Victor severed his connection to his Wild Totem spell and sent him home. Nodding and clearing his throat, Victor reached up to smooth the front of his finely stitched gray shirt and brushed the road's dust from his thighs and knees. He didn't need to—the garments would be spotless by the time he walked to the estate gates, but it felt good; it was another way to settle his mind.

He'd long since left behind the black, springy crystal roadways of Sojourn City and its nearby environs, but a few miles back, the dirt roads had transitioned to red-brown cobbles. Victor had passed by a few other estates, and he figured the wealthy lords had paid to improve the road passing through the area. Wealthy was probably an understatement. Volpuré's estate looked like a small town with a tremendous, monolithic, pale-gray stone keep at its center. A stone wall of similar make surrounded the outbuildings, gardens, and courtyards, but the central keep stood alone, unguarded by an inner wall, yet imposing in its towering grandeur.

As he approached the wall and the guards at the gate, Victor studied that central keep. It was probably fifty yards on a side and maybe four or five hundred feet tall. He'd seen larger buildings, certainly, but the way it stood there, like a single, massive stone planted in the hillside, was impressive; he couldn't deny it.

Windows didn't mar its surface for the first third of its height, but starting there at some invisible demarcation line, stained glass and balconies peppered the smooth surface, and Victor could make out tiny people going about their lives—shaking out rugs, watering little gardens, and leaning on balcony railings as they gestured and conversed. Volpuré's household looked to be bustling and full of life. "How many kids does that *pendejo* have? Thirty-something? I guess that means a lot of grandkids and in-laws."

By then, he'd stepped into the shadow of the gatehouse, and one of the men wearing Volpuré's livery—a silver raptor on a lavender background—stepped forward. "When you stopped yonder, we'd wondered if you'd approach. What can we help you with, stranger?"

Victor, reduced to his more "human" size of something close to seven feet, smiled and hooked his thumbs onto his supple leather belt. "I need to speak to Bohn Volpuré."

"Ah! Do you have an appointment with Lord Volpuré?"

"I think he's probably expecting me. I'm Victor Sandoval. He might have some information about a few of my friends who went into the family dungeon. 'Something, something coliseum.' Does that ring a bell?"

The guard, a tall, stout fellow with a shock of bright red hair hanging down from the rim of his black-lacquered metal helm, stepped closer, glancing at his partner whose eyes widened. "Victor? The giant from the Vault of Valor? The one who beat Lord Arcus?"

"Ah, yeah. That's me." Victor shrugged, still standing nonchalantly.

"I'll fetch Chamberlain Potts," the second guard said, and Victor gave him a double-take because he'd never heard such a high voice. The fellow's cheeks reddened at Victor's quick glance, and then he hurried away.

"Right, well, I've instructions to bring you to the lord's parlor. I'm assuming you received his invitation?"

"I did not. I've just returned to town from a . . . quest, I guess. I heard rumors about my friends, so I came straight here."

"Well, please follow me, sir." The guard looked Victor up and down before he turned, and he seemed to want to say something, but perhaps his sense of propriety wouldn't allow it. He clamped his jaw tight and turned to lead the way through the gatehouse and into an expansive, cobbled courtyard. Fruit trees grew in circular planters along the edges, and a fountain burbled at the center, surrounded by a low stone bench. Victor smiled and inhaled the scent of citrus, and as children's laughter caught his ear, he turned to see a small boy climbing one of the trees while a pair of girls in bright dresses tried to poke him with little sticks. They all giggled, so he didn't think anything untoward was happening.

"We should make haste, sir," the guard said from several feet ahead. Victor hadn't realized he'd stopped walking, but the guard's words didn't spur him. He folded his arms and arched an eyebrow.

"Why?"

“Well, the lord’s parlor is on the top floor, and we wouldn’t want to keep him waiting—”

“I think I’ll wait for him here. I like this courtyard fine, and the fountain pleases my weary ears. Tell your master not to hurry on my account.” Victor strode over the cobbles to the fountain as he spoke, admiring the delicately carved fish that served as the water spouts.

“But, sir, I’m sure you’d be more comfortable in the manor—”

“Manor?” Victor glanced up at the imposing stone edifice. “That looks more like a keep to me. No, I’ve had enough of gloomy stone interiors. I’ll sit here in the sun, under the stars, and listen to the fountain while I wait. Thank you for the kind invitation, however.”

“As you say, sir. I’ll, well, I’ll let the chamberlain know. I’m sure he’ll have some refreshments sent your way. I’m not sure how long it will take Lord Volpuré to make his way down to see you—”

“No worries.” Victor waved him off as he sat down, leaned back against the fountain’s rim, and crossed his feet at the ankles. “I’ll watch the children play while I wait.”

“As you say,” the guard repeated, then he bowed stiffly and hurried toward the stone steps leading up to the manor’s sizeable double doors. Victor watched him for a moment, then turned his gaze toward the parapets surrounding the courtyard. Just as he’d hoped, there were dozens of guards making rounds, often sending glances his way. More than that, he could see picnic tables situated in the little gardens at the edge of the courtyard and, seated at them, several finely dressed adults. Arcus had told him that the courtyard was well-populated and the perfect place to issue his challenge. He’d warned Victor not to allow himself to be sequestered away from the eyes of potential witnesses.

“I hope you were right,” he muttered as he considered the objection he’d thrown at Arcus: what if Lord Volpuré instructed his kin and staff to lie about the challenge? Arcus had laughed, saying that too many people in the household had too much to gain from the lord’s downfall. They wouldn’t lie to the Sojourn Council for him, not about something so important as a challenge. Victor thought it was pitiful that a man of such means held such little loyalty from his own family, but, on reflection, he figured it was a simple case of “you reap what you sow.” Volpuré used his family for influence and treated them like tools, so it wasn’t surprising that at least *some* of them might do the same to him.

He hadn’t been lying about enjoying the sun and the sound of the fountain tinkling behind him. As he leaned back, Victor closed his eyes and tilted his face toward the warmth, letting it soak through his coppery flesh into the blood coursing beneath. He could almost imagine the warmer blood spreading through spiderwebs of veins, into his larger vessels and arteries, and carrying the sun’s invisible touch through his body. He sat that way for quite some time, and he might have dozed if not for the knot of worry still eating at the pit of his stomach whenever he thought about Lam, Edeya, and even Darren.

“Who are you?” a high-pitched voice asked. Victor opened one eye and peered down to see one of the children he’d been watching earlier standing by his feet. She wore a bright yellow dress with a huge grass stain near where her knees must be. As he watched, he could see the stain slowly fading as the garment’s enchantments worked overtime to keep the little rascal clean.

He grunted as he uncrossed his ankles and sat up a little. “I’m Victor. Who are you?”

“Jillian.”

“Jillian, huh?” Victor studied her rosy cheeks, bright yellow eyes, and golden curls. She didn’t look like Arcus or Trin. Still, it was a big family. “Are you related to Arcus and Trin?”

“They’re cousins. Are you one of my uncles?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Is Lord Volpuré your grandpa?”

“That’s great-grandpa!”

“Ah.” Victor nodded and winked at the little girl. He glanced over her head to see the others she’d been playing with lurking near the fruit tree, intently watching their conversation. “Are those your siblings or more cousins?”

“Rin is my sister, but Lop is Lord Stravian’s son.”

Victor rubbed his chin and nodded sagely. “Mhmm, I see, I see. Well—”

“Sir Victor?” Victor turned toward the feminine voice to see a lithe, graceful young woman approaching. She wore the Volpuré livery, but her uniform was clearly a custom design, far better fitting than those of the guards at the gate. Her hand rested on the basket hilt of a long, slender sword, but she bore a pleasant expression as she said, “Run and play, Jillian, you nosy fetter-fetch!”

The little girl squealed a scandalized giggle and ran toward her playmates, repeating, “Fetter-fetch! She called me a fetter-fetch!”

“Apologies, sir.” The woman stopped a few feet away, standing in a stiff, military fashion that brought a twinge of homesick longing to Victor’s heart as it reminded him of Valla. “I’m Efanie, Commander of the Volpuré household guard. I understand you’re waiting for Lord Volpuré?”

“I am. Maybe you can answer a simple question. If the answer is no, I’ll leave now without any trouble.”

“And if it’s yes?”

Victor shrugged. “Then there might be some trouble.”

“Very well.” Efanie broadened her stance and clasped her hands behind her back. “What is the question?”

“Does Lord Volpuré have some friends of mine trapped in the family dungeon?”

“Trapped is a strong word—”

“Don’t bullshit me, lady.” Victor sat up straight and leaned forward, resting an elbow on his knee.

Efanie narrowed her large, almond-shaped, amber eyes and glanced over her shoulder toward the closed doors of the manor. When she looked back at Victor, she offered a quick nod and

whispered, “The lord will argue that they entered of their own volition and that it would be an interference to pull them out. He’ll try to gain favors from you, perhaps even to force you to sign a contract of servitude in exchange for their release.”

Victor regarded her while inwardly feeling quite proud of his poker face. He didn’t smile, frown, or even blink; Arcus had already told him that much, so nothing was a surprise. Well, he admitted to himself, the fact that she was whispering this to him was a surprise. Did none of Bohn Volpuré’s people like him? He kept his voice low and calm as he asked, “And if I refuse?”

“I’m afraid he’s prepared to risk even his daughter, Trin’s, life. He included her with purpose of forethought; the council will see her death as proof that he meant no ill will, or at least that’s what his advocates will argue.”

Victor smiled. “It won’t come to that.”

Efanie blew out a sigh, and he could see the relief behind her eyes. “So, you mean to bargain with him, then?”

“Not exactly.”

Efanie looked over her shoulder again, then whispered, even more softly than before, “You must understand—Lord Volpuré holds the only control stone for the dungeon. You can’t—”

“Challenge him?”

Efanie groaned and shook her head. “Of course. You’re new to Sojourn.” She chuckled wryly and leaned a little closer, speaking conspiratorially. “He has the means to buy the best champion, Victor. Fak Royle has never lost a duel.”

Victor nodded, leaning back against the fountain again. “Makes sense, I guess, or he’d be dead, right?”

“He’s a *steel seeker!*” she hissed just as the large manor door swung wide, and a portly man in the Volpuré livery stepped to the edge of the stoop and looked down at Victor and Efanie.

“Lord Bohn Volpuré!” he bellowed, his voice echoing around the courtyard. Efanie jumped like she’d been electrocuted and took a few steps back, standing at attention. Victor didn’t want to look like a boor, so he stood from the stone bench and turned to look squarely at the doorway. A moment later, a tall, swarthy man dressed in the finest suit Victor had seen outside of a movie back on Earth strode through the doorway. He was followed by a train of attendants and soldiers, but only one followed him down the steps to approach Victor—a short, round fellow wearing a deeply cowed, blood-red robe and carrying a gnarled, polished length of wood topped with a pulsing green crystal.

When the two stopped before him, the man in the robe stood back a few feet, and all Victor could see of his face was the bottom edge of an unkempt brown beard. Bohn Volpuré cleared his throat. “Victor, was it?”

“That’s right.” Victor held out a hand, and Lord Volpuré looked at it momentarily before lifting his gaze, fluttering his overlong eyelashes as he regarded Victor’s face.

“How might I help you, young man?”

Victor let his hand fall to his side. Maybe once upon a time, such blatant disrespect would have gotten a rise out of him. Maybe it was the improvements he'd done with his Core, the influence of his inspiration-attuned Energy, or maybe it was just that Victor had met with enough assholes that nothing fazed him anymore. Whatever it was, the only thought that crossed his mind as Volpuré refused to shake his hand was that it would make it all the sweeter when he brought him to his knees. “You can get my friends out of your dungeon.”

“Your . . . *friends*?” He affected a puzzled expression, rubbing at his chin. “My *daughter* is currently in the family dungeon, exploring it with her team. I'm afraid there must be some sort of error on your behalf.”

“You think so?” Victor grinned, chuckling softly. He lifted his arms to fold them over his chest. “I'm sorry if I've challenged your wits, Bohn, but try to deduce the facts. Your daughter is in the dungeon with some friends, and I'm asking you to get *my* friends out of your dungeon. Perhaps those friends are the same people, hmm?”

“Use respect when addressing *Lord* Volpuré!” the robed man growled roughly. At the same time, he unleashed his aura, and Victor felt it hit him like a heavy, thorn-filled blanket, dragging him down, scoring his flesh with psychic barbs. The pressure was immense, the aura dense and powerful, and Victor moved with it, stumbling back and even falling to one knee, ducking his head, pumping his lungs to draw breath.

“Enough, Royle. Let the man speak.” Like a switch turning off, Royle's aura faded, and Victor took a deep breath, rising shakily to his feet. He looked around to see a crowd had gathered. The guards watched from the parapets, and dozens of finely dressed, beautiful people lined the courtyard's perimeter. Arcus hadn't been wrong.

“Will you let them out?” Victor asked, still avoiding making eye contact with Bohn.

“I'd rather not interfere, young man. My daughter's future depends on her learning to fend for herself and not to rely on the might of her family name to rescue her from predicaments. That dungeon serves a valuable purpose: exposing the entrants to the very real risk of death helps to forge their character. So, in short, no, I will not. It would take something equally as valuable as the lesson my daughter would be losing out on to entice me. Have you anything of the sort?”

“Money? A fine, magical weapon?” Victor knew nothing he offered would be acceptable, so he threw those out for the witnesses to add to their gossiping.

Bohn waved his hand, “I've no need of such things. I could buy your weapons a thousand—nay, a million times. Have you nothing unique?”

“I could give your daughter lessons. I'm sure you recognize the value in learning from a stranger with some talent—”

Bohn cut him off. “Unacceptable, but you've given me an idea. If you're willing to work for my daughter, why not sign a contract with my household? I could use a man like you.”

“I already owe service to Ranish Dar.” Victor finally looked up, locking his eyes, bright, amber, and predatory, with Bohn Volpuré's pretty blue ones hiding behind their large, dark lashes.

Bohn frowned, a crease appearing over the bridge of his nose, perhaps surprised by the angry glint in Victor's gaze. "Yet the man isn't here. Is he not your patron?"

Victor frowned, his real emotions beginning to impact his acting. "He is, but I owe him enough. I'd hoped to solve this problem on my own. I thought you might be reasoned with—"

"Watch your tone," Fak Royle growled.

Bohn Volpuré raised a hand, holding his dog in check. "If you will not leave Ranish Dar's service nor ask him to bargain in your stead, I cannot help you."

Victor nodded and stood up straight. He looked around the courtyard, ensuring that hundreds of eyes were on the small group at the center of the square, then he cleared his throat and said, in a booming proclamation, "In that case, Lord Bohn Volpuré, I challenge you to a duel to the death. Should I emerge victorious, by right of conquest, I claim the freedom of my friends and your own daughter from your dungeon."

"Fool!" Volpuré snorted. "My champion is a steel seeker. You've only felt a taste of his power." He turned to look at the short, rotund man in his silky red robes. "What say you, Royle? Up for a bit of a display?"

"Indeed, Lord Volpuré. I'll craft you something especially handsome from this fellow's hot blood." While they spoke, Victor did his best to look like a confused idiot. He glanced from Fak to Bohn and then over to Efanie. All the while, he let his eyes bulge out and his mouth hang open.

Volpuré chuckled and held his arms wide, looking around at the many witnesses in the courtyard. "Challenge accepted! We shall feast afterward!"