

“They don’t seem threatening nor particularly dangerous.” Arcus was staring at the two men guarding the “gatehouse” of the town as he spoke, and Victor had to agree with him. One of the men was sitting on his butt, leaning back against the rough-stone wall while idly tossing pebbles. The other sat on one of the stone blocks haphazardly scattered near the half-built structure. She was preoccupied with some dice, repeatedly tossing them on the flat rock beside her. Neither wore much in the way of armor, nor had they touched the spears leaned against the nearby wall.

It had taken Victor and his companions the better part of a day to make the trek through the ruins and hills, but as they approached the town, Arona had solidified her certainty that Rasso Hine was within; her scouting ghost had, apparently, seen a man being addressed as such. It gave Victor some comfort knowing that the day they’d spent in the dungeon would hopefully be the only one; he didn’t want to be gone from Sojourn for weeks or months. “Already been away nearly seven days on the outside,” he muttered.

“That’s right, so let’s get this over with.” Arcus nudged Arona with his red metal rod. “They’d be fools to outright attack the three of us.” He’d nudged Arona because she was the one who’d urged caution, saying they should observe the town for a while before approaching. Victor hadn’t argued, but, in this instance, he was inclined to agree with Arcus. Why not get things over with?

“If you want caution, Arona, let me approach the entrance. You and Arcus can back me up if shit goes sideways.”

Arona had been crouching behind a stack of broken stone blocks, but she turned and arched a thick, black eyebrow at his words. “You trust us for such a duty?”

Victor chuckled as his earlier words came back to bite him. “Okay, don’t rub it in. Just look me in the eyes and tell me if you’ll have my back.” He stared at her, and those black eyes widened slightly as she straightened up and stepped in front of him, never breaking eye contact.

“I will aid and support you if the denizens of yonder community seek to do you harm.” She spoke gravely, her rough voice rasping the words as she carefully enunciated every syllable. Victor held her gaze for another few seconds, then nodded and turned to Arcus.

“You gonna betray me?”

He grinned, and one of his eyes blazed with inner flames. “Not today, Victor.”

“Fair enough.” Victor slid down the slope behind them into a small gully, then cleared his mind and summoned Guapo, using glory-attuned Energy. The mighty stallion burst from a pool of sparkling, golden Energy and lifted his hooves in the air, whinnying loudly. Victor laughed, then swung onto the massive horse’s back, letting him prance forward and back for a few steps. At first, Arona scowled at his display, but a corner of her mouth twitched upward as he continued to show off. Arcus snorted a short laugh and glanced through the stacks of broken stones.

“They’re looking this way.”

“Good; they’ll see me coming in a second.” Victor mentally urged Guapo forward, and the horse bounded out of the gully, rounding the small hill where Arcus and Arona still watched. Then, he pounded down the slope toward the steep trail leading up to Rumble Town. They’d gotten a

pretty good look at the place from their vantage. The town was situated in a natural cleft in the mountainside, forming a sort of canyon. Though a low, ramshackle wall had been built to block the entrance, it was easy to see the hundred or so buildings built up around the walls of the narrow box canyon.

The trail switch-backed up the mountainside and was probably half a mile long, so it only took Guapo a few minutes to thunder his way up to the clearing before the gate. By the time Victor arrived, the two guards had clambered to their feet and stood with spears held ready. Victor could feel their auras; they were weighty but nothing near as substantial as those of Arcus or Arona. Even setting aside the fact that their equipment was lackluster, Victor figured he could take them both if he had to.

“Halt!” the man bellowed, and Victor pulled Guapo up short. The stallion snorted sparks and danced on the stones, each of his hooves *thudding* like bass drums on the firm, stony soil. Victor regarded the two guards from within his monstrous helm, and he could see their resolve weakening as they glanced toward each other for support.

The woman was covered with dirty orange hair, from her arms to her shoulders and even her face—the rest of her was hidden behind a dirty brown cloak and well-oiled, stained leather armor. She had a round, pink nose under big, green eyes, and her mouth spread in a decidedly feline grin as she said, “Go get Ronkerz,” to her companion. As he turned and slipped through the gate, she looked back at Victor, and he thought he caught the soft rumble of a purr in her voice as she asked, “New around here?”

“Yeah, that’s accurate. The place is certainly a lot different from the dungeon I expected.”

“Oh? Thought you’d find some tunnels and monsters and a bunch of old prisoner bones?” She lowered her spear, and Victor saw her nostrils twitch as she looked him up and down. “You’re no prisoner, are you? Nobody gets sent into hell with a bunch of pretty armor and weapons. Are you one of them? One of the bastards who sent us here?”

Victor grinned as her purr turned into a snarl. “Nah, you ever heard of an iron ranker on the Sojourn City Council? I’m just an asshole who owes them a debt.”

“Oh? That right? What kind of debt?” As she spoke, Victor couldn’t help noticing how a crowd was gathering on the dirt road behind the gate. He frowned at that thought—why call it a gate? It was just two short walls of roughly stacked stone blocks that narrowed the canyon’s entrance; no door was attached. Still, people were gathering on the other side—all sorts of people. He saw human-looking folks, Fae, avian, and beastkin. Some were the size of giants, and some were much smaller. All in all, there had to be a hundred people forming the crowd, and he could see signs of many more coming from the tumbledown structures of the town.

“I need to find someone and ask a few questions.” Victor and the others had decided that announcing they needed to get Rasso Hine *out* of the dungeon wouldn’t be wise, not to a bunch of inmates. If the denizens of the prison knew they could get someone out, things could get ugly fast. Seeing the number of inmates gathered at “Rumble Town” only reaffirmed Victor’s conviction in that plan. Even if he and the others could win in an all-out, mad free-for-all, he didn’t relish the idea of slaughtering a bunch of starved, ill-kept inmates.

“Oh? That right? Someone like me?” The purr had re-entered her voice.

“Maybe.” Victor sent a little Energy into his armor-changing runes and smiled as his helmet and heavy armor converted to clothing. He gently patted Guapo’s neck as he directed his grin to the cat-woman. “Are you the leader around here?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but a basso voice echoed from behind the wall, “That’d be me, stranger.” As the words hit his ears, an aura fell over Victor that almost made him grimace. Guapo snorted and took a few sparking steps back, but Victor growled and pressed his knees into the Stallion’s sides, and he pranced forward, deliberately lifting each hoof in a showy act of defiance in the face of the heavy aura.

“I’m Victor,” he called to the opening, wondering why he couldn’t see the man with the deep, echoing voice.

“I’m Ronkerz,” the booming voice replied, and this time it was behind him. Guapo whirled with a whinny, lifting his front legs and snorting. Victor scowled when he laid eyes on the man who’d startled his mount. Ronkerz was a giant—a hulking, black-furred gorilla of a man. His arms were like tree trunks, and his knuckles, quite literally, dragged on the stone ground. He really *did* resemble a gorilla, with a few notable differences. His eyes were angular and shrewd and glowed with violet Energy. His mouth was more of a muzzle, with a long snout and big canines that made Victor think of a bull terrier more than a gorilla. Finally, he wore armor—thick steel-plated armor with gleaming, needle-sharp spikes on the shoulders.

Victor slid off Guapo, gave his rump a slap, and then sent the mount back to the Spirit Plane. As the glittering golden fog of his departure faded, Victor stepped toward Ronkerz and held out a hand. “Good to meet you.” It wasn’t lost on Victor that Ronkerz didn’t hold a weapon, nor did he assume the man needed one to inflict some damage—his fists looked like wrecking balls.

Ronkerz narrowed his shrewd-looking eyes and then took a lumbering step closer. He was probably about Victor’s height but half-again as broad. When he swung one of his long arms out and grasped Victor’s hand, the power in that grip was apparent. It had been a while since Victor had trouble getting his fingers around a person’s palm, but he grinned as he squeezed what he could and felt the other man’s powerful fingers struggle to compress his flesh—even the little bones in his hands were made of the stuff of titans and wouldn’t bend easily.

“So, you come seeking an inmate?” Ronkerz asked as he released his hold and let his knuckles fall to the ground.

“That’s right. I guess he has some information that’s important to the safety of the city.”

“And we should care?”

Victor shrugged. “My understanding is that the city maintains this dungeon. Not sure what would happen if the city stone were destroyed . . .”

“Bah! Impossible!”

“Is it? Have you ever seen an invasion led by veil walkers? Sojourn’s a ripe target for some of the darker corners of the universe.” Again, Victor spoke from prepared talking points. It had been Arona’s idea to play up the invasion angle. Even prisoners generally wanted to continue existing, and the idea that an invasion might lead to the dungeon’s destruction was really the only card they could think to play to get some cooperation from the inmates.

“Oh?” Ronkerz lifted one of his thick, powerful digits and scratched at the short, black fur atop his head. “What about your friends lurking on yonder rock pile?”

Again, Victor shrugged. “We didn’t know what to expect.”

Ronkerz huffed a breath out his nostrils, and the dust on the ground stirred at the powerful exhalation. Something in Victor stirred, and he found himself wondering what it would be like to fight the man. He remembered what Arona had said about how Ronkerz had beaten four people in their test of steel when he was just a tier-seven iron ranker. Something in Victor’s chest began to swell with excitement as he imagined testing his strength against the formidable man.

Ronkerz must have seen something in his expression because he took a step back, and a deep, rich chuckle welled out of him. “Hah! Who did those fools send in here? You look like a dog eyeing a bitch in heat.” He stepped closer, putting his fang-filled snout just inches from Victor’s face. “If you want to test yourself, *boy*, stick around; I may give you the chance.”

Once upon a time, having a man call him “boy” like that might have set Victor off. His rage surged in his Core, but it was easy enough to hold it there. With a slight twitch of his will, he expanded the fiery, white-gold center of his Core and allowed a wave of inspiration to wash into his pathways. With a fierce grin, he nodded and thumped the thick metal plate on the side of Ronkerz’s boulder-like shoulder. “I’d like that. In the meantime, would you mind if I called my companions closer? We could use a break. Been hiking through this damn dungeon for nearly a day, and that was after a bunch of scoundrels tried to ambush us at the entrance.”

Ronkerz stared at him for several tense heartbeats, but then he, too, grinned, and it was quite a fierce expression on his animalistic face. “Call them over. We can bargain for what you need.” Victor had been facing him throughout their entire conversation, but he was peripherally aware that a considerable crowd had formed on both sides of the gate and even atop the wall. Ronkerz turned and bellowed in a voice that echoed and reverberated through the narrow box canyon. “Get back to work! If I have a fight, you’ll damn well *know it!*”

Victor didn’t have to look to know that the denizens of Rumble Town knew who their boss was. He could hear their hurried steps as they scurried to do as he commanded, scattering into the canyon and the narrow streets and ramshackle buildings it contained. As they dispersed, Victor stepped closer to the trail leading down the slope and raised his arm, waving toward the hill where he knew Arona and Arcus lurked, watching. A few moments later, he and Ronkerz watched Arcus, red as a Christmas candle, and Arona, another shadow among many, walk down to the trail and begin climbing toward the canyon entrance.

“Tell me who it is you seek,” Ronkerz demanded as the two spell casters fell out of view on the steep trail.

“Rasso Hine.”

Ronkerz hummed or growled—Victor wasn’t sure—in his throat but didn’t say more. Victor was content to wait; he’d done fairly well, in his opinion, but was eager to let Arona or Arcus do some talking, bargaining, or whatever it would take to get Ronkerz to hand over Hine. While they waited, Victor glanced back at the canyon and saw only the two gate guards remained, though a few people could be seen lingering near the dirt road that led into the center of the town.

Without thinking, he let his thoughts escape his mouth, "Must be hard as hell to live in a place like this. Does the sun ever come out?"

"No sun in this world," Ronkerz rumbled. "No good soil. No game animals. Some fish and slugs can be found in the deeper caves. Some clever fools over the centuries have managed to bring in some seeds. Not on purpose, mind you; no one goes into prison thinking they'll need to farm. Still, there must be some council members who take pity on fools like us and have sent prisoners in with sacks of fruit and vegetables. With the right Energy, we can get some things to grow in this damned soil." As he spoke, Ronkerz's voice became more and more pleasant, less gruff, and, if Victor closed his eyes, he couldn't make the smooth, well-enunciated words match up to the gorilla-like giant standing beside him.

Before he could respond with a comment or another question, Arcus came into view, sheathed in flames, floating along the trail. Victor snorted derisively; of *course*, the man had to make a showy entrance. Arona, just a short distance behind him, had no such qualms. She grunted softly as she climbed the steep slope using her ivory staff as a walking stick. "Ronkerz," Victor said, gesturing to the two arrivals. "This is Arcus, and behind him is Arona."

Arcus settled to the ground, and his flames faded to a faint flicker that limned his shoulders as he bowed. "I've heard much about you. It may please you to know that your name still strikes fear into the hearts of the Sojourn elite."

Ronkerz snorted a huff of air, and the flames on Arcus's shoulders flickered and faded. Victor raised an eyebrow as he saw Arcus flinch back. Arona stepped forward and sketched a stiff, formal bow. "Lord of Greatscarp, I greet you and offer you the regards of my master, Vesavo Bonewhisper."

"Vesavo still haunts those gaudy towers?" Ronkerz leaned close to Arona; she was tiny in his shadow—a thin, pale figure with a great, hairy, armor-clad monster looming over her. Even so, she didn't flinch as his big nostrils twitched, and he snuffed the air around her. "Yes, I remember that scent. *Interesting.*"

The way he said "interesting" left Victor wondering at the layers that word contained. Was he simply interested in the fact that Arona was Vesavo's apprentice? Or was he concerned? Dismayed? Did it impact his plans? What were his plans? Victor could have wondered about a thousand similar questions but forced his mind to be quiet; he'd only learn by talking to the man and seeing what came. "Ronkerz has agreed to bargain with us," he said, hoping to get the ball rolling again.

"Indeed." Ronkerz turned and lifted one of his long, powerful arms, gesturing toward the town. "I'd invite you to a feast, but I doubt you'd enjoy our fare. Perhaps you have some rations you might share?"

Victor glanced at Arona and Arcus, hoping they'd answer, but they both looked preoccupied. Arcus looked like he'd seen a ghost, and Arona was pensive, her eyes distant. "I've got food to spare, Ronkerz. Let's sit down and talk."

Ronkerz shifted, and his shrewd, violet eyes regarded Victor. "I didn't expect you to be the leader." Victor opened his mouth to protest but stopped short as the bulky simian turned and lumbered toward the gate. What had he meant? Could he tell Victor wasn't as high level as the others? Did he think the "leader" would be one of the casters who hung back? Did he believe

Victor didn't have leadership qualities? He almost laughed as his mind raced. He shook his head and pushed the disquiet down, reminding himself, once again, that clarity would come with time.

He followed Ronkerz past the gate guards and could hear Arona and Arcus walking behind him. They were still quiet, and he wondered if Ronkerz had dropped the full force of his aura on them. He wanted to question them, to speak softly about what they thought of the situation, but, giant as he was, that wasn't an option. He was a little annoyed at himself for revealing his actual size. If he'd reduced himself, he could have saved his full strength as a bargaining chip. Not only that, but he would have been able to walk more closely to Arona and Arcus and gauge their moods. It would surely draw too much attention if he made himself small now.

Victor contented himself by looking over his shoulder, down at the much smaller man and woman. He raised an eyebrow, and Arcus shrugged with something of a smirk on his face. Oddly, the haughty expression gave Victor some comfort; Arcus was still his pretentious self. Arona pressed her darkly-stained lips together and gave him a firm nod. The look said plenty—she was ready to deal with whatever sort of bargain or trouble Ronkerz had in store.

Those thoughts made Victor think of an ambush, so he turned his attention to the town as they walked. The buildings were largely built from stone, with mud and clay used as mortar. The little wood he could find on roofs or shoring up leaning walls looked ancient and dry, and he wondered if it was scavenged from the lairs of the dungeon's monsters. He could picture the planks as part of ancient "ruins" where undead might spawn. None of the buildings were tall, and most were built against the canyon walls. Victor figured the citizens of Rumble Town gained a lot of square footage by carving caves out of the cliffsides.

They were about two hundred yards past the gate when he saw the first children. Dirty faces with wide eyes watched from corners and dark alleys between structures. They wore rags and looked half-starved. Victor felt his rage stirring again. The whole place was *wrong*. He could understand banishing a powerful, dangerous figure like Ronkerz. Victor didn't know his story, but even if he had been in the right, he was a grown man who'd reaped the consequences of his own conflicts. You couldn't say the same for all of these children. There had to be a better solution.

Ronkerz led them to the end of the road, an open square where the dirt had been cleared away from the hard stone bedrock. It was probably fifty yards across, and all around it, the canyon walls were lined with rough buildings and shoddy ladders that led up to open caves. Hundreds of people lingered around. They stood in clusters near buildings, sat in cave mouths with their legs dangling, and lined the rough stone walls separating one rough building from another. They reminded Victor of an audience, and, as he looked around the square, he understood why; they were standing in the center of an arena—a fighting pit. As the understanding struck him, a flash of insight lit up his eyes, and he glanced at Arona and Arcus and grinned. "*Rumble Town.*"