

The Victor's Cup - Chapter 1: The Tithing

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Thousands of registration booths had been set up all across the nation of Osceus. These small booths are nothing more than thin plywood panels nailed together, forming a shelter over a machine with a digital display and a card slot. Almost all these machines would never be used as only at most six participants would use these booths to sign up for this year's Victor's Cup. The rest of the booths would spend the next month or so weathering the elements without experiencing the touch of another person.

A wingless anthro dragon was walking down the crowded streets of the city, towered by skyscrapers on one side and by the congested traffic on the other. A gentle breeze blew down the street, ruffling the golden mane that ran down the top of his head down his back, and a smug smile crept up the corners of his lips. The registration for the Victor's Cup opened today, and he'd be the first tithing on the list.

The map on the Victor's Cup website led the dragon to a clean, white booth with a silver metal machine inside, much like the Automatic Teller Machines found in banks. The dragon walked into the machine and tapped on the dark screen.

The screen whirred to life and its display lit up. "Welcome to the registration for The Victor's Cup. Please enter your full name," the machine spoke out as a keyboard appeared on the screen. The dragon tapped on the keyboard with his clawed fingers, and the display turned green.

"Please insert your Osceus Identification Card into the card slot," came the next command. The dragon slid his hand into his pocket, pulling out a fat brown wallet and taking out a pale red card. He swiftly slid it into the slot, letting the machine scan it. "Registration confirmed. Thank you for volunteering to be a tithing for this year's Victor's Cup. You can find more information in the mail shortly," the machine replied, returning the dragon his card which he promptly kept.

Outdoor speakers around the city suddenly blared to life. "A new tithing has been registered," came a female voice. If one listened closely, one could make out a strange metallic tone in the voice which gave away its digitally-synthesized origins.

Advertisements on electronic billboards were replaced with a picture of the anthro dragon. Heads on the street turned to him as he basked in the attention, grinning at the curious passersby who stood around him in a combination of surprise and awe. He spread his arms as if to embrace the attention of the people around him as he spun around, taking it all in.

The words "Teryx Commodore" faded in on the digital screens across the city, announcing the name of the first of six tithings that will soon be participating in the Victor's Cup, voluntarily or not.

The dusty coffee shop was quiet except for the whir of an overhead metal fan and the soft drone of the newscaster coming from the small television box sitting on the shelf. The shop was empty except for two furs: the shop owner and a copper-coloured dragon. The shop owner was a blue-furred goat who was bent over a round table, wiping its grimy surface with a dirty rag in circular motions. Each circular motion only served to spread the dirt more evenly across the green table top until the small particles could barely be seen with the naked eye.

The dragon sipped his coffee silently as he watched the announcer on the television. Not much was known about him other than the name "Rhogar" which he went by. A leather backpack and a silver scimitar were leaning against the table leg beside him, scratched and worn out from years of use.

"We'll now hand the time over to Tano'rath to talk more about the arena of the Victor's Cup," came the tiger newscaster, and his face was replaced by an aerial shot of a city in the middle of a dusty desert.

A black dragon jumped into view. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure you are wondering about this grand show that we have planned for all of you," he hollered over the sound of the chopper's spinning blades.

"So, without further ado, I shall plunge into the mouthwatering details. We are now flying over what used to be the city of Krolas," Tano'rath shouted as he pointed down to the abandoned city. "And now, please quieten down, else none of you will hear what I have to say!"

"The arena this year consists of the husk of the former city of Krolas. These ruins used to play host to a population of a little over a million inhabitants. However, as you all probably already know, a nuclear meltdown triggered the evacuation of the entire population." The camera zoomed in on the concrete buildings below, revealing their peeling paint and creeping vines.

"This, of course, makes it a convenient location for our event!" the dragon announced with a flair as he adjusted his coat with a snort. "Of course, it is safe! Hundreds of years have passed, and the radioactivity has dissipated. However, no one wants to move back to a crumbling, obsolete metropolis, yes?"

He grinned to himself, as if proud of his quip of the ruins. "As such, this relic of our sad past shall be our arena! There shall be traps! Things you all know too well! Pressure plates! Ceiling nozzles! Turrets! Everything you loved from last year is back!"

"To make things even more exciting, our volunteers...oh, did I say volunteers? I mean tithes! Yes!" he corrected himself. "Our tithes shall be deployed to random locations across the ruins, armed with no more than their wits! To survive, they will fight! They will forage! They will search for weapons! Remember: There can only be one Victor!" The dragon was getting visibly excited at the prospect of battle.

"Let the games begin, ladies and gentlemen! Refreshments can be purchased at the convenience store two blocks down, that my brother definitely does not own. Enjoy! Now, we will take a look at our tithes so far!"

The television screen switched to a list containing Teryx's name and five empty slots. Five slots that had to be filled in a month. A week had already passed since the registration's opening and the list had not changed since the first day. If nobody else signed up for it, these five slots will be filled by randomly picking from Osceus' population of able-bodied people.

With a strong tug, Rhogar picked up the leather bag and threw it over his shoulder, slinging it across his back. He slung his sword around his waist, left some notes and coins on the table and walked out of the shop. Behind him, the goat scrambled over to the table, counting the tip fixedly.

Rhogar made his way out of the dusty shop and surveyed the equally dusty street. Two-storey shophouses stretched down the road, half of which were vacant slots in the building. Between two empty shops was a white booth that stood out like a sore thumb in its yellow environment. With a determined look, Rhogar made his way to the booth and tapped on the screen. It greeted him with a lit screen and a voice that said "Welcome to the registration for The Victor's Cup. Please enter your full name."

It was his time to shine.

A Dutch Angel Dragon was walking down a tarmac road that was half-covered by fine-grained sand. On her torso was a titanium chestplate lined with carvings of ancient runes and around her neck was a brown cloak that flew behind her in the wind.

The dust from the ground swirled around her at each suggestion of a breeze, covering her fur with a layer of yellow sand that contrasted the blue pelt that gave her her nickname. She pulled the cloak closer to her face, shielding it from the particles that threatened her eyes and nose.

Parked cars lined the side of the road, their glass windows scratched by years of shifting sand. She walked past them and entered the doorway of an abandoned building. A fountain stood empty in the lobby, its water having dried up a long time ago in the arid air, leaving behind a layer of sand that the wind blew into the building.

The Dutch Angel Dragon shook the sand out of her cloak and fur and looked around the place. She took a water canteen out her sling bag and allowed herself a few careful sips of water before capping it and sliding it back into the bag.

Four hundred kilometres of abandoned roads. Three thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two apartment buildings, all with a cookie-cutter architecture. Seven skyscrapers, all around the same height except for the central one that towered over the rest of them: the one she was now at.

She made a mental note of the lobby's layout before heading to the stairs.

Forty minutes later found her on the roof of the building looking down on the desolate waste that used to be Krolas. In the past two weeks, she had seen every building in the entire city and memorized their layouts. Was that enough to help her win the Cup? Perhaps, perhaps not.

But she would soon find out.

Niall the hyena fiddled with the silver switchblade with his fingers, swinging its blade dangerously close to his digits and face. He was sitting in a swivelling chair in the middle of a dark bedroom, staring at the bright glare of a computer screen. His eyes were staring at the screen, but his mind was on other things.

It was midnight and the sun had set hours ago, although the hyena had not bothered himself with turning on the lights. The ticking of the clock punctuated the silence, giving a sensation of the passage of time in the otherwise still room.

The Victor's Cup.

Three tithes.

Three more to go.

There was a sound of sliding metal as the blade was flipped back into the handle. With another "shick", the blade flicked open with the press of the release button.

It had been a week since the third volunteer signed up to be tithes for the Victor's Cup. The brown-furred hyena leaned back against the chair. There was sharp thud as the switchblade was stabbed into the wooden table top. He grabbed the blade and twisted, sending splinters flying across the table.

Fame and fortune.

If he were to win.

Well, he didn't care about the fame. But the fame would bring about publicity. Interviews. Stardom and celebrity status. And with it would come more money on top of the Cup's prize money.

But more important than money would be the fun of it all. The thrill of the hunt. The adrenaline rush. The helpless tithes. Sights and sounds that would tingle his senses. He couldn't help but grin at the prospect of it all.

On his door, six sheets of lined paper were arranged and taped in a circle. On three of them were the photos of Teryx, Rhogar, and Blue respectively, and below their photos were background analyses of them.

Niall flicked his wrist, flinging the knife towards the door, lodging it deeply into the picture of a trophy cup taped in the middle of the circle of tithes. He pushed himself away from the table and got up from the chair.

Tonight. Tonight, the fourth slot will be filled.

The crowded bar was noisy with the sound of electronic dance music and cheering furs as they watched the waterbuck on stage lead the crowd in another rendition of the song's chorus.

Coloured lights were flashing everywhere, making it even harder for the already-tipsy furs crowded around the pool table to focus on the shape of the billiard balls under the yellow cone of light from the overhead bulbs.

An orange-furred husky sat by the glass-topped bar, finishing up the last of his California Dream martini before slamming it unsteadily on the countertop. "Waiter..." he slurred, his hand raised in the air, waving it bombastically at the nearby bartender.

"What can I get you?" the bartender approached stiffly, forcing a smile on his face. Not that it mattered, as the husky didn't seem to notice the bartender's annoyance.

"I want uh...whatever this was. It was good," the husky smack his lips together in anticipation of the sweet and smooth alcohol.

"That will be eight dollars," the bartender replied flatly.

The husky reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. With the exception of his identification cards, credit cards, and some loose change, it was empty. "Gah," he complained to no one in particular before turning over to the bartender. "You wait here. I'm going to withdraw some money."

The bartender shrugged as the husky stumbled out of the bar. The nearest automatically teller machine was a few blocks down, probably a little further than he was comfortable walking. However, the trouble of having to call a cab outweighed the trouble of walking that short distance and so he reluctantly made his way down the street.

His arduous journey halfway down the block got him reconsidering his choices. Was it better to just go home and sleep it all off? Just then, something caught his eye. A familiar display and a card slot were just across the street, housed in a clean, white booth that was illuminated an equally white light bulb, standing out in the dark street.

He licked his dry lips. This changes everything. Out of habit, he sloppily looked on both sides of the street before sauntering to the booth. He tapped the screen and waited for the machine's instructions.

"Welcome to the registration for The Victor's Cup. Please enter your full name," came the robotic voice.

He groaned a little as he typed "Dysty" into the display. Realizing his mistake, he tapped on the "Clear" button and typed his name out again. It took four attempts before he finally got the name "Dusty" to show on the screen, and he tapped the "Enter" button repeatedly.

"Please insert your Osceus Identification Card into the card slot," the machine instructed. Dusty was half-listening to the words as he inserted his bank card into the slot. The machine returned the card to him. "Invalid Identification Card detected. Please insert your Osceus Identification Card into the card slot," it protested.

The husky grumbled. Why did money withdrawals need his identification card now? Nonetheless, his parched throat was thirsty for more, and he took out his identification card and slotted it into the machine.

"Registration confirmed. Thank you for volunteering to be a tithe for this year's Victor's Cup," the machine informed him after a whirl.

Wait. Tithe? A sense of realization washed across his face as he sobered up slightly.

Victor's Cup? THE Victor's Cup?

As if in a scathing taunt, the outdoor speakers of the city came to life. "A new tithe has been registered:" came the female voice again. "Dusty the Husky."

"Fuck!"

The last day of the Cup's registration had come. Five volunteers. Five tithes. But by the end of today, there would be six. By hook or by crook. There was no two ways about it.

Mounted on a wall near the ceiling, the diner's television was once again covering updates of the Cup. Kip tuned his mind out. A month of listening to the repeated explanations of the Cup and its details were taking a toll on him. After today, the call for tithes would end and things would go back to normal.

The evening sun was shining through the glass windows of the diner, adding an orange glow to his striped blue leathery skin. He was a sharkip: having a body of that of a tiger shark, although the orange gills on the side of his cheeks and the blue fin on the top of his head pointed to his mudkip genes.

He sliced the chicken cutlet on his plate, brought a piece to his mouth and chewed on it. Its crispy breading surrounded the tender meat inside and he took the time to enjoy its flavour in his mouth.

"And we close the registration for this year's Victor Cup with only five tithes," announced the tiger. "So who will be the sixth? It all depends on the luck of the draw!"

Kip tried his best to focus on his dinner, but it was hard to do so when the Victor's Cup refused to sit in the back of his mind, instead coming to him in vivid imagery with each mention of the Cup. The chance of him being picked each year was so minuscule, it barely mattered. Yet, each year he let himself get nervous over something that would probably never happen.

His mind brought up the previous year's Cup where a ferret was tithed against his will. They dragged him from his home, screaming and scratching, trying to grab on to anything and everything that could delay his capture just a few seconds longer. They threw the hysterical tithe into the arena where he howled for the next few hours as he clawed at his metal collar, trying to pull it off. He continued like that until the nearest tithe followed the sound of his shrieks to him and put him out of his misery.

Kip shook his head. Thinking such thoughts was not helpful for a time such as this. On the television screen, the tiger walked over to a sleek computer that was connected to a database containing all of Osceus' population. "We will now randomly pick one lucky citizen to fill in the last slot. Let's see..." he tapped a button on the computer's keyboard and a printed slip of paper slid out of a slot in the machine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I will now read out the identification number of the last tithe. Seven," he slowly read out.

Sighs of relief echoed throughout the diner as Kip sat up straighter in his chair.

"One."

More sighs of relief rose from people around the diner.

"Two."

People had already begun going about with their daily lives. Servers turned away from the television and resumed waiting on tables, and diners carried on eating. Kip's chewing, however, slowed down.

"Eight."

The volume of the chatter had already risen to its original level, and Kip strained his inner ears to hear the calling of the numbers.

"Eight."

There was a clatter as he dropped his silverware on the table. He tried to relax as he chewed on his food. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

"Seven."

There was a cry of relief as a lioness hugged her wolf husband, her fearful expression turning into one of embarrassed joy. Heads turned to look at the lady before turning back to their food.

"One."

Kip gripped the edges of the table, lightly tugging against the tablecloth. Deep breaths. Deep breaths. Just one more number. It'll be something other than a "four", and he'll laugh it off, finish his dinner and go home.

"Four."

The chicken felt like cardboard in his mouth. That can't be right. He swallowed his food and stood up shakily. There could've been a mistake. There must've been a mistake.

"No," he heard a voice say. Some diners turned to look in his direction.

"Kip the Sharkip. Congratulations, you're the lucky winner!" the tiger carried on, oblivious to whatever was happening in the diner.

"No," came the same voice, louder this time. People were staring at him oddly.

His face appeared on the television screen, smiling down at everyone..

"No no no no," the sounds of protests were coming from him. He needed some time. His wallet. Where was his wallet?! He fumbled around and found it on the table behind his cup of water. Money. Coins. How much was his meal? The waitress had already taken away the menu. Gah!

A firm hand clamped down on his shoulder and Kip turned around to face its owner. "What do you want?" he snapped. The diner's manager was standing there facing him. "Dinner's on the house. Finish up, and you can go home," he nodded understandingly.

There was a moment of strained silence. "T-thanks..." the sharkip stammered. He looked at his half-finished dinner, none of it appearing as appetizing as it once did a mere five minutes ago. "Thanks," he muttered again. He fought back his tears as he tried to force an expression of gratitude on his face. Then he ran out of the diner without looking back.

"Welcome, to the Victor's Cup."

~ To be continued ~