

The Victor's Cup - Chapter 2: Preparations

Commissioned by Cryptic796, Mudkipz9, SlyArtisticBeast, Teryxc, Tywolfeee, and Witch_of_the_wilds

Written by TwistedSnakes

Candles lit up the dark hallways of the Tithing' Villa, casting sombre shadows of potted plants and stone statues on the carpeted floor.

When the six tithes first arrived at the villa, they were greeted with a garden in its courtyard. A long path led through the heart of the garden, looped around a majestic fountain before going up to a white-marble mansion that almost glaring in in the hot afternoon sun. Around the fountain stood many animal-shaped topiaries, posed as if they were dancing around the garden in glee.

The mansion's wooden double doors opened up to a hall furnished with regal furniture, embroidered tapestries, and suits of armour, all of them giving the tithes a taste of the life of royalty they could possibly lead should they win this year's tournament. Six tithes. One Victor. But for now, they would be staying here until the tournament commenced in seven days' time.

The afternoon soon gave way to evening and evening to night. Now in the dark hallways, the blaring light of the sun was substituted with the soft flickers of candle flames. Down the hallway stumbled a half-sleepy Dutch Angel Dragon. Her long nightgown flowed out from behind her, dragging its silky trail on the carpet as she made her way along the corridor. The mansion had three lobbies, one in front of the main entrance which they first saw, and one each in the left and right wing of the mansion. The angel dragon's destination was the lobby in the right wing. The reason for this midnight rendezvous was beyond her.

The carpet ended as she arrived in the lobby. She shuddered as she felt the cold marble against her bare feet, looking around for the sign of the person she was supposed to meet, but she couldn't spot anyone.

"Hello Blue," said a voice, causing the angel dragon to jump. The voice came from a person who was sitting on a large ornate chair, hiding in the shadows of its backrest. "Take a seat," the voice commanded.

Blue's face twitched in suspicion, but a brief glance told her it was safe. She made her way to a similar chair that was placed at a right angle beside her meeting partner's chair and sat in it.

"So, what am I here for?" she asked.

"I just want to talk," the shadowy figure smiled.

"Alright. I'm here. Let's talk," she replied.

"What brings you here?" the voice asked.

"How about you? What brings you here?" Blue responded.

"Well since I asked the question first, it's customary for you to answer. But I can't ignore the request of an angel, can I?" A friendly smile emerged from under the shadows. "I'm here to win. And I daresay you're here to do the same."

"I..." she stammered. "I just wanted to test my skills," she finished, unsure if it was the answer the figure was looking for.

"And do you think you can win?" the voice asked back in concern.

"Haha oh dear," the angel dragon scratched the back of her head. "I don't think so, especially with someone as strong as you. Rhogar looks really strong too, so I don't think I can beat him either. I still want to try though."

"Huh. You should be more confident in your skills. You're not just a pretty face, you know that?" the figure emerged from the shadows as he got out of the chair. His golden mane appeared a dull yellow as it reflected the candles' flame. His draconic form seemed to fill the lobby as he made his way over to Blue's chair and knelt on one knee in front of her, looking up into her eyes.

"Haha you're the celebrity here," she teased back playfully.

The dragon put a clawed hand on her shoulder and Blue smiled back. "You're strong, you're smart, you're cunning," he continued. "What more could we ask of a champion-to-be?"

Blue grinned. "You think so?" she replied, tilting her head to one side.

"Yeah. But you got to be smart about it," the dragon continued.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked, her brows furrowing in concern.

The dragon appeared to ponder for a moment. "Well...I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"If we teamed up, we stand a better chance of taking out the rest of the tithes."

"And when we're the last two tithes?"

"Well, then a fair one-on-one battle would resolve that right? One in two chance of you winning, rather than one in six."

Blue put a finger to her chin and thought for a bit. "Sure, that makes sense," she nodded.

The dragon smiled, and gracefully slid the curved edge of his claw down Blue's cheek to her chin, giving her a little scratch on her blue fur, and she blushed back. "You're cute, you know that right?" he mused out loud, and the angel dragon blushed harder.

"So. Me. You. Victor's Cup," the dragon gave her a wink, broke away, and stood up.

Blue nodded back.

With a swish of his tail, the dragon left the lobby and disappeared down the corridor. "See you there," he wished as the shadows swallowed him up again.

Blue annoyedly brushed her fur where the dragon touched her before leaning back and hiding in her chair's shadows, glaring suspiciously at the dragon as he left.

Did he see through her act? Probably not. Would she team up with him? Probably not either. But so long as she maintained her facade of ineptitude, she shouldn't be a high-priority target for the other tithes. This should give her enough time to carry out her plans.

The next morning found Dusty and Kip walking side by side among the pebble paths that weaved through the garden in wavy lines.

"Ugh...it's all over..." the sharkip bemoaned.

"Lighten up. It's not the end of the world," Dusty shrugged back.

"That's easy for you to say," Kip snapped back. "You signed up for this."

The orange husky glared at the sharkip for a moment before shaking his head as he sighed. "Well, not really."

Kip turned to Dusty with an eyebrow raised. "What do you mean, 'not really'?"

"Well, I don't want to talk about it. All I can say is I was registered by accident. I don't want to be here as much as you do, you know?" he grunted.

Kip nodded and the two continued walking stiffly down the path. The air between them was silent except for the crunching of pebbles below their feet. They rounded a corner and arrived at the stone fountain in the middle of the garden. The sound of the pouring water splashed around them, drowning out their thoughts.

"Put it this way: after the tournament, you can go back to enjoying life like nothing ever happened," Dusty shrugged. "And if you're that desperate to leave, just pull the gem out from your collar and eliminate yourself."

Kip shot him another deathly glare. "You don't know do you?" he snapped sharply, venom dripping in his voice.

"Know what?" the husky shot a dirty look in return.

"So there are rumours going around that the losers of the Cup never return from the tournament," Kip said flatly.

"Wait, what?"

"You heard me."

"Wait, wait, wait. Hang on there," the husky stammered. "They can't just do that, that's illegal!"

"Yet it's been happening every year. Without fail," the sharkip shrugged. "Try and explain that."

"Sounds like the best thing you can do is to prepare all you can then," came a third voice, and Dusty and Kip turned to Blue as she emerged from behind a topiary elephant as she went about on her morning stroll.

"Easier said than done," Kip snorted. "I don't do combat."

"Neither do I," Blue smiled back. "Here, we can train together," she offered one paw to each of them. "The training grounds are behind the mansion. By the end of the week, hopefully, we'll be prepared."

The two of them nodded in response. They didn't have much of a choice in this but the least they could do is to make the most of it. With Blue leading the front, the three made their way back to the mansion.

The Tithing Villa's training grounds were rebuilt each year to prepare tithes for the current arena. For this round, there were roofless rooms and crumbling walls built on a bare concrete ground. A thin layer of sand was scattered over everything, making it slippery for anyone going at high speeds.

There was a sound of buzzing energy as a neon blue scimitar came searing through the air, leaving behind a trail of warm vapours in its wake. Rhogar's scimitar narrowly missed Teryx as the blue dragon rolled out of the way. Teryx jumped to his feet and swung his own weapon: a two-handed sword that shimmered with the same ethereal material that made up Rhogar's scimitar.

Rhogar dodged the swing, jumping back to a broken pillar behind him. Teryx was still charging at him with his sword raised, ready to strike. Rhogar jumped back to avoid the huge swing as Teryx turned the pillar into a pile of rubble.

As the blue dragon brought the sword down on Rhogar, Rhogar parried the blade with his scimitar, sending the huge sword swinging to the side. The blue dragon appeared to stumble a little, but he recovered and charged at the copper-scaled dragon. There was a clash of energy blades as Rhogar blocked the blow, and the both of them locked their weapons together, each one pushing back at the other's thrusts.

The two blades finally came apart as the wall behind them exploded, sending chunks of concrete and debris flying at them. Niall stepped through the hole in the wall towards the two dragons, armed with glowing whips in each hand. He cracked each one in turn menacingly as he stepped towards the two of them.

He swung his whip at Teryx, who rolled out of the way as the ground he was on was left with a crater in the wake of the whip's impact. In the meantime, Rhogar charged at Niall with his scimitar lowered, ready for an upward swing at the hyena's left arm. Niall turned to him and sent another whip at the orange dragon, sending him dodging behind a crumbled wall.

With Niall distracted, Teryx crept up behind him and brought his sword down the hyena's back. The energy blade appeared to plunge into the hyena's brown pelt, and Niall shouted in pain as he felt the weapon's electricity charging through his body. However, no wound was left behind as Teryx pulled the sword out of his back.

Grunting in pain, Niall swung around bringing the whip along with him. The whip coiled around Teryx's body and sent intense shocks through his body. The blue dragon dropped his weapon as he knelt to the ground shouting in pain. Ignoring his cries of pain, the hyena looked around for Rhogar. No sign of the copper-scaled dragon. He turned back to Teryx and hit him with another crack of the whip and he crumbled in pain again.

There was a roar as Rhogar sailed out of the second floor of a bare concrete building's window and pinned Niall down with his body. His scimitar was pressed against the hyena's throat.

"Gonna finish me?" he taunted.

Rhogar grunted at Niall, glaring at him for a moment. Finally, he released his weapon and stood up. "The battle is over," he stated flatly.

"Well, why not?" Niall got up, sweeping sand off his body. "It's not like the weapons actually wound us or anything."

Rhogar snorted. It was true: apart from an intense electric shock, the weapons didn't cause harm to the victim. They were designed like this so that they could be used in the arena without causing participant death. Yet, this was not what he was here for. Each tithing slot in the Victor's Cup was a slot that an unwilling participant could end up in. The least he could do is reduce the amount of pain that the Cup inflicted on its tithes each year.

Teryx was getting himself untangled from the whips that Niall had thrown on the ground. He nodded at Rhogar, flashing him a smile in response to his look of concern. Satisfied that the blue dragon was fine, the copper dragon looked back to the mansion. In front of its back door stood Blue with Dusty and Kip behind her. Blue clapped enthusiastically at their performance. "Nice fighting," she encouraged with a grin.

She approached the three combatants and greeted them, "Good morning! Looks like you gentlemen eager to get to the battlefield."

"Yeah!" Teryx responded warmly. "It's been a while since I've been in combat. Gotta warm up a little before the actual thing."

Blue nodded back. Behind the blue dragon, Rhogar seemed reluctant to engage in the conversation, and Niall was looking the angel dragon up and down in contemplation, sizing up her form.

Kip and Dusty kept silent. Dusty was just looking at them with a sense of dread and Kip was suddenly focused on his new-found interest in making circles in the sand with his toe. An awkward moment of silence passed before Teryx broke it. "Tell you guys what, we can split up into pairs and train together," he suggested.

Blue nodded her head, but the other four tithes stood by in silence.

Dusty stood by as Blue picked up a black metal collar from a box of training equipment. The other tithes had broken up into twos and moved to another part of the training grounds, out of sight of the pair. Blue laid out the collar in front of Dusty for him to examine.

Its surface was smooth and sleek except for a black gem that was laid in an indentation in the metal. "Let's see it in action," Blue grinned in anticipation. She took the collar and clasped it around a wooden target dummy's neck. The collar sealed itself and its edges lined up perfectly, forming an almost-seamless ring around its neck.

"Once the collar is on, any attempt to remove it will result in immediate elimination," Blue explained. "Any attempt to leave the arena will result in immediate elimination. And, removal of the gem will result in immediate elimination."

Dusty nodded as he listened to her explanation. "And we eliminate the other tithes by taking out the gem from their collars," he finished.

Blue nodded in agreement, before tilting her head at the collar, beckoning Dusty towards the collar. The husky stepped looked at the angel dragon before taking a nervous step towards the dummy. He reached his paw out to the black gem on the front of the collar, squeezing his digits around the smooth surface of the gem. With a gentle tug, the gem came off from the collar.

Without warning, white bandages shot out from the collar into the air. Dusty stumbled backwards in fear, bumping against Blue who was watching the spectacle unflinchingly. The bandages reached the top of their arc-like trajectory, swooping down around the dummy and wrapping around it with so much rigour, the dummy fell to the ground with a thud, bundled securely from head to toe in the white linen.

Dusty stared in shock at the fallen dummy. Would the tournament next week find him bundled up like that, the public's last look at him before he disappeared off the face of the Osceus? No. He steeled himself and took a look at the black gem in his hand.

He would have to win.

Teryx held a whip in his hand and surveyed the training grounds in front of him. In a sandy field littered with rocks and broken pillars, wooden target dummies were planted haphazardly around, awaiting their violent demise.

Aiming at the dummy nearest to him, the blue dragon snapped the whip, splitting the target into two clean pieces as the upper half dropped to the ground. The whip felt powerful in his paws. Light enough to remain wieldy but heavy enough to pack a punch.

This was going to be fun. He started running, charging through the training ground as he swung his whip to the left and right of him. A crack and a dummy on the left exploded in a shower of splinters. Another one, and a dummy on his right burst into flames. Wooden dummies were

getting smashed to smithereens or set on fire as the energy whip's surface came into contact with the wood.

Teryx screeched to a halt as he reached the edge of the training grounds. Turning around, he surveyed the wake of destruction that he left behind. He cracked the whip again, this time at nothing in particular. This weapon was powerful for handling multiple opponents, but in a one-to-one battle, he'd prefer his heavy sword. Hit once, hit good.

Niall strolled through the training ground in the wake of Teryx's genocide of dummies, smirking at their corpses as he approached the blue dragon. As he got close, he clapped his hands slowly with a smug look in his eyes. "You know what you're doing, don't ya?" he asked the blue dragon.

Snapping out of his appraisal of the whip, he smiled warmly and turned to the hyena. "Yeah, got some good practice in the past," he nodded, coiling the whip up and handing it back to Niall.

"So have I," the hyena shrugged. "What's your plan?"

Teryx shifted about on his feet, trying to mirror Niall's nonchalant attitude. "Don't know, guess I'll just go in there and wing it," he grinned sheepishly.

"What?" the hyena asked incredulously. "You need a plan if you want to win," he explained.

"Ehh, no battle plan survives contact with the enemy, right? Haha," the blue dragon laughed with a touch of nervousness. He shot a look at Niall, checking if the hyena was seeing through his act. Niall seemed to have noticed nothing as he slowly moved closer to Teryx.

"Still, you need a plan. Something to give you the extra edge," Niall stated smugly.

"What do you have in mind?" Teryx raised an eyebrow.

"I'm saying, we should team up," the hyena explained.

"Hmm, so why you? Why not the other tithes?" the dragon probed.

"I'm smart. I'm cunning. And I can wield a weapon well," he boasted. As if to demonstrate, he took a switchblade out of his pocket. With a swift movement, he sent the blade flying into the heart of an intact wooden dummy.

"Hmm," the dragon pondered for a moment. Why would the hyena approach him out of all the tithes? Well, to be fair, in the shoes of the other tithes, he'd put his money on either Rhogar or himself. If that's the case, why team up with him? Did the hyena have a plan to finish him off? Speculations, speculations. For now, the best he could do is to cooperate while remaining cautious. "Alright, that makes sense. Meet up with me on the battleground, we'll team up," he smiled cheerily.

"Good," Niall nodded back nonchalantly. "I think I'm done for today." Leaving Teryx behind, he threw the whip to the ground and walked over to the wooden dummy to retrieve his knife. He made his way back to the mansion, tossing and catching his knife as he sauntered along the sandy path.

If anything, the conversation only served to confirm his suspicions of Teryx. The dragon was a diplomat with a plan: to make friends with all the tithes and letting them finish each other off before dealing the final blow. Not a bad strategy as far as Niall was concerned.

Now to craft a plan of his own.

Rhogar heaved as he pushed the lid off a large metal crate. In it were various hiking equipment, survival tools and unlabelled black foil packs. "There we go," he pointed the supplies in the crate. "In the arena, you'll find small packages that will contain supplies like these. You'll need to gather supplies if you want to survive."

Kip squatted down to take a closer look at the equipment. He recognized most of them. Rhogar took them out of the crate and threw them onto the floor one by one. Ropes. Grappling hooks. Electric flashlights. Backpacks. Goggles. Jackets. Gloves. Water canteens.

"Find a backpack. Then pack it with only the essentials you need. Anything else will weigh you down," Rhogar instructed, and Kip nodded in reply. The sharkip picked up a black foil pack. "What are these?" he asked.

"Food," the copper dragon stated flatly. He grabbed another one from the crate and ripped the top off, revealing a starchy "cake" that appeared to be wet cooked rice mashed together along with bits of meat and vegetables. He pointed the open end towards Kip, who gave it a cautious sniff before making a disgusted face.

"Ugh, what's that," he groaned, sticking out his tongue.

"What you'll need to eat in order to survive," the dragon glared annoyedly at the sharkip. He squeezed the foil from the bottom, pushing out a chunk of the mush as if he were squeezing a tube of toothpaste. With a chomp, he bit off the chunk and chewed on it as Kip stared at him with a mortified expression.

Trying to take his mind off his sustenance in the arena, Kip rummaged in the crate for gear he couldn't identify. He found a black metal ball made out of two hemispheres joined together. On one half was an engraving of a lightning bolt. "What's this?" he asked Rhogar, cocking his head in curiosity.

"Think a grenade, but with the same energy pulse that makes up these weapons. It'll hurt, but it's not gonna injure you," the dragon shrugged. "Want to give it a go?"

Kip nodded, before suddenly realizing what he was signing up for. "Wait. What do you mean 'give it a go'?"

"I mean, do you want to try experiencing its blast?" Rhogar rolled his eyes.

"What. Is that safe?"

"Did you just hear what I said? Yes, it's safe."

"Well..." Kip looked at the innocuous-looking sphere in his hand. If he was going to be facing this weapon in the arena, he might as well be experiencing its effects now. "Alright," he looked up at Rhogar apprehensively.

"Now, just twist the two halves and let go. The blast happens five seconds after you release it," Rhogar explained, stepping away from the sharkip. "Don't mind me, I'd like to stay well-clear of whatever it is you're going to experience."

Kip looked anxiously at the dragon as he backed away. That was definitely not comforting. But he was committed to this. Closing his eyes, he twisted the two halves apart. The hemispheres slid against each other until it clicked.

Now to let go. However, try as he could, Kip couldn't release his grip on the ball. His primal instincts were screaming at him to hold on to the ball and never let go, and fear was paralyzing his entire body.

With a shout, he forced himself to let go. A spring-loaded mechanism pushed the two halves apart, creating a gap between them, revealing a cylinder inside.

Beep. It's started.

Beep.

Beep. Oh no.

Beep. Too late to change his mind.

Beep.

There was a loud sound of static filling the air around Kip as electricity surged through his body. He convulsed and collapsed on the ground, his ears filled with the sound of his screams. Pain. Nothing but pain. Every fibre of his being felt like it was being ripped apart at its seams.

After what seemed like forever, the shocks slowly subsided, leaving a ringing sound in the sharkip's ears. He groaned in pain. "What was that..." he groaned in pain.

"A military-grade weapon meant to incapacitate enemy soldiers in war," Rhogar shrugged, nonchalant about Kip's apparent suffering. He picked up another black sphere, this one marked with an icon of a cloud.

"Tear gas," he stated. "Might want to throw this one away from you," he warned as he passed the sphere to the sharkip.

Kip nodded and took the weapon from Rhogar. He twisted the ball as before and threw it behind the ruins of a concrete wall. There was a loud hiss and black smoke filled the air. "Acts as a good smokescreen," Rhogar nodded.

The sharkip watched the smoke spread around the crumbled walls before picking up another ball. "Then how about this?" he pointed at the engraving of a puddle on it.

"Latex trap. Again, throw it somewhere else."

Twisting the ball again, Kip threw it at the wall. It bounced off the concrete surface back towards the pair.

"Fuck!" Rhogar cursed as the overhead ball squirted out liquid rubber over the both of them. The two of them collapsed under the weight of the rubber as it adhered them to the ground. Rhogar pulled against the rubber that coated his scales, trying to free himself from the trap. "Damn it Kip!" he swore at the sharkip.

Kip too was trying to escape the sticky rubber but to no avail. The rubber was slowly solidifying around him, making it harder to break free. "Eh heh heh," he laughed at the dragon sheepishly. "Think they'll come looking for us soon?"

The week passed by all too fast as the tithes improved their combat proficiency with the various weapons, practised survival skills and got to know each other better. The evening of the seventh day found them all waiting in the main lobby of the mansion. Dusty, Kip, Blue and Niall were sitting on the plush chairs in the lobby, and Teryx and Rhogar stood around the coffee table in the middle.

"So why are we here again?" Dusty asked.

"We're meeting one of the organizers of the Cup I think," Kip replied.

"Whatever for?" Niall snorted. "It's not like it's gonna matter in the Cup."

Rhogar shrugged. "Formalities," he suggested.

Their chatter quieted down as the front doors to the mansion opened. Four bodyguards dressed in black tuxedos entered and stationed themselves two on each side of the door. Following behind them was a white wolf with grey markings dressed in a white suit. Beside him was a brown-furred doe dressed in a matching white blouse, bell-bottoms and heels.

"Greetings, tithes. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," he smiled warmly at them. Rhogar and Niall snorted quietly and Kip muttered under his breath.

Ignoring their cold responses, the wolf continued. "I'm Decro, and this lady is Jayna. I'll be the head gamemaster of this arena and she will be my assistant." Decro waved his hand at her and Jayna nodded back in acknowledgement.

"As you should all know by now, this year's arena will be in Krolas. I will be leading the team of twenty gamemasters in the running of the games, and we will be watching your every move in the arena. Rest assured we will be making sure that your experience in the arena will be as lively and engaging as possible."

His announcements only elicited more glares from the tithes. The wolf ignored all their reactions. "Do you guys have any questions for me?"

"Why are you doing this?" Rhogar asked. Kip nodded too. After a week of being here, this was something he wanted to know.

"I assume you're referring to the Victor's Cup in general?" Decro asked. Seeing the dragon's nods, he continued. "The Victor's Cup is a tradition that has been going on over the past centuries. Satisfy society's...bloodthirst, for lack of a better word, with minimal collateral damage. You could say we are doing society a huge service through this games."

Rhogar grunted, not satisfied with the answer, but there was nothing else he could do about it. Dusty was the next to ask a question. "What about the tithes who disappear after losing?" he demanded.

"All our tithes return home safely after the tournament," Decro cut him off curtly. "Next."

Kip gave a suspicious look at Dusty, shaking his head and mouthing "Don't trust his lies" through subtle lip movements. The husky noticed and returned a slight nod.

"I assume the tithing interviews will be tomorrow?" Teryx asked.

"That is correct," Decro nodded. "And the Victor's Cup tournament will take place the day after. Last question."

"Who are you rooting for?" Niall piped up almost immediately, not giving the rest a chance to ask their questions.

"I root for the best tithe." Decro smiled at his unrevealing answer. "So that concludes our meeting for today. The next time you meet me will be as a Victor. May the heat of battle forge the blade of your soul. Rise up through the ashes and make yourself whole."

The wolf turned around and left the mansion, followed by Jayna and the four bodyguards. The doors closed in on them, leaving the six tithes alone in the dim and gloomy villa.

~ To be continued ~