

The Victor's Cup - Chapter 3: Showmanship

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

Written by TwistedSnakes

There was an air of tension and anticipation in the audience as they chattered amongst themselves. The three thousand furs were all seated in a huge auditorium filled with rows of plush velvet seats, but millions more were watching the live airing of the feed from the comfort of their homes, offices, and anywhere else with a television.

For the violence-hungry citizens of Osceus, each year's Victor's Cup could not come early enough. In a highly-efficient city where furs moved like cogs in the machine in the clockwork of the city, suppressed personal tendencies had very few outlets to express themselves. Just like the rest of the nation, the Victor's Cup is equally efficient at providing such an outlet. Maximum pleasure. Minimum collateral damage. In the grand scheme of Osceus, the Victor's Cup is but another moving part in the agile drudge of production.

The lights in the auditorium dimmed down, bringing with it the noise of the audience that trailed off in hushed whispers as they waited anxiously for the show to start. The curtains were drawn, revealing a huge dark screen.

"Our story begins centuries ago when Osceus was no more than individual kingdoms in vast and bountiful lands," an animated scene appeared before the audience over the narration.

"In one such kingdom," the narration continued, "King Sadek ruled strictly but justly. Each year, prisoners on the death row would all be executed together in a public spectacle." Basic shapes that resembled a line of furs standing in a line were decapitated as a white blade sliced across the screen, severing their triangular heads from the rest of the bodies.

"One day," the narration sounded ominous as the pastel colours gave way to dark tones. "The prince was caught red-handed in the act of treason and sentenced to death." A yellow crown spun as it fell through a dark void. "The king was devastated. In an attempt to save his son, he came up with a new law: prisoners on the death row would fight it out in the forest. The one who brings to the king the head of all the other prisoners would walk away a free man."

"A lot has changed since then, turning this morbid deathmatch into a civilized sporting event," the narration continued as out of ashes rose a trophy cup, the emblem of the Victor's Cup. "Without further ado, we bring you, the Victor's Cup!" the voice finished, loudly announcing the last three words with an enthusiastic flourish. The crowd cheered in glee as the screen dimmed and the lights came back on.

Dressed in a white suit, a maroon-skinned shark walked onto the stage, grinning and waving at the roaring audience. "Zaaaaaaaaach Shenod!" he exclaimed his name and the crowd went wild. "Boom boom boom!" He went to the centre of the stage where two large armchairs were placed facing the audience, standing in front of them as he grinned at the audience.

The cheering subsided after a while. "Welcome to the Victor's Cup once again. We've added a ton of features from the previous years: new map, new weapons, and new oh-so-tempting traps. Boom!" he announced and the crowd cheered again.

"But that's not what you guys are here for; you'll have the next few days to watch it all live on television. No no no, what we're all here for is to meet our six tithes." The crowd burst into cheers as music played over the speakers.

Meanwhile backstage, the six tithes were gathered around Jayna as she explained the interview process.

"The interviews will be conducted one by one, starting with you," the doe pointed at the sharkip who recoiled in surprise. "Shenod will ask you some personal questions about your history, combat experience and personality. Just answer truthfully. Or not, that's up to you."

"And what incentive is there for us to lie?" Dusty interrupted her.

"To increase your bets," she brushed off. Noticing the raised eyebrows of a few of the tithes, she sighed. "People can bet on tithes they think will be the Victor. There's money to be made in the bets. And if you win, you receive ten percent of all the bets on you as prize money."

"So," she continued, "if you think that current facts about yourselves are less-than-stellar at charming the audience, you may want to hold off on the truth. Moving on, I advise you to work with Shenod. He's here to help you shine, so the least you could do is to show your best side."

A roar of the crowd can be heard from behind them. "That's your cue," Jayna turned to the sharkip. "You're up."

The music faded out and the audience turned their focus to the pair of furs seated on two armchairs in the middle of the stage. Shenod was seated on the left, leaned forward as if confident and eager to pounce on Kip, who in contrast was seated on the right, sinking into his seat as he stared nervously at the crowd.

"So how did you feel about being the only non-volunteering tithe in this competition?" Shenod repeated.

"Huh?" Kip snapped out of his fearful trance and looked at the host. "I guess it's like winning the lottery, but only in a bad way?" he stammered. The audience burst into laughter at his response.

"Aww," a look of concern flashed across the shark's face. "Has the week of preparation helped you with that?"

"No...I guess not..." Kip said reluctantly.

The audience looked at the pair uncomfortably. Ready to salvage the situation, Shenod opened his mouth to speak but the sharkip continued, "But I know how to blow shit up now." The audience roared with laughter.

"Hahaha, yes, yes. That will be quite a sight to behold. We're going to have to hold you up to that promise, isn't that right people!" Shenod turned to the audience with his arms raised in the air. The crowd whooped in glee. "Bang!" the shark exclaimed too, punching his fist in the air.

When the audience quietened down, Shenod turned back to the sharkip. "So what are your family think of you entering the competition?" he asked.

The question caught Kip off guard. "I..." he stammered. He thought of his parents and his two younger brothers. What would they think if he never came back from the tournament? But those were rumours, right? As far as the Cup was concerned, everyone returned home from the tournament safe and sound.

"I hope they're proud of me no matter what happens," he finally replied. Shenod nodded with a knowing look as he placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure they'll be proud of you. I bet they're watching you right now from behind their television sets." He turned to the cameras and reassured, "Don't worry Mr and Mrs Kip your son will do his very best in the arena. People, don't you think so too?"

The crowd went wild. "Alright folks," Shenod's voice rose from the speakers over the cheers of the crowd. "Let's give it up for...Kip the Sharkip! Bang!"

"So Dusty, rumours said you signed up for the Cup while you were drunk," Shenod studied the husky curiously. "Enlighten us, is that true?"

"Every single word," Dusty confirmed, sending the crowd into fits of mirth. "But I guess deep inside me, I know I can win, and drunk-me must've figured it out and decided to do me a favour."

"Wow, very deep," Shenod nodded. "So what makes you think you can win?"

"What, are you doubting me already Zach?" Dusty jested, and the easily-entertained crowd roared in laughter.

"Bang! Oh dear me no!" the shark protested, holding his hands up in surrender. "I think everyone here has a good chance of winning this. In fact, just today I was considering putting down another five thousand on you."

"What? Only five thousand? If I were you I'd put down ten!" Dusty jokingly retorted as if offended.

Shenod didn't skip a beat. "Oh, only if you'd sponsor the other five thousand," he laughed.

There were a few seconds of laughter from everyone before everyone quietened down again in amused sighs.

"On a serious note, I know I might seem small in stature," Dusty explained. "And that's why I've been playing to my strengths." He tapped his temple referring to his mental prowess. "I know every trick in the book what it takes to win. Machiavelli. Sun Tzu. Clausewitz. You name it, I've read it."

He leaned forward in his seat and gave the camera an intense look. His gaze was broadcasted on huge screens in the auditorium as well as on millions of television across the nation.

"I have what it takes to outwit, outplay, and outlast every other tithe in the arena."

"So, I daresay that before you signed up for the Cup, neither I nor anyone in the audience has even heard of you," the shark stated, leaning in towards Niall, who was leaning back in his chair as if deep in thought.

Talking over Niall's silence, Shenod continued "I mean, I do a web search with your name and nothing shows up. Can you imagine? Nothing!"

The hyena continued sitting in his chair in silence.

"Still with us Niall?" the shark looked at him in concern.

"Yes. You didn't ask a question," Niall stated flatly.

"Very true, very true. You got me there," Shenod gave the crowd a cheesy and sheepish smile. "Let me phrase it this way: after years of being unheard of by the general public, what brings you here today?"

There was an awkward pause as the shark looked at the hyena askingly. He was about to open his mouth to add something more when Niall spoke up. "Fun," he said curtly.

"Fun! That's what the Victor's Cup is all about. Isn't that right people?" Shenod cheered the crowd on as they roared in delight. "So, I know there are a lot of things to love about the Victor's Cup, but could you share with us just one thing about it you find fun?"

"Winning," the hyena answered without hesitation.

"Bang! I can't agree with you more," Shenod guffawed.

"To engage in battle and eliminate the other tithes," Niall continued, ignoring the shark. "And then to claim all the prize money."

Shenod was taken aback for a second at the hyena's directness, although he hid it well as he followed up with his reply. "Very nice. I can't wait to see what you've got in store for us."

"I am the predator, and the tithes are my prey. And I will hunt every last one of them down until I am the only one left." He took out his pocket knife and began playing with it.

"That's the mentality I like, don't we all?" Shenod asked the crowd as he stole a glance at the knife. The crowd cheered again.

The hyena took the knife and stabbed it between his fingers into the chair's armrest, the blade piercing the fabric and lodging itself into the wooden frame below. Furs in the audience gasped in fear and the crowd went silent.

Shenod, however, seemed unfazed. "Bang! Let's give it up for Niall!"

"And what's your strategy once you're in the arena?" Shenod nodded at Blue.

"I don't know," Blue smiled sheepishly. "I guess I'll need to figure it out once I get there."

"So you know any of the other tithes?" the shark asked concernedly.

"Well, Teryx has been nice to me so far," she pondered. "Actually everyone has been nice to me."

"And who are you going to team up with?"

"Ahh! I don't know," she moaned. "I really don't want to fight any of them."

"Surely you can't do that to win?" the shark challenged.

"Well, I'll fight if I have to, but I won't like it," Blue admitted. "But I don't like violence," she winced as if in pain and hunched over in a nervous huddle. Shenod moved over to her and gave her a hug, and the audience let out a collective "aww".

"Feeling better?" the shark asked after a while. Blue nodded. "Thanks so much," she smiled.

"Well, I hope that you know what you're doing when you're in the arena. Best of luck to you," he turned to the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, Blue!"

"Well Rhogar, the people who bet on you will be happy to hear that you're proficient in many different weapons. Daggers, swords, polearms, bow and arrow, firearms, what more could we ask for?"

Rhogar retorted with a snort of disdain. "Yeah, so?" he replied curtly.

"I think I speak for everyone when I say that we want to know where you've gotten all this extensive training from," Shenod smiled warmly, a stark contrast to Rhogar's cold demeanour.

"I was forced to learn it. To survive," Rhogar commented.

"You do what you must, you do what you must," the shark nodded empathetically.

"You don't know half of it," Rhogar grunted, cutting Shenod off.

"And that's why we'd all like to know more," the shark looked at him in concerned. "I mean if you're okay with sharing with us, of course."

Rhogar furrowed his brows, intending to brush off the question. However, he changed his mind as he saw the look of genuine concern from both Shenod and the audience, all of them hoping to hear his story.

"I was...coerced into being a mercenary," Rhogar admitted.

"Oh dear, when was this?" he probed.

"When I was seven."

There were audible gasps from the audience and even Shenod seemed to be looking for words of comfort.

"It was a choice between learning to use whatever weapons I had on hand or dying," Rhogar shrugged. "It wasn't a tough decision."

"I picked up swords and daggers at first," Rhogar continued. "Then when I had nothing but a metal pole to defend myself, the polearm was an obvious transition. Eventually, I picked up ranged weapons when I needed to attack from a distance. Everything was I learnt was do or die."

"Well, I am so sorry for your past. All of Osceus' hearts go out to you. I'm sure you'll do well in the arena. Don't we all agree folks?" the shark turned to the audience enthusiastically, evoking more cheers from them.

Rhogar looked at Shenod, then at the crowd, then back at Shenod as the shark put a hand on his shoulder.

"At least this battle is one that you chose to be in."

Teryx waved to the audience as stepped onto the stage. Taking the lead, the blue dragon went ahead to introduce himself. "Teryx Commodore!" he raised his hand in the air, leading the crowd in wild cheers over him. Grinning smugly, he ran his clawed fingers through his golden mane, letting it fall behind him.

He flashed everyone a huge, confident grin before sitting down on the large chair beside Shenod who seemed to be enjoying the show along with the rest of the audience. "You're quite the popular one Teryx," the shark complimented. "When I first saw you five years ago on television, my first thought was 'I wish one day I could be interviewing you for the Victor's Cup.' The gods must have heard my prayers because here you are! We're all honoured to have you here tonight, aren't we people?"

Cheers and whoops came from the crowd, especially from Teryx's fans in the crowd. Teryx shook his head modestly. "No Shenod, the honour is mine. Meeting you face to face is so much better than everything I've seen on television."

"Hahaha, bang!" the shark guffawed. "Are you trying to butter me up?" he quipped.

"It's not buttering up if it's true," Teryx grinned back.

"Well said!" Shenod let out another round of hearty laughter, leading the crowd in more roars of joy.

"On a serious note," the shark continued after the auditorium quietened down. "I think we all would like to know what brings you here to the Victor's Cup? I mean, there was no hesitation at all. An hour of the registration opening and you have volunteered to be a tithe. An hour, imagine that!"

"I'm here to win," the dragon declared confidently, leaning back against his chair as if those four words explained everything.

"And I don't expect any less of you Teryx," Shenod nodded. "Although I am obligated to warn you: all the other tithes are gunning for the position of the Victor too."

"They can try," Teryx nodded. "And I do hope they'll try their best. But in the end, I'm going to win. After all, with all of you supporting me, I can't find it within me to disappoint you guys!" he turned to the audience and offered his palm up to them.

"Bang! Marvellous! I can't wait to see what you've got for us," Shenod grinned. "Now it's not that I don't trust you, because I think you stand a great chance at winning this, but what happens on the teensy-weensy chance that you're eliminated by another tithe?"

Teryx face turned dark for a while, but it went away as a smile flashed across his face. "That's not an option. I can't afford to lose: the consequences are too much."

The shark was taken aback. "What do you mean, 'too much'? I mean, after the Cup, everyone goes back home and life goes on. So what's on your mind?"

"The Victor's Cup isn't all fun and games, is it Shenod?" the dragon turned to the shark. Without waiting for a reply, he turned to the nearest camera and gave it a dark look. From backstage, Kip watched Teryx's intense glare.

"The lesser-known half of the Victor's Cup tale tells us that much. After all, when the very first Victor's Cup game ended, King Sadek struck the Victor down where he stood," Teryx explained.

The crowd watched by in shock and even Shenod looked at a loss for words. The dragon continued, "I don't blame him. Wouldn't you want revenge on the man who killed your son?"

~ To be continued ~