

The Victor's Cup - Chapter 4: Enter the Fray

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A spotlight shone from the high ceiling of a circular metal room, casting a cone of light into its middle. In the circle of light, six metallic rings about an arm's length in diameter were arranged in a hexagon. In each ring stood a tithe, each of them watching the middle where a clock was counting down. Five minutes. Five minutes of nerve-wrecking suspense. Five minutes and they would find themselves in the battlefield.

Blue the Dutch Angel Dragon was standing in her own ring, wearing a set of full body armour. While at first glance one might assume it was a medieval set of armour, closer inspection would reveal the more modern and streamlined curves of the plates, closely fitting the angel dragon's slender form. The metal it was made out of was lightweight, thick enough to defend from most weapons but thin enough to ensure swiftness and mobility.

Across from her ring, a blue dragon with a golden mane stood in his own ring. He flashed her a charming smile that only a dragon like Teryx could manage as he admired Blue's preparation with her battle gear. He was dressed in a roguelike outfit with rugged fabric, steel pauldrons leather gloves and belt, steel pauldrons and a cloth cape that hung around his neck. Unlike Blue, his gear was chosen to allow him to be swift and stealthy, its yellow-grey colours prepared to blend into the rest of the urban space and desert.

Beside him was a copper-scaled dragon named Rhogar. He was dressed in heavy cargo pants, a turtleneck sweater and a leather jacket. His boots were made out of a hardened fabric with thick rubber soles, albeit a little tattered from use. The desert climate had driven the temperatures in the city of Krolas to extreme ends, and Rhogar was prepared for that.

Dusty the orange-furred husky was lightly dressed with a simple combination of shirt and jeans, his heavy combat boots looking like the only thing that belonged in battle. Still, wearing light was going to be important if he were to remain swift on the battlefield. He looked stern and focused, glaring at the other tithes in turn.

Kip too was dressed to travel light. Apart from his black neoprene shorts and cloth bandages around his arms, the sharkip was going to let his tough skin weather the forces of nature. However, while his body was ready, his mind was nervously fretting and it showed through his incessant pacing while in his ring.

Niall seemed unfazed by both the impending tournament as well as the tithes around him. Unfortunately for him, his pocket knife was treated as a weapon and hence banned from the competition. Instead, he took to tossing a coin into the air repeatedly, watching it rise and fall in its consistent pattern of acceleration and deceleration. He was wearing purple pants, a latex crop top as well as numerous cuffs and piercings, as if he was going to spend a night at the club as opposed to the next few days in an arena.

Around all the tithes' neck was a black metal collar, seamless in its form except for a shiny gem that was inlaid in the front. It was making a hum so soft that one could only hear it if one listened carefully to it. The tithes however, were too focused on the tournament to concern themselves with the collar. The timer had already counted into its last minute.

Kip glanced at Teryx, who nodded at him with a half-smile and a knowing look. Kip smiled back nervously before looking away.

Niall maintained his stony face, a mixture of calm and stoicism.

Thirty seconds left.

Rhogar's hand instinctively went to his side as he prepared for battle, but his sword wasn't there. He grunted. No weapons, right.

Blue stood by patiently. Her turn to shine would come, but for now she would have to appear harmless.

There was no turning back now. Not that there was from the moment the names of the six were announced to the world.

Dusty snorted. All or nothing.

Ten seconds left.

Rhogar glared at the other tithes. He was ready.

Niall shrugged in response.

Five seconds.

Blue tensed her body under her armour.

Four.

Teryx grinned.

Three.

Weaponless, Rhogar clenched his hands into fists.

Two.

Dusty took a breath.

One.

Kip closed his eyes.

The timer hit zero and the rings around the tithes glowed. With a blinding flash, the six of them were gone, leaving the empty chamber behind.

The world faded around Blue in a beam of white light. There was a sudden jerk as if she was falling through the air and her heart jumped through her chest. Suddenly, sky came into view as she landed on sandy tarmac with a clank of her armour. She stumbled a little, almost falling from the the disorienting landing, but she caught herself and looked around her, shielding her eyes from the rising sun.

She was standing in the middle of a highway crowded with cars. The scene was surreal: the cars were all stopped in the middle of the road, sand having accumulated inside the cars over the years, spilling out the half-open doors and wound-down windows. The other tithes were nowhere to be seen, having been unceremoniously scattered randomly around the city.

Her bearings. She looked around the city skyline and looked for the skyscrapers. One. Two. Three. Four and five. Six. And the seventh one: the tallest of them all. Judging from the positions of them, she was close to the southwestern corner of the city.

Her target destination was the fourth tower, half a day's walk away from where she stood. Perhaps longer if she stopped to look for supplies, which she should be doing. The tournament could last anywhere from a few hours to as long as it takes for all the food and water in the arena to be exhausted.

She jumped over the barrier in the middle of the highway and trudged towards the nearest highway exit. This was going to be an interesting tournament.

The afternoon sun was bearing down heavily on the hyena. The heat was giving him a bit of a headache and the stifling dry air only served to make it worse. He stumbled down an empty street, leaving behind sandy footprints as he made his way to the nearest building for shelter.

Above the double glass doors of the building was a sign that read "Blagorn's Convenience Store". Food and water perhaps. Niall knew how badly he needed them. He tried pushing the doors, and they moved a little, scraping against the ground. It wasn't locked, but years of grit accumulating in its hinges had slightly jammed the automatic door mechanism. He pushed harder against the door and with the sound of scraping metal, the door slowly inched its way open.

Once the opening was wide enough for him to enter, Niall let go of the handle and slipped in. The door remained stuck open, but it was fine. Nobody was going to follow him in anyway. He snorted and looked around the shop. Food, snacks and drinks were lined across rows of wooden shelves, packaged in paper and foil that bore labels of a past era.

Niall picked up a bottle of fizzy cola and looked at its label. "Happy Pop Cola" the label read. Despite the faded colours, he recognized the brand name and hues, but the logo design looked alien to him. Still, water was water. He opened the bottle cap and poured it into his open mouth. There was a squelch and a brown sludge flowed out of its opening. He quickly jumped back and threw the bottle against the wall, and the hardened plastic cracked against the impact, splattering a muddy substance over the dusty tiled floor.

"Ugh," he groaned, shuddering from thought that he was mere inches away from ingesting that sickly substance. Still, he needed water. Suddenly, the reflection of the sun against the silver surface of metal box caught his eye. He turned to look at it: a small box tucked away in the corner of the shop behind the counter where a rusty cash register stood. What piqued his interest was the engraved insignia of the Victor's Cup on the box's cover. A supply box.

He took a step towards the box when his instincts screamed at him to freeze. He immediately stopped himself and tried to look for the source of his concern. A closer inspection revealed thin, almost-invisible threads running back and forth in a convoluted weblike pattern across the floor in front of the box.

Niall sighed in relief, although albeit angry at the lengths that the game masters had went to make their lives a living hell. He muttered a few choice curses under his breath, fully aware that the hidden cameras would capture every single word and broadcasting it for the whole nation of Osceus to see.

He jumped on the countertop and leaned over the edge as he reached for the box. Almost there. Suddenly, there was a sound of fur against wood as Niall slipped. With a yip, he quickly grabbed the countertop and curled his tail up, coming dangerously close to the tips of the soft fibers of the threads. He gasped in fear as he stabilized himself.

Making sure that his claws had a good grip on the wooden counter, he slowly scrambled his way up before turning around to face the box. Ugh, this was not going to be easy. He dug his claws into the wood and stretched a leg out towards the box, attempting to pick it up with his toes.

With his leg outstretched he could reach further than with his arm. His toe claws scraped the top of the box, shifting it closer to him. With the balls of his feet, he gripped the edges of the box and lifted it up by its corner. The box was now in the air, hovering precariously over the ground.

Still holding on to the countertop, he tightened his core and pulled the box inwards to him. The hot afternoon sun had left his feet pads sweaty and sandy, making it hard grip on to the sleek metal surface. Just as the box was halfway across the gap, it began to slip out of his grasp.

Niall clenched his core and squeezed his toes tighter, trying to hold on to the box in place, but to no avail. There was a sickening sound of paw pads sliding against metal as the supply box slipped out of his hands. Time seem to slow down as Niall watched the box fall through the air. His lightning reactions and instincts kicked in and he turned around and reached out to catch the box.

He caught the box just mere inches away from the threads that hovered stealthily over the tiled floor. Niall sighed in relief as he pulled himself back over the countertop and hopped onto the floor. Whatever was in the box had better be worth it. He pressed the button on the front of the lid and released the locking mechanism before opening the lid.

Peering inside, he found a plastic vial of water and a small leather drawstring bag containing something soft. He took a huge swig out of the vial, finishing the entire bottle and letting it

drop to the floor. Opening the drawstring bag revealed three soft buns within them, one of which he promptly popped into his mouth and started chewing. He hung the bag containing the rest of the buns at the belt around his waist before walking out of the shop.

Suddenly struck by a morbid curiosity, he turned and look back at the shop. What was the trap about anyway? He tossed the empty box back into the shop over the counter, bouncing against the wall before landing on the web of threads. With a loud sound of rushing wind, spikes of liquid rubber shot out from circular holes that opened from the walls, spearing the wooden shelves, crushing the expired food products, and criss-crossing each other in a mesh of rubber. Liquid latex was spilling all over the floor, solidifying in sticky puddles.

Niall stepped back from the doorway in surprise before composing himself and giving the shop a smirk. The arena seemed to be equipped with a ton of traps, and while he was too alert and intelligent to get caught by such petty tricks, the other unsuspecting tithe would probably be less lucky. Perfect. Perhaps he could win the Victor's Cup without even having to meet another tithe.

Niall smirked again, oddly satisfied at the carnage the trap had wrought. After a few moments of admiration, he turned his back on the shop and continued his way down the street, refreshed and renewed from the consumed supplies. Perhaps he'd find a tithe or two, team up with them or something. But until then, he had time to decide.

The sun had set a few hours back and the moon and stars had taken its place, their dim lights bringing out the cold, sharp corners of the concrete buildings. Sneaking among the shadows was a stealthy sharkip, running from the shelter of one building to the shelter of the next.

Across his back was a canvas backpack weighing him down with the supplies he had collected over the course of the day. He came to the next apartment building and peered into it, checking for people. Nobody.

He picked up a dusty shoe that a city inhabitant must have dropped years ago and threw it into the lobby. It bounced on the floor a few times before coming to a halt. Safe. The sharkip stepped into the building cautiously, keeping his eyes peeled for traps. This would be the last building he'd scour for supplies before he called it a day

An hour more of searching through apartment after apartment brought Kip to the top of the apartment building. He peered out of the doorway of the roof access enclosure onto the roof. The roof was empty except for a long silver crate in the middle. He took a few steps towards box.

The panel beneath his feet shifted under his weight and Kip quickly took a step back. Glowing tentacles burst from the panel and grabbed the sharkip by his ankle, hoisting him upside down in the air. Kip gasped in shock as he swung back and forth in the air, flailing his limbs helplessly.

He hurriedly regained his senses and pulled his backpack to his front, unzipping it and rummaging about inside. Packs of biscuits, rope, a polyester jacket fell out of the backpack along with other supplies, but his hand grasped the handle of a machete. He pulled it out of the

bag and shook it about in the air to shake off its sheathe and revealing its blade of glowing energy before swinging its at tentacle around his ankles. The blade sliced right through the tentacle, splitting it cleanly in half in a burst of viscous, purple goo. Kip fell to the ground with a crash and rolled away as a tentacle rammed into the ground where he once was.

The sharkip jumped to his feet and ran to the panel where the tentacles were protruding from, avoiding the tendrils that snaked around him. One tentacle lashed out at him and he ducked under it, skidding to the base of the mass of tentacles. With a few well-aimed slashes, both the ground and the sharkip were splattered in purple goo and dying tentacles, writhing as they dissolved in the rest of the goo.

Kip panted as he got up, holding his machete defensively in front of him. The mess of goo that had pooled around his feet was no longer pulsating, so the sharkip lowered his guard and stepped to the long, rectangular crate. With the tip of his glowing machete, he pried the cover and lifted it from a distance. No traps activated themselves, and the sharkip peered into the box, taking note of its contents. There was a blanket, some foil packs of rations, a flashlight, among other things, although what laid at the bottom caught his eye.

It was metal pole with a small rectangular block of metal at one end. Kip picked it up and examined it. The pole was cold and smooth, except for a switch in the middle of it. He flicked the switch and the rod hummed to life. A luminescent blade materialized out of the rectangular block, completing the energy polearm.

Kip stared at the polearm, mesmerized by its shimmering light. It felt heavy and powerful in his hands. With two hands gripping the handle of the weapon, he swung it down in front of him creating a "Vroom" sound as it heated up the air around it. This was something he could see himself using in battle.

He turned off the weapon and looked at the supplies, both the one in the crate and the one that had fallen out of his backpack onto the goo-covered ground. He sighed. The backpack was too full to fit everything now. He took the equipment out of the box and laid them on the ground. Wiping the goo off the other supplies, he arranged them in a pile and sorted through them.

He kept the food items, flashlight and jacket. The blanket and climbing accessories were too much to take with him, so he threw them into a discard pile. The machete was a redundant now that he had his polearm.

After a few minutes of packing his backpack, he sat back and looked at the discard pile: things he definitely didn't want falling into his opponents' hands. Pulling out the machete, he stabbed the discard pile, shredding them. Bits of torn blankets, rope, and plastic were left, which he kicked into the pile of goo. He took the machete to the edge of the roof and dropped it down to a ledge, unreachable by anyone.

He put on the polyester jacket and slung the backpack across his bag. It was time to find a place to rest.

The wolf standing in the middle of a round room collapsed into the sleek metal chair behind him, catching his breath as his eyes faded from purple back to blue. Standing beside him was Jayna the doe, holding a clipboard as she continued watching the screens in front of them.

They were in a round room surrounded by glass. Beyond the glass, one could peer out and see the entire arena from a bird's eye view. But the arena wasn't below them. Instead, it was a realistic three-dimensional project created by the glass panels that covered every inch of the curved walls of the room. Across the panels were various numbers and graphs displaying metrics from the arena.

In the room were five gamemasters standing in a circle around the two of them, each with a helmet that projected a virtual reality map in front of them. With hand gestures in the air, they moved the virtual map around, zooming in and panning across the city as they watched the tithes like hidden guardian angels. Above each of them was a holographic display that reflected the scene they were looking at.

The entire team had been monitoring the arena's conditions, from climate to supply crates, from traps to tithes. Although the automated AIs could help manage the menial tasks, most of the decisions required someone at the controls. From strategically placing clouds to prevent the weaker tithes from fainting from dehydration, to triggering traps to direct tithes closer to each other, the team had their hands full.

"Decro, sir," Jayna asked. The standing doe was holding a clipboard, looking tired from the day's work. The wolf turned to her, "Yeah?"

"Are you going to sleep?" she asked.

Decro waved her question off with his clawed hand and looked back to the transparent floating display in front of him showing Kip sorting through the supplies from the crate. "Maybe," he finally shrugged.

"Up to you then," the doe put a hand on the wolf's shoulder. "Get some rest if you need to."

The arctic wolf nodded. "Thanks Jane," he grinned at her.

"It's Jayna," she feigned annoyance, but her playful voice gave her away.

"Sure, whatever you want," Decro placed his hand on Jayna's hand on his shoulder.

They watched the screen in front as the sharkip ruined perfectly good supplies. Not that the head and assistant gamemasters minded; in the end, it was all fair game.

"Well, I'm going to sleep now," Jayna took her hand off Decro's shoulder.

"G'nights then," Decro turned to her and nodded and the doe turned away and walked to a portion of the wall which was not covered by the wall displays, revealing a silver panel. The panel slid open and she disappeared down the white and sterile hallway as the panel closed behind her.

Decro watched her leave until the panel closed before turning back to the screen in front of him. He had been here for three shifts now. The next batch of five gamemasters would be coming to take over for the next five-hour shift in about an hour's time, but he'll be staying put for the time being.

After all, what's sleep when you have the Victor's Cup to run?

Dusty woke up with a start. He had been having the same dream every night ever since he had unwittingly signed himself up for the Victor's Cup. He'd be back in the bar, drinking like nothing was happening. Then a giant cloud of smoke with a demonic head and clawed hands would burst into the door, reaching for him and pulling him out of the building as he kicked and screamed to be let go. The beast would then throw him off into the distance, where he would sail through the air in a parabola before the city of Krolas would rush to meet him. He'd hit the ground, and then he'd wake up.

Tonight was no different. The nightmare that was plaguing him came back again, except this time he woke up in the midst of the abandoned city, in a random room, in an apartment building. He grabbed his backpack and held it close to him, hugging it as he shivered, half because of the coldness of the wind, half because of the coldness he felt inside.

With his blanket around his shoulders, he remained huddled alone as the sun rose. A slit of light turned into a beam of light, and before long the sun was blaring into the room, illuminating it with its warm glow.

He needed to get up and start moving soon, if not for battle, then at least to gather more food. The sole pack of biscuits he found yesterday had been his measly sustenance as he allowed himself a tiny bite every few hours.

The last crumbs of the biscuits had long gone and he was hungry. Dusty sighed once and willed himself to get out, but his body didn't move. He sighed again and pushed himself. This time, he staggered to his feet, still clutching the backpack in front of him as he shoved the blanket into the bag's opening. The bag was empty except for an empty biscuit wrapper and a weapon handle with a missing blade. He slung the backpack across his back and shook his head. He needed to snap out of this. He might not be able to gather the confidence he feigned for the public interview, but he could at least use his survival skills for this.

Today he'd go out. And he'd find supplies. And he'd survive.

Rhogar held an energy scimitar in one and a flashlight in the other, directing the latter down the dark tunnel, illuminating it with a cone of light. He was in the utility tunnels of the city where cables that used to bring power to the city ran back and forth, snaking their way through Krolas like blood vessels.

The tunnels had not yielded a lot of supplies, but he had found a pouch that was strapped at the side of his waist containing ration packs and water. On the other side of his waist was a coil of rope. More trouble than it was worth; there were times when he had to avoid sensors hidden

among the cables mounted on the walls, and on a few occasions he was almost hit by bombs that exploded leather straps everywhere, creating an impassable web. He shuddered to think what would have happened if he was caught in one of them.

The copper-scaled dragon got the feeling that the arena was intentionally blocking his paths, almost like it was directing him somewhere. While he had no destination in mind, he couldn't help but feel irritated that he was forced to play into the gamemasters' plans. His path led him to a tall ladder that led up a dark vertical tunnel. He shone the light up the tunnel, but the column was too tall, and the beam faded off into darkness with no sign of the ceiling. He snorted and turned the energy blade of his scimitar off and hung the inert handle at the belt around his waist. He switched off the flashlight, plunging the tunnels back into pitch-black darkness, freeing his hands up to climb the metal rungs of the ladder.

The sound of the thick sole of his boots stomping on metal echoed through the tunnel. After a few slow minutes of climbing in the dark, Rhogar's hand reached the last rung of the ladder, grasping air as he felt around for the non-existent next rung. Waving his hand around in the dark, he traced his fingers across the ridged metal roof of the tunnel. A manhole.

With a heave, he slid the metal cover to the side, scraping the metal against the concrete ground with a low scratching noise. He peered out of the opening, looking around to see if the noise had attracted any nearby tithes, but the absence of approaching footsteps indicated otherwise. He got out of the tunnel, replaced the manhole, and studied his surroundings move closely. He was in a small dusty room filled with metal boxes covered with dials and levers. Bundled cables were leading out of the machines, connecting one to the other as well as into the walls and ceiling.

A door in the wall was half-open, sandwiched between two more machines. As he drew his scimitar and turned it on, Rhogar got into a running jog and made his way towards the door, pulling it open. The door led to a suspended walkway that overlooked a large room. In the middle of the large room was a giant basin, much like a swimming pool except for a circular pit in its middle. Hardened cement appeared to have been poured down the pit years ago, filling it up halfway. There were cement trucks beside the pit, still filled with dried cement, indicative of a project long-abandoned as people made their escape.

Sun was streaming in through a narrow row glass windows close to the ceiling. It was morning, and Rhogar had been awake for the past twenty hours. He shook his head and continued to the middle of the walkway, climbing the railings and jumping off the side onto another suspended catwalk below, each side leading to a door in the wall. Just then, a rumbling noise reached his ears, and dust began flying in from the door on his left. Rhogar turned to face the door, wielding his scimitar in an aggressive stance.

Kip soon appeared through the door, running straight at him. He was holding an energized polearm close against his chest as he ran towards the dragon. Rhogar got ready for the sharkip's attack.

"Run!" Kip warned.

Rhogar was stunned for a second. A warning?

A black hound burst through the doorway that Kip came through, replacing a doorway with a large hole in the wall as it chased the sharkip, baring its shark fangs. Its pelt was jet-black, shining with a rubbery sheen, leaving wisps of dark purple smoke in its trail.

It pounced on the catwalk, sending waves of vibrations across the metal structure. Kip and Rhogar lost their balance for a second before recovering again. Rhogar turned around and ran for the door on the opposite end with Kip hot on his heels and the hound giving chase.

They were close to the exit, but each time the beast landed the impact shook the walkway and forcing the two tithes to stumble. Every second was precious, but alas it was not enough for them to reach the doorway. Rhogar was pushing himself to the limits and Kip was huffing and puffing with each step.

Rhogar furrowed his brow as he made up his mind. He turned back around and faced the beast.

"What the-" Kip exclaimed in surprise as he watched the dragon make his way to the nearest steel cable supporting the catwalk, hacking against it with his scimitar. The fibers began to fray under the sharp edge of the blade. Stomp! The beast's weight on the catwalk added more tension to the fibers. Stomp! Just one more and it was going to give.

Suddenly, Rhogar found his arm yanked towards the door. "What are you doing?" Kip exclaimed. Stomp! The cable snapped, sending the side of the walkway falling to the side, dragging the two tithes and beast down the side, with the latter roaring in anger.

Rhogar and Kip continued to run towards the exit door, this time with Kip in front. The cable opposite the snapped one soon gave way too, bringing down the whole portion of the catwalk. The ground they were on was falling away from the doorway, hinged on the cables that connected it to the doorway. They were almost there. Kip jumped through the doorway and landed hard on the ground. Rhogar missed the doorway, slamming against wall, managing only to grab the top of the ledge of the doorway.

The rest of the walkway broke off, sending the beast down into the pit below. It slammed against the ground, and laid there lifelessly. Its body melted away into a pool of rubber, seeping into the cracks in the ground.

Rhogar was still hanging from the ledge. The lizard struggled to hold on as he tried to pull himself up. He turned around to find a long drop between him and the ground. He looked up at the doorway and saw Kip's head peering out at him.

"Get away!" he shouted, as if he could swat the sharkip away with his voice alone. The beast had caused him to let his guard down and now he was vulnerable to elimination. Kip grabbed his wrist and tugged it upwards away from the ledge.

"Hey! Let go!" the dragon struggled to break free from Kip's grasp.

"What are you doing?" the sharkip yelled back exasperatedly. "Stop struggling and pull!"

Kip's last statement caught Rhogar off guard. Was he helping him? With a grunt, strained with his free arm, pulling himself up with Kip's help. The two rolled into the dark corridor, stirring up the dust from the ground.

Rhogar coughed the dust out of his mouth. "Thanks," he nodded curtly at Kip.

"No problem," the sharkip replied, unsure of himself. "So what's this place anyway?" he asked, trying to ease the awkward tension between the two of them.

The dragon shrugged. "If I were to guess, this would be where the accident happened."

"What accid- oh," Kip stopped himself as he realized the significance of this place.

"Well, it should be safe after all these years," Rhogar nodded, getting to his feet. Dusting himself off, he made his way down the corridor where an unlit exit sign pointed the way out. Kip followed after him.

"Are you following me, kid?" Rhogar asked suspiciously, turning his head back to look at the sharkip.

"Uhh..." Kip dragged the toe of his boots along the dusty ground. "Yeah?"

Rhogar snorted and turned back to the front, continuing his way down the corridor, leaving Kip behind standing awkwardly.

He paused and appeared to ponder for a little. "Fine, you can come along," he finally conceded.

"Really?" Kip's face brightened up. Without waiting for a reply he caught up with Rhogar in a slow jog and followed behind the lizard.

The two tithes came to a door. Rhogar kicked it open, letting the bright sunlight of the outside world flood the corridor. The both of them squinted as their eyes adjusted to the sunlight. This was going to be another long day.

Teryx scanned the garden in front of him. The gravel path led downhill through the artificial knolls, punctuated with shrubs, flower bushes, and the occasional tree. Everything seemed normal, except...

The dragon pulled out a metal sphere and angled it so that a metal antenna sticking out its top was pointed down the path. Faint beeping sounds came from under the gravel track in front of him. Traps.

With a snort, Teryx pushed a cylindrical plastic bin on its side and kicked it downhill. The bin picked up speed as gravity exerted its pull on it. As it rolled over the nearest beeping spot, the ground below it exploded in a burst of electrical energy, sending the bin flying into the air. The electrical explosion triggered another hidden mine, which exploded in a shower of latex. More traps triggered in chain reactions and the entire park was soon filled with writhing leather restraints, protruding spikes, latex pools, electrified pathways, and numerous other traps.

He smirked at the mess in front of him. Part of it was the hilarity of the great lengths that the game makers had gone through in setting all these traps up, only to have them triggered in futile. Part of it was the grim realization that all these were meant to ensnare the unsuspecting tithes. No matter. This place was safe now.

With one hand on the trap detector and the other on his energy sword, Teryx dragged his heavy two-handed sword along the ground as he walked down the remains of the gravelly path, avoiding the pools of latex and other obstacles. The sword left a trail of upturned gravel behind him as he navigated the garden into the rest of the city. He let his sword continue to scrape the ground as he left the park and stepped onto the concrete pavement, leaving scorch marks all over the ground.

A trail that would lead straight to him. Apart from Rhogar, the rest of the tithes were open to be his allies, and this trail would be their North Star, guiding them to him. A gentle smirk crossed his face. Who would be the first to find him?

Apart from the numerous traps that littered its many floors, skyscraper was unchanged from when Blue last saw it. Searching for supplies took longer than she expected, so she arrived at the tower close to midnight, where she rested.

Today found her looking for traps in the skyscraper once she woke up from the night's rest. She had found at least twenty traps in the lobby alone. It wasn't hard to find them. Disturbed piles of sand on the ground, signs of regular cuts in the concrete walls, and discoloured ceiling panels were among the many signs that a trap was there.

She had spent the first half of the day hunting traps and the other half of the day extracting and relocating them. Blue had chosen this tower for its convoluted layout. Staircases never went up for more than three storeys at a time, forcing furs to travel down the hallway, through a lobby, down another corridor before they arrive at the next stairway leading up to the next floor. The restricted layout of the building meant that furs traveling through the building would find themselves constrained by the corridors.

Which was exactly what Blue intended to take advantage of.

The traps were now set up in strategic and convoluted positions on the first five lobbies of Blue's skyscraper. Traps were placed in obvious locations that people would avoid, only to run into a better and well-hidden trap as they made their detour. Other than Blue, who knew the location of all the traps and the safest way around them, anyone would find it hard to infiltrate her base.

Nighttime was soon approaching. On the twenty-fifth floor, Blue had pried open a tiled panel that housed a hidden energy beam, throwing the panel carelessly on the ground. She pulled the beam and its huge battery out of the concealed recess in the wall and dragged the two items across the sandy floor to the stairwell, aiming the former down the stairs. The next person to come up around the corner of the stairs would be in for a nasty surprise.

The sun rose on the third day of the Victor's Cup, finding Dusty trekking down a road that led between a row of quaint two-storey apartment buildings. He had managed to gather and store a generous number of food and water packs the previous day, owing to the fact that unlike the other tithes, he wasn't concerned about his backpack space. Instead, he took to storing them in a rusty washing machine inside one of the apartments, draping a torn rag over the glass door to hide the supplies. He had enough to last him the next week or so, which should be more than enough to tide him over the entire Cup. Now, he had to survive.

Although his primary weapon was an energy sabre he had found in a supply box, he had been taking apart the traps he encountered along the way, salvaging their active components to use as secondary weapons. He had amassed a few vials of explosive latex, sealed cubes of living harnesses, and an immobilizing grenade.

Just as he rounded the corner of the blocks, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the sandy ground. Dusty froze in fear. Just one wrong move and he'd be eliminated. All his efforts down the drain. His heart pounded in his chest. The footsteps were coming closer.

He steeled his nerves and forcefully pulled himself away from his position. He needed to move. Anywhere. Other than the apartment with his supplies, the other buildings had their doors locked or jammed. Hiding in them was not an option. He took off down a tight alleyway between the nearest two apartment buildings and looked around. If he remained here, he'd be found.

An iron dumpster. Fire escape. With a running jump, he jumped on the dumpster with a loud clang before scrambling his way up the fire escape and into the open window of the first apartment. With a flash of the orange fur of his tail, he disappeared just as a brown hyena appeared around the corner of the alley to find the source of the noise. Nothing.

The hyena squinted suspiciously before resuming his search down the street. He went up to the front door of the nearest building and grabbed the rusty handle, violently yanking it. The door didn't give, so he made his way over to the next building.

Silently crossing the buildings as he leapt stealthily from fire escape to fire escape, Dusty kept watch on the hyena. Building after building, door after door, the hyena checked until he came to an open door: the apartment building of Dusty's base.

Dusty watched with a mixture of panic and frustration as the hyena entered the building. If he found his stash of food, his entire day of preparations would go right down the drain. He jumped across the gap to the same apartment that the hyena was now in. He was in the corridor on the second floor with doors to various apartment rooms. Below him, the hyena would be exploring the lobby. If he searched the laundry room... Dusty shook his head. He had to do something.

He snuck to the staircase and crept down until he could hear the hyena's footsteps. He was in the apartment pantry, and Dusty could hear the sounds of wooden cupboards being flung open and pots and pans clattering to the floor. He had to do something. But what?

The sounds subsided and the hyena's footsteps approached the lobby again. Dusty slunk back up to stay hidden as he watched the lobby from the corner of the wooden banister. The hyena emerged from the kitchen before entering the laundry room beside. Crap. If he didn't do anything, the hyena would find his stash of food. The tournament would be over for him. He couldn't breathe. He'd need to find more food. Was there any left? How much would the other tithes have gathered? His vision blurred. The air felt suffocating.

Dusty slowly got up, trying to get more oxygen as he snuck back up the stairs. In his dizziness, he stumbled and his shoulder slammed into the concrete wall with a thump.

"Who's that?" a voice snapped from in the laundry room.

The sharp voice was enough to snap him out of his trance. He flew up the stairs and chose an apartment room at random, opening the door, dashing inside and closing it with all the silence he could muster.

The hyena burst into the room not long after, looking for the source of the disturbance. He kicked the bed, making it drag across the ground leaving skid marks. Nothing. He ripped the curtains off the metal rod, sending it clattering to the ground. Nothing.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the hyena taunted. With a smirk, he walked over to the front of the apartment closet. A scratched mirror was mounted on its door, reflecting the hyena's confident and sly face. In a swift movement, he swung the closet door open roughly, revealing an empty supply crate sitting in front of him.

"Bahh!" He ripped the closet door off the hinges threw it to the ground, shattering the mirror. The apartment building was already looted. There was nothing left for him. He stormed down the stairs and out of the building.

The front door slammed and Dusty finally let out a sigh of relief, gasping as he recuperated from taking only shallow breaths in the presence of the hyena. He had been hanging from under the bed frame and his arms were aching. With a heave he pulled himself out from under the bed and rushed out of the corridor, flying down the staircase and into the laundry room.

The washing machine still had the cloth draped over it. Dusty sighed in relief. He grabbed the handle of the glass door and pulled, revealing an empty washing drum.

Jayna tapped the back of her hand against a blue glowing square on the side of the door. The glow turned green and chimed as it detected the identity chip in her hand, opening the door to the control room of the arena.

Furs were working on their holographic controls. Camera displays zoomed in on the tithes. Everything was still in place, running like clockwork.

The doe walked over to the seat in the middle where a white wolf was chewing on something. "Sir Decro," she greeted him. He nodded as he swallowed, before squeezing a white rice cake out of the black foil pack in his left hand and taking another bite out of it.

"Tithe food, really?" she raised her eyebrow.

"Edible," he shrugged as he spoke between bites.

Jayna nodded doubtfully, then turned her head to the arena statistics that hovered in front of Decro. Everything was normal.

The both of them watched the screen as Dusty tipped the washing machine down to the ground in anger.

Jayna furrowed her brows as she watched the events unfold.

Decro turned up to see her expression, and Jayna looked down to see the dark rings below his eyes. "Do you feel anything for them?" he asked.

A seemingly-innocent question. Jayna shook her head. "No," she answered. "How about you? What are they to you?"

Decro took another bite out his meal. "Suffering of the few," he said flatly. "For the entertainment of the rest."

"Hmm, yeah. A few people invited me to team up with that," Rhogar pondered as he rested his head on his backpack with his paws clasped across his chest.

"Oh?" Kip rolled around on his backpack and jacket to face the dragon. "Who?" he probed.

"Teryx and Niall," Rhogar stated.

"Oh, why aren't you with them now then?" the sharkip asked.

"I don't want to team up with people," the dragon shrugged back.

"Haha what?" Kip gave him an amused glance. "Then why are you teaming up with me?"

"I'm not teaming up with you," the dragon protested.

"Then what do you call this?" Kip grinned.

"Well we're not a team," Rhogar stated flatly.

"Whatever you say," Kip teased. "Whatever you say." He rolled back to face the ceiling of the classroom. The both of them were in a classroom on the upper floors of an elementary school. They picked the classroom furthest away from the staircases and made space by pushing the obstacles away: rusty tables and chairs, clay model animals from a long-forgotten school project, abandoned school bags, and dusty stuffed animals. They now sat in a pile at the corner of the the classroom, giving them space to sleep.

Rhogar had also strung up some of the metallic objects together and hung them on both entrances. A last line of defence to alert them should someone try to enter the classroom. At least they could sleep with that peace of mind.

"But seriously though, why are you helping me like this?" Kip asked.

Rhogar snorted.

"Okay, okay," the sharkip backed off.

A few moments passed as the both of them laid back in the dark. Rhogar grunted before speaking, "Well, I guess it's a long story," he turned to face Kip. The sharkip was already softly snoring in his sleep. The dragon sat himself up and looked at the sleeping sharkip.

He shook his head. Was he getting attached to Kip? He hoped not. There could only be one Victor.

It was inevitable.

The dragon shifted closer to Kip. The moonlight streaming through the shuttered windows of the classroom reflected off the sharkip's collar. Rhogar reached out to him with his clawed hand.

It was inevitable.

It was almost in his grasp. He hesitated.

Inevitable. Yes. But perhaps not tonight.

He pulled his hand back and scooted back to his backpack and laid back down. Perhaps not tonight.

The morning sun was soon turning its beams into harsh rays that bore down upon Teryx as he made his way through the corridors of an abandoned shopping mall. His footsteps echoed through the empty mall as he entered shop after shop.

He had finished the last of his rations in the morning, and now his hunger was starting to catch up with him again. Water was also hard to come by too. Despite trying to conserve water, he had drained his bottle of water over the course of only one day. His throat was parched, but all he could do for now is to carry on looking for water.

Teryx took another weary step forward. A flash of silver caught his eye through a shop window. Between the mannequins sporting summer dresses and tank tops, he could see a supply crate at the back of the shop. He picked up his pace and entered the shop.

Clothes racks and shelves were toppled over, forming a wall of debris and leaving just one path to the end. In the middle of the path was a round, metal device. It let out a periodic beep, and a red light in the middle of the device flashed with each beep. Teryx approached the device cautiously. It seemed to sense his presence, beeping faster as he came closer.

The dragon stepped back and the beeping subsided. Picking up a nearby mannequin, he threw it down the path. The device detected the mannequin and began beeping furiously. There was

an explosion of electricity, sending shelves flying to the side. Teryx braced himself, covering his face with his arms as hangers and clothes flew around him.

Once the mayhem subsided, Teryx opened his eyes to examine the aftermath. Everything from the clothes racks to the faded clothes were pushed to the side, forming an empty circle around the metal device. The beeping had stopped as the device sat inert on the floor.

With the room disarmed, Teryx walked to the back of the shop. The silver crate almost seem to glow in the soft light of the mall's skylight. Was this what hope looked like? He crouched down in front of the box and placed his hand on the lid and lifted it up. The box was filled with the foil packs of food, all of them stabbed so that the coloured mush from the various packs had leaked out all over the bottom of the box, mixing together in a messy swirl of green, orange, white and brown. A plastic bottle had been emptied into the box, along with a handful of dirt and sand.

Someone had already looted the mall and disappeared, but not before ruining the surplus for the others. He pushed the crate over in frustration, spilling its contents all over the ground as he got up. He turned towards the exit and walked towards it, kicking the metal device out of anger.

A high-pitched whine came out of the device, and the metal shutters on the shop front rolled down. The vents in the shop were blasted open as a torrent of black latex gushed out of them. The shop was getting flooded with the liquid rubber.

"Fuck," Teryx swore. He ran over to the metal shutters tried to lift them open. The latex covered the shop floor, reaching up to his ankles as he strained himself but to no avail. He quickly got up and threw himself at the shutters. There was a clang as they shuddered, but they showed no sign of giving.

"Fuck," he cursed again. He slammed his fists on the shutters, creating another loud clang. "Hey!" he screamed out. "Somebody! Help!" The liquid rubber was now at his knees, soaking his robes and fur and weighing him down, pulling him deeper into the latex.

"Kip!" he yelled. "Dusty! Niall!" If any time was the right time for an ally to appear, the time was now. A bomb blew up in a corner of the shop, sending a wave of rubber splashing over him. He was submerged in the latex as it obscured his sight. He struggled and kicked in the heavy liquid, pushing himself up to the surface. The liquid clung to his fur, covering him with a shiny sheen.

He took a huge breath and continued banging on the metal shutters.

He wasn't going to be eliminated here. Help should come soon.

Help had to come.

~ To be continued ~