

# The Victor's Cup - Chapter 5: The Endgame (Mild Version)

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A city stood in the middle of a barren desert. Skyscrapers loomed over the buildings below, casting long shadows over the apartment buildings and shopping malls below. Yet for a city that big its streets were glaringly lifeless, long driven away by the nuclear accident that has now become synonymous with the city name of Krolas.

The recent weeks, however, has brought new attention to the otherwise forgotten city. This year's Victor's Cup's tournament was taking place in Krolas and millions of people were now watching the city through hundreds of hidden cameras hidden in building walls and mounted on minuscule drones, following the six participants, or tithes as they were called, as they traversed the trap-riddled landscape.

At the present moment, millions of furs were focused on their television screens as they watched the hyena Niall as he chewed on his lunch. Much to everyone's curiosity and boredom, he had been perched on the window of a skyscraper for the entire morning as he watched the nearby tower.

A blue streak heading out of the skyscraper. Running back to it half an hour later with metal parts in her hands. The same blue streak flashing across the corridors, visible through the glass windows as she rose through the floors before finally assembling objects and furniture in the office space in an arbitrary arrangement. She instinctively knew what she was doing but there was only one way to be sure.

He squeezed the last of the noodles out of the foil pack. The pressure of the vacuum pack had squashed the individual strands together with the rest of the black sauce, forming a dark and oily cake that he let drop into his waiting mouth. As he chewed, he opened a bottle of water and gulped it down, washing the floury cake down. He tossed the empty foil and plastic bottle to the sandy ground and hopped off the window sill.

Niall yanked the handle of the backpack which he earlier placed in the corner, swinging it off the floor in a cloud of dust as he slung it on his back. Two black metallic handles were hanging by his waist which he unhooked off his belt and held one in each hand. A press of the button and a long snake of energy grew out of each one, drooping to the floor and coiling on the ground. With a crack of the whip, he sent an ornamental flower pot in the corner smashing into thousands of porcelain shards.

A ten-minute walk found him standing in front of the lobby of the building. In this building was a tithe. His target. His prey. But first... He took out a round metal sphere and twisted it along a line that circled the diameter of the sphere. "Beep," the sphere emitted a high-pitched tone.

Beep. Niall took the sphere and threw it towards the swinging glass doors that led to the lobby of the skyscraper.

Beep. It flew through the air and landed on the steps in front of the doorway.

Beep. A panel on each side of the doorway slid open, revealing two turrets. They whirred to life and shot out streams of latex in front of the glass doors, waving their muzzles back and forth and thoroughly covering the ground.

Beep. There was a huge radiant flash as energy jumped through the air around the entrance, arcing in bright strikes as they were conducted to the steel surface of the turrets. Niall's fur stood up from the static in the air.

The turrets exploded in a burst of sparks, sending sharp metal debris flying everywhere. The sound of tearing and scratching of metal and shattering glass assaulted Niall's ears. He stepped back as he closed his eyes and turned away to protect himself from the blast. The world around him felt like it was washing around him as his fur was buffeted by the wind.

The air around him calmed as swiftly as it came, and the hyena looked up to survey the wreckage. The chaos had destroyed the two turrets, the glass door, as well as a few traps that were placed near the entrance of the doors. Niall nodded. This wasn't unexpected, and from his observations of Blue, he could tell that he would be meeting more traps up ahead.

Niall crossed the rest of the ground floor eventlessly to the elevator. To nobody's surprise, the buttons didn't respond to his presses. Shrugging, he headed to the doors to the stairs. Checking to make sure there were no traps, he swung the door open and cautiously made his way up the stairs.

The stairs ended on the fourth floor, leading to a corridor. With his whip closely by his side ready to strike, he gingerly pushed the wooden door open and looked out of the doorway into the corridor. No sign of danger. He stepped through and walked down the corridor. A lobby was up ahead with its furniture haphazardly arranged as makeshift barriers. They seemed they were meant to lead him in a twisted path around the floor before he could reach the corridor that lead to the next flight of stairs up.

Niall grunted. The traps were definitely hidden around the area. Blue had set them there. He needed to take it slowly as he- there was a slight tension around his left ankle as his boots nudged against a thin fishing line stretched across the entrance to the lobby.

The tiles in front of him flipped into the air as tentacles burst out from below them, writhing in the air and shooting towards Niall. "Fuck!" the hyena exclaimed.

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There was a loud explosion from the lower levels that shook the ground below Blue; someone was trying to enter her fortress. Not that she was concerned as there were plenty of traps between the intruder and her to almost guarantee her safety. One well-positioned trap was all it took to restrain a tithe and render them helpless to her.

She could hear a few more rounds of banging as traps activated. Then there was silence. Blue finished stringing a fishing line by tying it to the leg of an upturned office desk. The thread ran around the room, winding around furniture and pillars and forming an almost-invisible web of

nylon thread. She would later hook it up to traps so that one wrong step would send a thousand traps flying at the unsuspecting tithe, but for now, she needed to finish up what the traps below started.

She hopped effortlessly through the gaps that she had intentionally left in the web and made her way back to the stairwell that led down to the lower floors. The traps may have been set up to catch the unprepared, but there was also a hidden way through them for her to navigate the floors. She pranced across the floor, almost as if dancing as she made her way to the lobby on the fourth floor. As she reached the bottom of the steps, she whipped out a metal blade handle and pressed a button on it. There was a sound of static in the air as a sharp blade emerged from the end, forming a dagger.

The lobby was in shambles, even more so than she had left it when she first set it up. Office tables and chairs were strewn over the tiled floor. The glass windows were shattered. Metal energy mines and lifeless leather restraints laid scattered across the ground in front of the opposite corridor. Someone had been here, and that someone was now in a black leather sleepsack, thrashing about on the ground, struggling to get out.

Blue grinned and approached the sleepsack. She stabbed the end of the sack and ripped it open, revealing the source of the writhing. There were a bunch of decapitated tentacles in there, twisting and turning in the leather bag. She jumped back in surprise, gasping "What-". A strong furred arm grabbed her by the metal collar and yanked her back, throwing her at the ground. She skidded across the ground as the layer of sand scraped against her armour, coming to a stop as she slammed into the wall. Her dagger flew off to the side.

She looked up into the eyes of a bloodthirsty hyena. Niall. Charging at her with one whip in his hand. She grunted and grabbed a sharp shard of glass and swung it at the hyena as he approached. There was a flash of glass and a sharp cry of pain.

"Oww!" the hyena exclaimed, stealing a quick glance at his forearm which now sported a deep gash from top to bottom. "Why you," he seethed. Blue had scrambled to her feet and picked up a second shard of glass, now wielding one in each hand.

Niall cracked a whip at her and she jumped to the side, narrowly missing the ends of the whip. A second one, however, caught her side and she winced in pain as a welt appeared under her skin. "Gah!" Swinging her arm, she threw a glass shard at Niall. He cracked his whip, sending the glass exploding over the both of them in a shower of shiny bits as he continued approaching her.

She wasn't equipped to deal with this. She needed to turn to her original plan. With a shout, Blue threw the other glass shard at Niall before turning around and running towards the stairs to the upper floor. There was another sound of shattering glass behind her and she reached the stairs and dashed up, with Niall hot on her heels.

She ran up a few flights of stairs, purposefully stepping on an oddly-discoloured step. There was a beeping sound and the stairs behind her exploded in a shower of concrete chunk and steel rods, separating Niall and Blue, with the latter continuing up the skyscraper.

Niall glared at her disappearing figure. The next floor was too high for him to reach even if he jumped. He reached into his bag and pulled out a metal ball, twisting it before he threw it upwards in the gap between the stairs.

Blue heard a beeping sound beside her as the sphere shot up to her level. There was a flash of light and pain coursed through her body. She screamed in pain as her body shuddered. But she needed to run. Niall had looped a rope to the exposed steel rods, climbed up the gap, and was now behind her. Blue fought her body and climbed the stairs. She was almost at the next lobby.

She threw herself at the door and dashed down the corridor and arriving at the next lobby. Majority of the tiles here were trapped, but a few were safe. But before she could jump, a whip bound her arms to her body, sending shocks through her body as she fell to the ground. "Argh!" she shouted.

Holding the other end of the whip, Niall walked over to her with a grin on his face. "You're a speedy one," he remarked and knelt down beside her. "Such a pity this is the end of your line," he reached out a hand towards her neck.

"If I'm going down, you're going down too!" she yelled as she flipped herself over and kicked Niall, sending the both of them onto the trapped floor. Turrets emerged from the ceiling as spikes shot out from holes in the wall. Bandages were flying around the room, attempting to wrap the both of them up in a flurry of dust that obscured them from the world.

Suddenly, there was an electrical burst around the two of them as an energy grenade went off around them. Bursts of yellow and white light flashed in his eyes and the screams of both him and Blue filled his ears. He couldn't think a single thought. All that filled his mind was pain. Just pain.

Forever seemed to go by for him before he found himself once again in control of his body. Slowly and carefully, he began to push himself to his feet. Residual electricity sparked across his fur as they rubbed against each other. He looked around at the aftermath. Blue was still groaning on the ground and the restraints were strewn across the ground lifelessly, having been neutralized by the grenade.

Now to finish the job. He bent down, plucked the gem from the collar, and stepped back as ropes shot out from the collar. They wrapped around Blue and tied her arms and legs together. A blue cloth wrapped around her eyes, blinding her to the rest of the worlds.

Satisfied that his target had been eliminated, Niall turned around and sauntered towards the stairs.

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A sharp chime came from both Kip's and Rhogar's collars as they walked through a grey and empty corridor. They both instinctively froze, staying alert for enemies before they allowed themselves a sigh of relief.

"What was that?" Rhogar grunted.

"Think it came from our collars," Kip suggested.

"Uh huh," the dragon shrugged as he resumed his journey down the corridor.

"What, you don't think so?" the sharkip jogged after him to catch up.

"I believe you," Rhogar replied. "Just wondering what's causing it."

"Maybe it's low on battery?" Kip suggested again.

"I doubt it," Rhogar stated flatly.

The dark corridor led to a small open hall with smooth wooden counters and computer displays. Open doorways led to small wards, each filled with beds and medical equipment. They were in a dilapidated hospital searching for supplies.

"Split up," Rhogar nodded. "You take the left side and I'll take the right."

Kip nodded and walked briskly into the first door on the left. Despite the warm wind blowing in sand from the open windows at the end of the room, Kip could feel a faint, cold sensation as he stepped into the room. Three beds were on each side, flushed against the wall. The curtains were drawn for one of the beds, obscuring the last bed on the right side.

Beside each bed was a metal bedside table, and the sharkip went up to the first one on the left. The drawers made scraping noises as the sand in the mechanism scratched against the metal. Nothing inside.

He went over to the next bed and opened the drawers. One bottle of water. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. He picked it up and smiled. With almost all the large supply crates looted already, food and water were hard to come by. It amused him how something he'd take for granted back at home became a beacon of hope in the arena. He slipped it into his bag and resumed his search.

The third bed was beside the open windows, giving him a view of the city as he approached the drawer. With another sound of metal scraping, he opened the drawer. Nothing here. He turned around to go to the fourth bed. The one with the curtains. He approached it and pulled the curtains open.

Kip stumbled backwards. A bony figure was lying on the bed. The skin had dried from the desert heat, turning into a leathery brown material. The flesh below it had long rotted away, leaving the bits of remaining skin hanging from the bones, following the contours of the ribs below. He stood there unmovingly, watching the body in a mixture of gut-churning revulsion and morbid curiosity. Why was that body there? Did someone forget the person in their rush to leave? Or did they just leave them there to die? And did he even want to know?

"Hey," Rhogar's voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Huh?" the sharkip looked at the dragon with a disoriented look on his face.

"You done, kid?" the dragon nodded.

"Uhh, give me a bit," Kip quickly scrambled to the remaining drawers.

"I'll be waiting in the lobby," Rhogar shrugged and turned away, apparently unfazed by the sight.

The next few minutes found the two tithes sitting in the middle of the small hall having lunch. Rhogar brought an opened ration pack to his mouth and poured out a mouthful of thick and viscous stew. He handed it to Kip who did the same, chewing on the bits of potatoes and vegetables that floated in the stew. A half-finished bottle of water sat between the two of them.

"I wonder how many tithes are left," Kip pondered aloud.

Rhogar shrugged in response. "No idea."

"What if we're the last tithes left?" he opened his mouth to say but stopped himself.

The dragon noticed the sharkip's unease and turned to face the front again.

They finished the pack of food in silence and sat there for a few minutes.

Finally, Rhogar suggested, "Let's get going?"

Kip nodded. Picking up their bags, the both of them got up and headed out of the hospital with Rhogar taking the lead and Kip following behind with a cautious berth.

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The sea of rubber was rising up. The entrance and windows to the shop were shuttered, blocking off the escape of a frantic dragon. Help wasn't coming. This was the end of the line for him.

Suddenly, something on a wooden rack caught his eyes just as a wave of rubber reached his lower jaw. He could still escape if he was fast. Teryx took a breath as the latex washed over his head and covered his eyes. Trying to visualize the shop around him, he swam in the viscous liquid towards the racks. His claws caught on something flat and hard. The rack.

He slid both his hands over the surface. He needed to find it. But the rubber was dulling his sense of touch. His hands touched something soft. Clothes. Not what he was looking for. His arm bumped something hard, pushing it off the shelf and onto the floor. Probably what he was looking for. Crap.

Teryx swam down to the shop floor and dug his claws through the rubber. It was his way out. It had to be here somewhere. He just needed to look harder.

But his lungs were bursting. He needed air. His hand clutched his throat and came into contact with his metal collar. Air. Help. His fingers touched the gem. Was this his only way of escape?

His other hand bumped into something hard and it rolled away. Wait. He stretched out both his hands. He was going to make it. His fingers suddenly grasped a small metal sphere. He grabbed it, twisted, and threw it to where he remembered the shutters were.

He could imagine the beeps in his mind. Or was that his heart beating in his chest, or his fiery lungs forcing him to take a breath of liquid latex? There was a soft and muffled rumble and a shockwave shot through the rubber. Suddenly there was a current pulling him out. The bright sun flashed in his eyes as the black liquid flowed away onto the mall floor outside the shop. He knelt on the ground catching his breath.

He was still in the game. But for now, he needed to rest. With a sigh, he slumped on the ground and laid motionlessly in the pool of sticky rubber.

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Niall peered into the subway platform, shining his flashlight around the high-ceiling hallway. There was nobody in sight but the shadows could be lying to him. Keeping his guard up, he stepped onto the platform and looked around. It was getting close to midnight and he needed a place to rest. However, the platform left him too exposed and vulnerable. He spied a doorway labelled "Control Room" on the side and made his way to it.

He gingerly grabbed the metal handle and pulled it. It wasn't locked so he swung the door open cautiously. The room was filled with dusty monitors that lined the walls on the far end, each of them labelled. Niall could make out words the words on some of them: "[Northbound Track] Inbound", "[Eastbound Track] Station" some of them announced on the faded and dusty rectangles of paper, taped on top of each screen. There were old computer terminals sitting on the desks that lined the walls with wheeled chairs in front of them.

He closed the door behind him quietly, picking up a metal rod from the ground and shoving it into the metal handle to jam it. He sighed.

There was a shuffling movement behind him and he turned around, shining his flashlight at the source. A black, shiny humanoid beast was emerging from the shadows. Crap. He swapped his torch from his right hand to his left and grabbed his whip. There was a whirring sound and the energy coil grew out of the handle.

There was a sound of sly laughter. The beast was grinning. "Finally," a familiar voice spoke. The figure stepped out into the full path of the flashlight's beam, revealing his draconic horns and features. A confident grin was plastered across his face. "It's almost like you guys have been avoiding me."

"You," Niall furrowed his brows in suspicion and gripped his whip tightly. "What are you doing here?"

"Me? Nothing, just looking for allies," the dragon stepped forward. "Still on my side?"

Niall stepped backwards and bumped into the door behind him. "Depends. Who's with you?"

"Just me," the dragon responded.

Niall nodded. "Fine," he responded. "Let's work together."

Teryx's smile spread from ear to ear as he approached Niall and extended his hand. The hyena took the handshake and shook.

"So what's the plan?" the black figure asked.

"Same as before. Survive. Fight. Eliminate," Niall responded coldly.

"So what else is new, right?" the figure smirked.

"For now, we get some rest," the hyena said, and the dragon nodded in response.

As they split up to opposite ends of the room to rest, Niall turned to the dragon.

"One more thing," he looked the figure in the eyes with a smug grin. "I know where we can find the next tithe."

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Teryx slept lightly. After all, he needed to be alert. While having an ally would be helpful, he didn't trust the hyena, and being within mere metres of him was a hundred too little. But for now, he needed sleep. He was slowly drifting off. Just a bit more...

The dragon suddenly sat upright. How long was he asleep? Something woke him up, but what was it? The ground shook beneath him. An earthquake? But that didn't make sense. This city wasn't close to any fault lines. His line of thinking was suddenly interrupted as another shockwave made him stumble across the floor. Niall was on the opposite end of the room, sitting up and looking at him.

The ceiling above them cracked under pressure, sending bits of concrete flying into their fur. They didn't have time to find out. Both of them grabbed their backpacks and scrambled to their feet, running to the door. Teryx reached it first and pulled. There was something jamming the door.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath as he violently yanked on the door handle in the dark. The door didn't open.

"I jammed the door for safety," Niall snapped. "Let me do it."

"No time," the dragon lashed back as he threw his body at the door. The handle burst off the door in a shower of wood splinters and Teryx stumbled out of the room with Niall behind as the ceiling collapsed behind them. The entire subway station was falling apart around them.

With Teryx in the lead and Niall close behind, they ran for the escalators that led upwards to the surface as chunks of concrete debris fell to the ground, cracking and denting the tiled floors. They stormed up the escalator's tall steps up to where the ticketing hall was.

They vaulted over the metal gantries and up another flight of escalators. The ceiling fell in a cloud of dust and both Teryx and Niall stumbled as the steps they were on slid downwards. Quickly recovering, they finally reached the top of the escalators and into the moonlit surface.

The dragon turned and looked down the passage that they had just escaped from. Everything was clouded in a shower of concrete dust.



"Look," Niall pointed, and the dragon turned his head in the direction he was pointing in. There was another rumble as a skyscraper on the horizon collapsed in on itself.

The both of them stood in the cold, dry air of the desert. This wasn't an earthquake. It was the work of the gamemasters. They had total control over the entire arena.

And the tithes were at their mercy.

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Dusty sighed. He had spent the morning finding and setting up a base, albeit a little crude. The warehouse he found was located near the middle of Krolas. He had hoped to find a quiet corner of the city to set up camp but the collapsing of buildings had slowly eaten away at the edges of the city, leaving behind impassable rubble. He ended up settling on the warehouse after walking around for an hour or so.

Setting up was not hard. There was an old generator in the warehouse office filled with some gas and by some miracle, he managed to get it running. It powered the lights on the high ceiling, illuminating the entire room and revealing tall, metal shelves that ran lengthwise through the warehouse, all of them stocked with cardboard boxes. A slope in one corner of the warehouse led up to a holding area where equipment such as wooden pallets and a forklift truck were placed.

From the scraps he had collected, Dusty had also put together a few remote-controlled explosives which he set up around his base to buy him some time to escape. He had hoped he'd never had to use it, but from the luck he had had over the past four days had not been... He shook his head. No negative thoughts. Look at the bright side. He had found food and water, enough for him to last him the next one and a half days or so.

Other than almost getting scared out of his wits when the wind slammed the side door close, the afternoon passed by uneventfully. As he was lying down in the office, he heard the front door creak open. Dusty froze. Was it another tithe or just a false alarm?

Then silence.

Just as he was about to relax, a voice cut through the silence.

"You sure he's here?" Teryx.

"Yeah, very sure." Niall.

Shit. He was outnumbered. He contemplated his options as the voices continued to converse in the background. The office room was in a corner of the warehouse. The rows of towering shelves that rose high over his head formed corridors that led to the front entrance where the two intruders were coming from. In the other corner was a back entrance he could leave by, but travelling the entire length of the warehouse would alert the other tithes to his presence.

He had to stay hidden. There were metal lockers in the office and Dusty hurriedly swung them open with a creak. The shelves made it impossible for him to fit into it. The shelves, however, were removable. Quickly and quietly he took metal shelves out of the locker and placed them

carefully inside it. He stepped into the locker and pulled the door close. The fluorescent ceiling light of the room shone through tiny vents in the locker door and Dusty could see the outside through the slits.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the hyena taunted in a singsong tone as he pushed open the office door. He stood in the doorway and took a cursory look around the room. The metal shelves on the floor. A wide grin spread across his face.

"Are you kidding me right now?" He turned and look straight at the locker that Dusty was in.

Fuck. Dusty panicked and fumbled in his pocket. The remote. Where was the remote? His fingers grasped a plastic rectangle and he pressed the button in its centre. There was an explosion in the office as the explosive under the generator went off. The entire office was thrown into disarray as furniture was thrown about and the lockers that Dusty was in fell over. The lights in the warehouse flickered off as the power got cut.

Dusty scrambled out of the locker and out of the office. Niall was still recovering from the shock. "Why you little-" he seethed and dashed after the husky.

He saw the husky disappear between two rows of shelves and he gave chase. The rows of boxes and plastic-wrapped items blurred past him. He was catching up with the husky. As they reached the end of the row of the metal racks, Dusty turned around and weaved back into the adjacent row.

"Stop playing games with me, dog," Niall lashed out. "Don't make this hard for the both of us."

Dusty pressed something in his hand and there was another explosion. The tall shelves at the end of the warehouse began tilting as their broken legs gave way to the weight. The first one fell onto the second, which fell onto the third. Boxes slid off the shelves and fell to the ground with sounds of fragile items smashing. The domino chain of racks was reaching them.

The orange husky sprinted even faster and U-turned down the next row of racks. Niall skidded to a stop and watched Dusty disappear down the racks that were almost crashing down on him. The husky dodged the falling packages as they fell around him. The shelf was almost on top of him and he had to duck. He was almost at the end.

He jumped and skidded on the ground as he exited the row of shelves. The domino chain of metal racks collapsed behind him as the wave of destruction propagated through the rest of the warehouse. He could barely see the hyena from over the fallen shelves. He turned around and made for the exit.

Suddenly a forklift truck barreled into him from the top of the slope from the holding room. Dusty flew through the air and skidded on the ground into a pile of wooden pallets and they toppled over him.

The forklift slowed to a stop as its momentum dissipated and Teryx got off. The blackened dragon walked towards the recovering husky and with a swift movement, he grabbed Dusty's wrist, pulling him out. With one hand, he gripped both of the husky's hands and forcefully raised him up and pinned him to the wall, leaving his collar vulnerable.

Niall had clambered over the shelves, coming over to join the pair. "Good job," the hyena nodded.

Teryx looked into Dusty's eyes, and a soft whimper and a terrified expression met his gaze. The look of a prey. The dragon turned to Niall. "You do the honours," he tilted his head towards the helpless husky.

"Don't mind if I do," Niall sauntered over to the two and reached out for Dusty's collar, his finger outstretched. There was a swift movement and Niall found himself suspended in the air by his collar. Teryx had yanked his metal collar upwards, suspending him in the air.

"What are you doing?" Niall shouted.

"Well, it's obvious isn't it?" Teryx replied flatly. "Eliminating you."

"What the fuck? After I've gotten you all the way here you betray me like this?"

"I don't trust you, and you don't trust me," the latex-coated dragon shrugged. "This is for the best."

In a quick movement, he grabbed Niall's collar gem and plucked it. He let go and let Niall fall to the ground. "I hope you get eliminated next," the hyena cursed.

Purple liquid latex burst out of the collar and stuck to him, pulling his arms and feet together in a rubbery encasement. Satisfied, Teryx watched the entire sequence of events play out with Dusty standing beside him dumbfounded.

Dusty looked up and stared at him blankly. "T-thanks," he stammered.

"No problem," Teryx smiled back casually. He took a look at the gem in his hand and got ready to toss it aside.

"Wait!" Dusty stopped him. "Could you let me take a look at that," he pointed to the black gem.

Teryx raised his eyebrow but tossed the gem to Dusty who caught it in midair and examined it closely. It gleamed in the small slits of light that

"When you're ready, we should leave," the dragon turned and his way to the exit with the husky following behind.

Unbeknownst to the both of them, if Teryx had turned just a few seconds earlier, he would have seen a flash of copper scales disappear from the open doorway, almost as quickly as it had appeared.

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The red carpet stretched out before Teryx and Dusty as they walked through the Krolas' Aviation Museum. The carpet used to be soft and plush but the years of dust had slowly flattened it to the ground in a stiff mat. Various forms of aircraft were mounted in glass displays above their heads, from the first hang glider to the latest spacecraft.

"So, why did you eliminate Niall instead of me?" Dusty asked cautiously.

"Hmm?" Teryx turned to the husky. He turned upwards to the planes above them in thought.

"Well," he began. "I didn't trust him."

"Why not?"

"Pretty sure he'd backstab me at the first chance he gets," Teryx frowned. "Besides, I did agree to team up with you, right?" He gave Dusty a reassuring pat on the back.

There was a rumbling sound in the background as buildings crumbled to dust.

"And if it comes down to us two?"

"Then I don't think we have a choice, yeah?" Teryx shrugged.

"But what if..." Dusty quickly cut himself off. He had wondered if they were the last ones left but that would just turn the dragon against him, and he didn't want to face the dragon that stood almost two heads above him, not while equipped with only his sabre and explosives.

"Yeah?" Teryx tilted his head.

"What if we're the last two?" he blurted out.

"Hmm," Teryx pondered for a moment before studying the husky with a strange look in his eyes. "Hmm. Well if that's the case..." With one sharp motion, he grabbed the husky's collar and lifted him up. Dusty instinctively grabbed Teryx's forearm and kicked his legs in the air desperately.

"H-hey!" he protested. "What are you doing?"

Teryx shot the husky a cold look. "You've been acting suspicious over the past day. Lurking behind me, tinkering with your little devices, and now you're hiding something. Frankly speaking, I don't trust that," he explained. Without giving Dusty time to react, he grasped his other hand around the black gem on the collar and plucked it out.

"No!" the husky protested but Teryx had already dropped his gem to the ground.

The dragon let go of Dusty and the husky fell kneeling with his face towards the ground, breathing heavily.

"Guess we're finding out if we're the last two tithes," Teryx shrugged as his body relaxed and he looked up to the aviation displays.

Suddenly, Teryx was thrown back as the husky tackled him, pinning to the ground. Before he could react, Dusty had already snatched away his gem and stood up, leaving one foot pinning him on the ground. The husky panted as he turned his collar around. While Teryx wasn't looking, Dusty had turned his collar around and adhered Niall's gem to new front, which the dragon had fallen for.

A huge burst of black rubber from the collar splashed around him and Dusty stepped away to safety. The force pushed him to the ground and the latex stuck to his fur and the floor, holding him in place as he struggled to get out. "Ngnn! Get me out!" he protested as his words fell on Dusty's deaf ears. The liquid hardened from the exposure to the air, forming a rigid structure around his kneeling body.

As everything settled down, Dusty looked around waiting for something to happen. Nothing. He shrugged. Perhaps they weren't the last two tithes after all.

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The rising sun marked the start of the sixth day of the Victor's Cup. Tucked away in the centre of the city was a small apartment complex. In contrast to the skyscraper that towered beside it, its buildings were only two or three storeys high, all of them facing the small garden that greeted its visitors. However, the years of neglect had taken its toll, leaving behind sand where there once was grass and stumps where there once were trees and flowerbeds.

Armed with their weapons, Rhogar and Kip were searching through the apartment buildings for other tithes. Rhogar wielded his scimitar in front of him while Kip held his polearm close to his chest with its blade above his head, ready to strike at any time.

They came to the next door and they split up, pressing themselves against each side of the door. Rhogar looked at Kip who nodded in response, and the dragon pushed away from the wall, kicked the door open, and barged in with Kip behind him. Another empty room.

Rhogar sighed. This was getting bothersome. The gamemasters were doing a good job of forcing the tithes together by destroying the city building by building and forcing them into a smaller battleground but there were just too many apartment rooms and office buildings to search. With their food supply running out, playing the waiting game was out of the question.

"Psst. Get down," Kip hissed to Rhogar as he pointed to the window. The dragon quickly crouched down and pressed himself against the wall under the window ledge. The sharkip peered over the edge into the garden below before squatting back down.

"Dusty," he mouthed to the dragon.

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The orange husky trudged through the withered courtyard of a cluster of short apartment buildings. The destruction of buildings had spread to his base, chasing him as he ran for his life as flying shards of glass and metal narrowly missed him. The chaos had led him to this district of the city.

His explorations had led him to this apartment complex. Hopefully, he'd find more supplies to replace the ones he was forced to leave behind when the museum collapsed from above him.

He was walking down an alley between two buildings when he heard footsteps behind him. He whipped around to see a sharkip and copper-scaled dragon approaching him.

"Oh," Dusty said nervously. "Hello?"

The two tithes continued their silent advance on him.

"Crap," he turned around and ran. Rhogar and Kip chased after him. Dusty dashed out the end of the alley and turned. He would have to circle the buildings and escape the complex.

But Rhogar was catching up with him. With a running jump, the dragon landed on the husky and stabbed him with the scimitar. Dusty screamed and convulsed in pain, and Rhogar took the opportunity to grab his collar.

"Wait!" Dusty gasped between his shuddering. "I need your help."

"And why should we help you?" Rhogar challenged.

"Because we need to work together to defeat Teryx. He's too strong," the husky panted. "He almost got me but I escaped."

The dragon eyed him suspiciously. "So? There's two of us and only one of him."

"You don't understand," Dusty explained. "He created this impenetrable fortress around the City Hall Centre and rigged it with traps. If we don't work together, we'll lose to him for sure."

There was the sound of an explosion coming from the lobby of the adjacent skyscraper. The building shuddered as its load-bearing pillars toppled and the walls collapsed on itself, bringing the tower down on it. The ground beneath the tithes started shaking.

"It's coming. We got to run," Dusty warned.

Kip looked at Rhogar nervously. The dragon was conflicted. "Fine," he finally conceded. He got up and pulled the husky to his feet. "Show us the way."

They ran out of the apartment complex as the buildings around them started to shake. Dusty was in the lead, followed by Rhogar and then Kip. The buildings around them were all shuddering in their foundations, threatening fall over and rain deadly debris over the tithes.

They raced down one block and turned down one corner. The tarmac road and concrete pavements cracked from the ground's vigorous shaking, forming rifts and faults that the tithes jumped over.

"It's straight ahead!" Dusty shouted. Suddenly, he tripped and fell to the ground. Rhogar slowed down for him but sped up again when the husky shouted, "Keep going! I'll be fine."

Rhogar dashed on ahead. They just had to defeat Teryx, then Dusty. Then he'd take Kip out. If only the gamemasters updated them on the status of the other tithes.

Wait.

What if they did?

There was a second beep from their collar when Niall was eliminated. If that indicated the elimination of a tithe, then the three beeps so far meant that only him, Kip and Dusty was left.

Which meant Dusty lied.

He turned around to see a grinning Dusty holding Kip in a chokehold. "Help!" Kip gasped.

"You lied. Teryx is out," Rhogar seethed.

"Took you long enough," the husky grinned smugly.

"Let him go," the dragon demanded.

"Sure," Dusty agreed. There was a loud beep sound as he ripped the gem out of Kip's collar, pushed the sharkip to the ground, and ran away.

Bandages shot out from the collar and wrapped the sharkip in layers, mummifying him in a tight bundle of fabric as he fell to the ground. The buildings around him crumbled to the ground and he was whisked away in a flash of light.

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Rhogar gave chase after the escaping husky. Revenge aside, he was close to winning the Cup. He needed to end it today.

They ran past rows of shophouses as their doors were blown open with the explosives inside before they crumbled into rubble. Stray traps were activating on their left and right as the tremors triggered them, sending bursts of rubber and leather everywhere.

Suddenly, Dusty turned around, faced him with his sabre, and charged at him. Sparks filled the air as Rhogar swung his scimitar and parried the incoming blade. The husky swung his blade at the dragon again and he ducked to avoid the blow. With a huff, Rhogar slashed at Dusty who yelped in pain.

The wave of collapsing buildings caught up to them. Dust was filling the air and swirling around them.

Dusty quickly swung his sword at Rhogar, slashing against his shoulders. The dragon gasped as he felt the shocks through his body. But he had to fight it. The two tithes traded blows. There was another huge burst of spark and Dusty was thrown to the ground, landing on sharp bits of concrete on the ground.

Rhogar pounced on Dusty and grabbed his collar. "There can only be one," he grunted and plucked the fifth gem from its socket.

Dusty growled in anger as an orange latex sleepsack stretched out from the collar. As he stumbled backwards, the material pounced on him and bundled him in an inescapable bag, squirming on the ground. There was a flash and the bag was gone.

A loud siren filled the air as the clouds of sand swirled around Rhogar and he too disappeared in a burst of light.

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Rhogar stumbled on the carpeted floor as the world around him faded in before his eyes. The clean hall was furnished with brightly-coloured celebratory ribbons that tastefully livened up the room without looking gaudy. The siren was still ringing in his ears and he shook his head to clear it.

A few figures were standing around the room as if they were ornaments and decoration. A purple latex bag was suspended from the ceiling, wriggling as it swung back and forth. A mummified sharkip was vertically bound against a standing pole.

On the other side of the room, the statue of a kneeling was placed beside a pillar, and further down was another suspended orange sack. A Dutch Angel Dragon was also bundled up and blindfolded on the floor.

All the tithes. Rhogar furrowed his brow as he took in the sight.

"Congratulations," a voice spoke. Apart from the other tithes, the arctic wolf who just spoke was the only other person in the room. The approaching wolf was wearing a white and sharp tailcoat tuxedo with two trailing black triangles that contrasted his grey-white tail behind him.

Decro. The head gamemaster.

Rhogar nodded in acknowledgement.

"You have risen through the ashes and proved yourself in the heat of the battle," the wolf smiled. "Your long journey has now come to an end."

The dragon grunted. He was disgusted with the entire Victor's Cup. People tithed against their will for entertainment. He himself was here to fill a slot that would have otherwise gone to someone unwilling. But for some reason or another, he felt a sensation welling up within him.

Was it a sense of achievement?

Triumph?

Success?

A smile crept up to his lips as he shook the hand Decro offered.

"Well then, let's kick off the celebrations with a Victor's photo shoot," the wolf lead him to the middle of the room where a silver circular dais sat on the ground. The both of them stood in front of the steps of the large dais. "Step on it if you please," Decro smiled.

Over.

It was all over.

Yet something was wrong.

If this was a photo shoot, where were the cameras?

Where was the audience?



The dais. The last trap. He knew it.

He swiftly stepped behind the wolf and pushed him with all the strength he had.

"What the-" the wolf exclaimed as he stumbled onto the metal dais. The disc came to life with a faint hum and a clear liquid splashed out of the sides. It curved upwards around Decro as he recovered and stood up.

"Damn it!" he slammed his fists against the transparent surface which had already hardened into a smooth surface, forming a giant sphere around him. There was a thump but the glass didn't give.

"Gahh!" he screamed. Resin began seeping out from the perimeter of the dais, filling up the bottom of the sphere. "Get me out!" he commanded. Rhogar ignored him and made a dash for the exit before guards came to foil his escape. He pushed the double doors open, disappeared through them, and letting them slam close behind him.

The clear viscous liquid was washing around his feet, clumping his fur together. "Ugh!" he threw himself against the thick glass in agitation. It shuddered but showed no sign of breaking. He slipped down the curved surface and splashed into the resin as it soaked his suit.

Decro stood up angrily. A cloud of purple-black smoke burst around him, filling the sphere with a dark mist. From under the smoke, the wolf's muzzle grew sharper and draconic fangs and horns grew from his maw and head. His eyes glowed red and dark tendrils emerged from his back, twisting and turning in a convoluted mess.

The resin was already up his waist, making it hard to move his lower body and tail. Decro opened his left palm and a dark ball of fire manifested. He flung it at the glass and it exploded in a flash of light. The smoke cleared but the sphere remained intact.

He roared and a huge burst of energy burst from his body. The entire sphere and dais structure shook, threatening to fall. But the resin was rising and weighing everything down, making it harder and harder to topple it. The clear liquid was already up to Decro's neck and its density had lifted him off the ground as he floated in the fluid.

"Gnrr..." he slammed his fist in the resin and it splashed all over his face. It stuck to him, hardening on his fur as he continued to struggle. The globe wasn't going to give. Fuck. He shouldn't have made it that impenetrable. The irony struck him like an unpleasant slap to the face. With a shout of anguish and resignation, his demonic features disappeared in a cloud of smoke. His hard expression turned into one of surprise.

"What the...where am I?" he groaned as he shook his head, trying to clear his mind to make sense of the situation. He was in a large and grand room, trapped in clear ball and suspended in some sticky transparent liquid.

And the liquid level was rising. His eyes widened in fear. "Hey! Help me, someone!" he shouted, just as the resin flooded over his head to the top of the sphere, leaving no air for him. With open palms, he frantically pushed against the glass on all sides, feeling for a way out, but nothing gave.

The resin around him was slowly hardening and he could feel his movements hindered. What was going on? "Help..." he mouthed as the resin solidified around him, leaving him floating in a glass globe with his tailcoat trailing elegantly behind him.

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Rhogar dashed out of the corridor. The exit had to be somewhere. He ran down the carpeted hallways, turning down each corridor only to meet another one. The only sign that he was in a different place were the various signs above the doors that indicated the purpose of that room, from "Ballroom 19" to "Recreational Room 38".

He just needed to keep moving. He could hear the sound of guards behind him, or was that in his imagination? It didn't matter. Just keep running. His salvation finally appeared in the form of a sign that said: "To Main Lobby". The way out.

He pushed through the doors and skidded to a stop as he came face to face to a cold-faced doe. Jayna glared at him with tired eyes, having acquired dark rings under her eyes from her relentless effort in her work. Two rows of six guards were standing beside and behind her with their energy guns pointed straight at him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

"I..." Rhogar grunted at her and his eyes fell to the floor. He needed to choose his words carefully. Was the doe to be trusted? After all, she was the assistant head gamemaster, second only to Decro. He looked back at her to see her raised eyebrow.

"I'm looking for an exit," he finally admitted.

"You're looking for an exit," Jayna repeated flatly. "Uh huh."

Rhogar snorted. Perhaps he made the wrong choice.

"Wait," her jaded eyes suddenly opened wide alert as she peered behind him. "Where's Sir Decro?" she interrogated.

"I'm...not sure," he growled. "He was in one of the rooms I think," he admitted. It wasn't a lie. More of a half-truth.

The doe studied him with a suspicious look and her eyes darted from side to side as she got lost in her thoughts. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a smirk flashed across her lips before disappearing without a trace.

"Go," she ordered in a firm and commanding tone.

"Huh?" the dragon was taken aback.

"The exit is that way," she pointed to a sign mounted against the wall. "Follow the instructions, that should take you out of here."

Rhogar nodded. "Thanks," he said as his feet took him away in a running jog before he turned and sprinted down the corridor.

Jayna turned to the guards. "Seal off Ballroom 1," she ordered. "Make sure nobody enters it until next year."

"Yes ma'am," the guards saluted her and two of them ran through the door, leaving Jayna behind in the silent corridor.

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The revolving doors led to an outdoors flower garden. The afternoon sun shone in the copper dragon's eyes as fragrant scents filled his nostrils. Surrounding the garden were skyscrapers that loomed over the frail flowers in stark contrast.

However, unlike the skyscrapers he had been seeing over the past week, these ones were bustling with life. The light of fluorescent bulbs shone through their windows and people were walking in front of the windows or working at their office desks.

Osceus.

He was in the capital of Osceus.

The Victor's Cup was over, and life goes on. He got into a running sprint through the gravel path that led the way through the garden. The metal gates opened up to a street filled with noisy cars. People were walking on the pavement beside the road, and Rhogar swiftly disappeared among them.

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~ End ~