

Chapter 13

Vel felt strange. He was half awake as he started feeling about. What he felt was enough to finish waking him up. Gone was the familiar feeling of plush fur he was getting used to sinking into. Instead, he felt like he was on a hard surface. He could not even feel the warmth of the giant gnoll body he had grown so used to. In fact, it felt relatively cool. Vel slowly opened his eyes and tried to rouse himself. What he saw left him confused and almost made him think he was dreaming.

He was outside for some reason. Vel had no idea why that was. There was no way any of the gnolls would have done that. He looked around, trying to see what could possibly be going on. It was dark outside, too dark for him to see well. He could not see the light in any windows from the hamlet he had been staying in. When he looked up, he spotted four, possibly five moons, of various sizes. They were all crescent moons and did not provide Vel with much light to see. He could just barely make out some huge plants towering over him at almost the same height as the gnolls. That made him think he was in one of those grass fields outside the hamlet.

It was still a mystery how he managed to get there. And then he heard something out there with him. Realization hit Vel like a horse. This world was scaled to giants, and he was outside with whatever animals may inhabit this world. He remembered what it had been like to fight the monsters back in Adrianople before Iah had come. She considered those things vermin, which meant they were pretty common here. Even with a modified weapon for fighting such creatures, he could only fight something like that in a group. Now, all he had on him was a small knife that was only really a threat to himself, which was probably why Iah let him keep it to begin with.

Vel remained absolutely quiet, hoping that he would be beneath the notice of the giant creatures that must inhabit this world. Then he remembered that Iah said he supposedly gave off a glow that anything could see him by. He was sure she had been honest with him, but he sincerely hoped she had been lying. Vel could hear something breathing in the darkness, something huge. Even though he knew it was probably useless, Vel slipped his knife out and prepared to fight. He remembered pulling the weapons out of the paws of the gnolls, and he was fully aware of just how much damage one lone person could do with a knife. Without a person to pull out his knife, he at least hoped the knife would remain as a constant annoyance for whatever was out there if it chose to attack him.

Then a voice came out of the darkness, "You can put that splinter away, little barbarian. I'm not going to hurt you." Despite the clear insulting tone, the voice had a sophisticated air about it. The accent was different from anyone back in Adrinaople. It was different from General Calvinus back in the provincial capital of Regulbium. However, it still sounded almost like he was dealing with a foreign aristocrat.

"Who's out there," Vel called out hesitantly, pointing his knife in the direction he heard the voice coming from. With how high up that voice was coming from, Vel could only hope the voice was being truthful.

"So it's true, you really can't see at night even though you are bright enough to make it look like daylight out here. I would say that's pathetic, but I'm inclined to believe you were made this way as a safety precaution in the gods' infinite wisdom," the voice said. Even though Vel thought whatever was out there was partially talking to himself, he could also detect some smug condescension directed at him.

Just as Vel was thinking about running, the voice called out again, "Please don't embarrass yourself by running. I'm faster than any of those gnoll savages you've been traveling with, and you could not get away from them either."

It seemed like the creature had guessed what Vel was thinking pretty well. Still, he tried to think of some means of escaping from this situation. Then he heard an exasperated sigh, "Here, let me provide you some light, and then we can talk."

The creature started to recite some strange words that did not translate even with the spell that had been cast on him. He assumed these were the words to some magic spell, and he was proven correct when a ball of light suddenly flared into existence about midway up the titanic stalks of orange grass in the area. The speaker was finally revealed, too, and Vel had to take a step back.

That voice belonged to a creature that was in the size range of the gnolls. Even though he was crouched down, Vel thought he was probably shorter than Hestrihz but noticeably taller than Ryrrg. He was also slenderer than any of the gnolls he had met, but that did not matter much to Vel when the creature could easily crush him under his thumb. The creature was mostly covered in scales, with thick plates running down a long equine neck. Most of the scales Vel could see were various shades of green, but the ones on the top of his head were golden. Vel had never seen a scaled creature with hair before, but this one had a long greenish-white mane that reminded him of a horse, as well as a furred tail of the same color.

Despite having scales, the shape of the creature's head reminded him more of a deer or an antelope, especially with the long-curved horns that the creature had. Those horns were also more ornate in appearance than anything Vel had ever seen, as if they had been molded by the gods themselves. Looking down at the creature's legs, he saw it had cloven hooves, which left a chill running down Vel's spine. This creature had the look of an herbivore about him. Considering his experience with the other giants of his kind, his survival chances had just dropped significantly.

The only difference between this herbivore and the ones he had seen after Iah and her clan had butchered them was how he was dressed. All the others had been dressed as warriors. This one, however, was dressed more like a noble. He wore an elaborate purple and gold tunic adorned with jewels around the neck that were of such size that he could have probably purchased a small kingdom with them.

This only served to confuse Vel. There was no way this creature could not be someone important. Why would such an individual be out in the middle of the field just to kill him? There had to be something more going on here. Just as he was about to start questioning the creature, he held up a hand to silence Vel and started speaking instead.

For some reason that Vel could not figure out, the mystery creature sounded exasperated as he said, "To answer your questions, and please try to keep up, I am a kirin. My name is Masumi. I'm a member of what those gnolls would call an elder race. Yes, I do think you are a disgusting little pest, and I would crush you like one in a more just world. Unfortunately, I need you alive for my own plans. And no, that plan does not involve mana powder. No, correction, it does, but not for the reasons you are thinking of. There, is that everything? No. Well, get into my hand and I'll explain more on the way."

Vel's mind was racing. The kirin, Masumi, had been answering his questions as fast as he could think them up, faster even, without him having to voice a single one of them. Masumi had been speaking quickly, like he was trying to rush his way through the one-sided conversation. At first, Vel thought the creature was reading his mind, but that did not seem like it was it. The kirin had been answering questions before he even knew to ask them. Vel had heard tales of oracles kept in a temple closer to the heart of the Empire, but he had never believed they were real. These titans were like things out of legends, though, so it

Illustration by SixSydes



was possible they had abilities like out of legends, too. He had already seen them using magic, after all.

As Vel looked at Masumi's hand, lying on the ground before him, he could not help but hesitate to get in it. He had made his contempt clear for Vel already. Frankly, knowing what he now knew about herbivores, stepping into his hand felt more intimidating than it had been to step into Iah's hand that first time.

"Please don't make me grab you. My fingers aren't built for handling creatures as frail as yourself," Masumi testily said as he wiggled his fingers, bringing their tips to Vel's attention. Indeed, the kirin did not have hands like a human or padded and clawed fingers like the gnolls. While his palm had a soft, leathery look, the tips of his fingers were a different matter. They looked like they were tipped with the same hard material as his hooves. Despite Iah's immense size, her pads were surprisingly soft and could handle him safely as long as she was careful. Those hard-looking fingers did not look like they could handle him nearly as easily.

He did think of running for just a brief moment. But, the kirin was the one providing him with light. Even if he could run away before Masumi could snatch him up, he would be stumbling around in the darkness in a forest made up of stalks of grass taller than any building he had ever seen. So, with a resigned sigh, he walked up to the kirin's hand and climbed into his palm.

Vel had barely finished climbing into Masumi's hand before he found himself being lifted into the air. Unlike Iah or the other gnolls, he did not care to wait for his little passenger to get comfortable first. Vel nearly lost his balance and fell during the ascent. He broke into a cold sweat as it dawned on him that this creature cared little for his wellbeing. He was already missing Iah and the gnolls very much.

"Oh, stop whining about your treatment," Masumi said. "You're just fine."

Vel found the way the kirin seemed to know what he was about to say quite disturbing. He wanted to keep his thoughts to himself, but he still wanted to know what was really going on. However, before he could start speaking, Masumi started speaking once more. Thankfully, it was not a response to something Vel had not yet said this time. Instead, the kirin had taken out a necklace with ten managlasses attached to it and was rattling off another spell.

As Vel wondered what it was, a dark sphere suddenly surrounded his body. While he could still see through it, the area around him looked considerably darker. It was not as bad as when he first showed up, but it was bad enough. The sphere only extended about as far out as his hands could reach, so there was plenty of room for himself and the sphere in Masumi's palm. It was a little disconcerting being inside it and

Vel tried to leave, but the sphere followed him around so that he always remained in the center of it. Vel thought Masumi noticed his displeasure about the situation because a smug smile crossed his face.

The kirin did not bother taunting him as he was already starting another spell. Vel watched in wonder this time as Masumi's form suddenly started shifting. Scales suddenly disappeared and were replaced by black fur. His mane changed to the same shade of black and shortened noticeably. The horns on his head shifted to a more mundane appearance. Even his clothes took on a more drab appearance, changing to a more well-worn shirt and pants of green and brown that looked worn, as if the outfit were years old. The noble-looking kirin had been replaced by a creature he was somewhat more familiar with, a black sable antelope.

With his transformation over, Masumi bent down to pick up a cane that Vel had not noticed earlier. Once again, Masumi did not bother to ensure his palm remained stable for Vel. He had to cling to the creature's palm for dear life, and Vel had a newfound appreciation for just how much care Iah and the other gnolls had taken with him. The ride back up was not any better. But when Masumi started walking, things did stabilize a bit, at least as long as he remembered he was carrying a human.

"So, what is this..."

Masumi interrupted, "The sphere keeps your light hidden from others. It also makes you look like a small sack to others. I don't want others wondering about the strange little creature I am holding once we get to Cado. Just please keep quiet so you don't ruin the illusion."

"If you don't need me for mana powder," Vel started before being interrupted once more.

"I need," Masumi started.

This time, Vel did not fall into silence and powered through what he was going to say, "Then what do you need me for?"

When Vel saw one of Masumi's eyebrows twitch in annoyance, he could not help but smile. The way the fingers in his hands twitched was a bit more threatening. It was clear the kirin had just thought about crushing him, but Vel's temper was flaring a little bit, too. If the kirin was annoyed with him, then that was fine. Let him be.

Masumi paused to compose himself before continuing, "I need you to help alter the course of fate."

“So you can see into the future,” Vel asked, once more having to try and speak over Masumi’s attempt to interrupt him.

“Yes, do try to keep up.”

The kirin sounded annoyed with just having to listen to him at all. Vel was aware that if he was not needed, Masumi would have crushed him without a second thought by then. Masumi did not care much for him, and the feelings were mutual. Vel was about to ask his next question, but Masumi spoke before he could, “I can see five minutes into the future.”

Masumi’s mood seemed to improve dramatically with that statement. He sounded proud about that fact and was more than happy to go on talking about it, “I can see further into time than any other kirin alive today. Most of them can only see a few seconds into the future, you know. That little amount of time is more confusing than helpful.”

Vel was left confused. He thought that Masumi must have been able to see further into the future than that. How else would he have plans to use him to change fate? That moment of confusion gave Masumi the chance to answer Vel’s question once again without him needing to ask, “I said alive today. Alas, we kirin, all the elder races for that matter, have fallen a long way. In times long past, the most powerful kirin of a generation might have been able to see thousands of years into the future. And there were ways of boosting one’s ability to see even further. I am acting off instructions handed down by my people for a very long time.”

Thinking about the implications of what had just been said, Vel asked, “Is fate, destiny, or whatever really set then?”

Masumi snorted, “Of course not. Fate is constantly in motion. Just the act of trying to predict the future can end up altering it. Try getting into a fight with something over five times as strong as yourself with better reaction time and see just how set the future is. However, some events are more likely to occur than others, and the fact that our worlds are converging means that a long line of bad choices will finally have their consequences.”

“But I’ve heard that worlds have converged many times before.”

“This time is special, though. I’m sure you have noticed that beings from other worlds are a bit larger than yourself.”

“That’s been hard to miss.”

Masumi continued, "A race of your size appearing has long been a warning, but few others have believed us, which I begrudgingly can't blame them for. My people have been known to lie about our predictions of the future to confuse our enemies. My people have tried to keep the prophecy concerning your people a secret, though, all in an attempt to maintain the power we elders have always held."

Vel objected, "How can you be sure whatever your prophecy is about concerns my people? Surely, we can't be the only race that aren't giants."

Masumi smirked, "Tell me, did you recognize my true form? Did it resemble anything you have ever heard of?"

"No."

"And what about this form?"

"You look like an antelope."

"And what about the gnolls? I'll bet they looked like hyenas to you."

Vel looked at Masumi curiously as he responded, "That's right."

"Gnolls and hyenas are different races. Hyenas are a midsized race and lack the mane spikes of gnolls," Masumi lectured as if he were talking to a somewhat slow student, "And like you, they are a short-lived race. All the short-lived races resemble feral beasts from your world, even ones that no longer exist. Well, I haven't confirmed *every* single one, but I've seen enough to believe it is true. The long-lived races and we elders may only be mythological to you, if you've heard of any of us at all. It's how the gods chose to warn us all of this convergence's significance."

Vel was overwhelmed with all this information. He had only just been getting used to the fact that his world was merging with a realm of giants. It was something that he thought he would not have to deal with. Vel had thought he would get turned into some sort of magic powder for the use of those giants long before he had to truly deal with living in a world of giants. And now he was finding out that there was much more to it. Now there were ancient prophecies and godly machinations. This was all too much for some simple frontier farmer to deal with.

Vel's silence as he thought was interrupted by Masumi, sounding like he was answering questions Vel had probably been a few minutes away from even thinking of asking, "It wasn't always destined to be you. It could have been any number of humans. Events just happened to unfold so that you were the one that did end up here."

“So then, someone was always meant to end up at that inn, and that person was always going to be abducted by you,” Vel asked.

“Oh no, like I said, the future is always in flux. Even my own involvement was not guaranteed,” Masumi said casually, “I’ve been looking into the future for a month, waiting for events to settle and to try and fine tune things in hopes of a positive outcome.”

“Wait, I thought you said you could only see a few minutes into the future.”

“If you’re going to insist on making me hear you twice, please don’t make me repeat myself,” Masumi sounded testy, “I also said there are ways of boosting my ability. Unfortunately, that means I have to work with others. But, with their help, I have been able to see a week into the future.”

“Then you know how all this is going to turn out? Care to clue me in?”

Masumi let out an exasperated sigh at that question, “I’m afraid my knowledge of the future ends about two hours from now. Not all of my conspirators were exactly the best of allies. Our cooperation came to an end about a week ago, even though I denigrated myself to pleading with them. You have no idea how lucky I am that I actually ended up with you in my possession.”

“And why am I so important?”

“I need you to help me survive long enough to make a difference,” Masumi said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Me help you survive,” Vel said incredulously, looking at the titan that could crush him like a bug up and down, “How?”

“I’ll let that be a surprise for you,” Masumi said with a smug smile.

Vel tried to prod him for more information, but Masumi would not reveal any more. This made Vel wonder if the kirin was withholding information from him for the good of the future. Then he noticed the smile on Masumi’s face, and Vel thought he might be amused by how much the lack of information was annoying him. Vel could only stare at the giant, stunned if that might be true. The future was at stake here, and this giant was keeping secrets to get back at Vel for annoying him. If he was typical of kirin and the other elder races, Vel could understand why Iah talked about them with such contempt.

Eventually, Vel started to notice some light over the horizon. The sun was finally starting to come up. And as it did, Masumi started casting another spell. His appearance

started changing once more, but not as radically as before. Instead of completely changing species, his black fur started to get little flecks of grey, and he looked older around the eyes. Masumi also started walking with a limp and using the cane he had been carrying.

Apparently, Masumi had waited until then to complete his costume. Vel wondered why he had waited so long to do so. Sure, they were out in the middle of nowhere, but it was always possible they could have run into someone. Vel wondered if Masumi might have been vain enough to not want to come off as old in Vel's eyes, a creature that Vel was sure thought of him about as well as he thought of bugs. If anything, Iah might have undersold the elder races.

Not long after completing his change, they finally emerged from the field of grass. What Vel saw then left him stunned even through the dark sphere he found himself in. It was the walls of a city, except five times Masumi's height. Vel had never even imagined a structure of such size before, and he could not picture a human army ever penetrating such a fortification.

The gates to the city were opening for the morning just as they approached, and out emerged a fearsome sight. Vel could not help but be amazed that the gate guards for this city were dragons, each of which was a match in size for the gnolls. All of them seemed to come closer to Iah in size, too. One of them was different from the others, more serpentine in nature, but Vel thought it still had the look of a dragon about it. Each one would have towered over Ryrrg, just as they did Masumi. There were also several smaller wyverns that were around belly height to the dragons that were assisting the guards.

Just about all of them were casting hungry looks in Masumi's direction. Vel looked up at Masumi and was surprised that he did not seem the least bit bothered by this. If anything, he looked more like he was trying to hide a condescending sneer. The kirin sure was confident, and Vel hoped he had good cause to be.

One of the dragons eventually moved to block Masumi's way and said, "Hold on there, meat. What brings you to Cado?"

Masumi let his cane rest against his side so he could pull out a paper from his clothing, "Field Inspector Jiro, here to arrange for the harvest of the fields surrounding your fair city."

One of the dragon guards snorted, "It's about time. Been talk of just burning it down for a while now."

"Good, then I'll be on my way."

“Hold on there, old timer. You need to pay for your anti-predation credentials,” one of the dragons said with a patronizing smile.

Vel watched as Masumi pulled out what looked like a gold coin with a square hole secured by a silk thread running through the hole. The coin had what looked like a winged dragon and a serpentine dragon circling the coin. Then Masumi said, “I already have one.”

The dragons laughed, “That’s for traveling the countryside. You’ll need another for getting around in Cado.”

“Since meat started to get harder to come by. We’ve got a lot of hungry mouths to feed, and even a scrawny old specimen like you goes a long way,” a dragon guard responded, not even bothering to hide the hunger in his eyes.

After that, they haggled for price. Vel was unfamiliar with their currency, so he had no idea whether or not Masumi was getting ripped off when they finally settled on a price. After that, Masumi was allowed into the city, and once they were far enough away, Vel got a little insight into how the negotiations had actually gone when Masumi muttered, “Greedy dragons. Always finding an excuse to get as much as they can out of everyone.”

After that, they mostly walked in silence. Masumi was not in much of a talking mood. He was getting a lot of hungry looks from the primarily predatory residents of the city, and he had the extra credentials he had been given by the guards out. Vel did not remain quiet because he had been asked, though. Part of the reason was that he also did not want to bring any unwanted attention to Masumi with all those hungry eyes looking in his direction. The other reason was that he was just in such a state of awe that it did not even occur to him to talk.

Even the small hamlet had been amazing to Vel, but this was an actual city of titans. The scale of things was simply stunning. Even the most simple of buildings he was looking at would have taken people decades, if not centuries, to build. Seeing a city meant to accommodate beings of such different sizes was also odd, but they did look like they had made it work. Some of the larger buildings were like things out of legends. And Vel could not even see anything like a palace or buildings he thought he would find in whatever their equivalent of the nobles’ quarters.

Then there were the people themselves. While dragons were the most common, they did not even come close to being a majority of the beings he saw. Vel saw a variety of birds, reptiles, and mammals. There were even a few fish people, along with a scorpion that looked like something out of his nightmares. Then Vel thought of something thanks

to the scorpion. When Masumi had mentioned that there were people in his world for every feral beast in his world, he had not thought bugs were included in that statement. But if there were, worlds had converged into the Patchwork world for far longer than he imagined. Then he saw some dogs pass by him and understood that it also applied to animals humans had domesticated. His mind could not grasp how large Patch had to be by this point in time.

As time passed, Vel's mind started to slowly adjust to the scale of everything within the city. When that happened, some of the awe he held for the city began to fade. Everything was huge for sure, larger than anything humans could hope to compare to, but something just felt off. It was the amount of activity in the city and the number of buildings he saw.

They had entered what Vel thought must have been a residential district for the average person, based on how plain the buildings appeared to be. Now, it looked like they had crossed into a market district. The buildings were larger, more brightly decorated, and there were plenty of buildings with large window displays showing off goods for sale. It had taken Masumi very little time to make that trip even though he was putting on an act of walking slower than normal with his cane. If this city was on the same scale as Adrianople, he doubted it would have had half the population, but it had walls that were on the scale of the provincial capital, Regulbium, possibly even better. Either this city, no, this town, was of strategic importance, or it really was a city by the standards of the titans. Vel remembered how Iah had doubted him when he talked about anything concerning the number of people in the Empire, but it was really hitting him why she had been that way.

Masumi did not take long to start approaching an opulent-looking building that was still within the merchant's quarter. It was not a shop, though. To Vel, it looked more like a manor for a well-off merchant. Vel had seen only one or two other manors, and like those, this one was guarded. What was unusual was that this one had dragon guards, the serpentine ones, along with a few other races. While there was a dragon patrol he had spotted in the area, they did not look like they were there to guard any specific property, besides this one.

There were other guards, too, quite a few of them by the standards of the titans. Vel spotted a couple of wild dogs, small by the standards of the giants, walking around the building, alongside a midsized greyhound. A couple of large, burly wolves appeared to be part of another group patrolling an area inside the fence surrounding the manor. However, one of the guards at the gate caused Vel to go pale, and he nearly backed right out of Masumi's hand in an attempt to get away.

Only the fact that Masumi noticed what looked like a suicide attempt on Vel's part saved him from plummeting to the ground. The kirin in disguise shook Vel back into the

center of his palm, being none too gentle about it, before faking a coughing fit and huddling against a wall. He looked around in what he probably thought was a circumspect manner but seemed very obvious in Vel's eyes. The giant was not used to being clandestine.

Masumi was fuming about what Vel had just done as he said, "What was that all about? Are you trying to jeopardize everything?"

"For one thing, you have not even told me exactly what is in jeopardy," Vel shot back, "And for another, you did not tell me we were going to venture into hell itself."

Masumi looked thoughtful for a moment and then sounded like he was choking as he tried to hold back laughter. Vel thought he was being mocked as he attempted to control the volume of his own voice as he shot back, "What's so funny?"

"I thought that prediction had to be from some unlikely future," Masumi sounded amused, "You're more amusing than I thought for a superstitious savage."

"Superstitious? There is an actual cerberus guarding those gates," Vel said in a mixture of anger and fear.

"And you think they guard the gates of hell," Masumi still sounded like he was trying to hold back laughter, "Well, all those extra sets of eyes do help to make them pretty decent guards, but I can assure you there is nothing that special about them. In the end, they're just a three-headed dog. You should see some hydras. And yes, those are real, too."

Vel was wary of what Masumi had to say, but it was not like he really had much choice in what the kirin did. Masumi continued on his way to the manor, and Vel did his best to stay quiet and unnoticed. Even when Masumi talked with the cerberus as if it were perfectly normal, Vel could not help but be nervous. It was a great relief when they passed by the creature of hell, but that made Vel pensive about what lay in store for him in the manor.

What he did find inside came as a pleasant surprise. Vel had never been in such a place of wealth, so he had nothing to compare it to. But he still knew he was looking at vast wealth when he saw it. There were statues, paintings, and other works of art adorning the halls and rooms of the manor that he was sure had to be worth a small fortune. This place would have been impressive to Vel regardless of size.

He was so busy gawking at everything that he missed Masumi straightening up and saying a few more magic words. It was not until the kirin stopped in place to say

something that Vel was broken out of his trance, "That feels better. Never did like having to impersonate the lesser, uh, the *younger* races."

Vel turned to face Masumi and found he looked like himself again. This prompted Vel to ask, "Why drop the disguise now? I don't suppose this manor is yours?"

Masumi chuckled, "You seriously underestimate me. But I guess that can't be helped with you being a savage and all. This humble little manor belongs to one of my...coconspirators. And this isn't their primary residence either. It's more of a covert meeting place."

"And we're supposed to be meeting with those coconspirators?"

"In time, once they wake," Masumi said, "But they are complacent predators. And if there is something overconfident blood drinkers enjoy more than their savagery, it's their nap time. So, we have a bit of a wait."

"And what do we do until then?"

"For one thing, I would like you to rub yourself against this," Masumi said, holding up the handle of his cane next to Vel.

"Why," a confused Vel asked.

"Just increasing my," Masumi paused, "our chances of success."

Vel still did not know what was happening but did as compelled. This obviously had something to do with the kirin's future predictions. He wished he knew what was truly going on. But this was important enough for Masumi not to crush him, though Vel could tell the titan ached to do just that. Of course, there was the chance that this could all be some sort of trick, but he would have to deal with that eventuality if it arose.

After Vel did what was asked of him, Masumi set the cane aside and walked on into the manor. Vel then asked, "So what do we do now?"

"We have to wait for everyone else to arrive that needs to be here," Masumi said, "Until then, we find somewhere to sit down and continue to not enjoy each other's company."