

Victor BK6: Ch1

Book 6: Chapter 1: Rockfall

Guapo's hooves echoed hollowly on the wide, wooden archway of the bridge as Victor rode his spirit steed toward the center of the expanse. The river below rushed and rumbled as it coursed over the massive granite boulders that dotted its bed, and as a gust of powerful, chilly wind rushed over him, Victor shuddered at the idea of falling into those white-capped waters. He urged Guapo to stop as he reached the apex, and then, with a clear view ahead, he studied the jagged, enormous peaks of the Granite Gates.

Even at this distance, they were awe-inspiring. He could see how those who'd named them had thought of them as gates—at this distance, the range was like a gray wall blocking off one part of the world from another, with the two peaks directly ahead standing shoulder to shoulder, separating a narrow canyon. He could imagine them shifting slightly and closing off the passage. Even with a few days' travel worth of distance between him and the mountains, they were gigantic, seeming to stretch up into the sky, their sharp peaks scraping the border between sky and stars.

Borrius told him the town was called, aptly, Rockfall, and the people there were primarily employed in the Imperial granite quarry at the mouth of the pass. He could see activity on the road and outside the town; it looked like wagons heading in through the gate, not out, which made sense—it would be dark in the next hour or so. Victor turned, Guapo stepping lithely, rotating, sensing his desire.

Far down the road, looking much like a row of insects in the distance, Victor saw his army approaching. A column of soldiers, flanked by two narrower columns of cavalry, and behind them, like beetles following ants, were the wagons, moving through the dust stirred up by the mounted soldiers. It was an impressive sight—their numbers had swelled as they advanced over the hills and plains at the southeastern edge of the Ridonne Empire. The last count Victor had read showed that their ten cohorts were back to full strength and then some.

Borrius hadn't created a new cohort, though they had the numbers to support nearly two more. He wanted them overfull, wanted them resilient to losses. After all, if things went as expected, they'd be fighting soon. Victor was ready for it. He'd been ready for a fight ever since the Empire had tried to crush their army before their campaign even got started. The Ridonne hadn't been eager to test his wrath, though. They'd not made a peep, not shown a single Imperial soldier to Victor's scouts.

Even the towns and villages they'd passed through were deserted of Imperial officials. Word traveled fast, and adjudicators, soldiers, and other representatives of the Empire seemed to flee ahead of the army's arrival. Victor was fine with that. He figured the town down the road would be similarly bereft of Imperials, though they'd probably slink back home after the army passed through. For all he knew, they simply doffed their Imperial garb and hid among their friends and family. He turned and looked back at the mountains.

They were impressive, no doubt. Much higher, sharper, and ominous than the ones they'd skirted around the Starfall Sea. Much, much bigger than anything he'd seen around Tucson. Rellia and Borrius were nervous about passing through them—something about “wild folk” and rock trolls. Victor wasn't worried. If something terrible attacked them, he'd deal with it, and if it was just a tribe of monsters tossing rocks down on them, the army would endure. He clicked his tongue, and Guapo started forward, walking with the drum of hooves on hollow boards toward the bridge's far side.

He'd charged ahead of the army, wanting a bit of peace, some time to himself. Nobody tried to keep pace with Guapo, and the other commanders had grown accustomed to him ranging forth. While good for such a considerable force, the army's pace was mind-numbingly slow to Victor, and if it weren't for his daily sprints on the Mustang, he'd probably have gone mad. Weeks of travel weren't his cup of tea, and the passage over these mountains couldn't be over soon enough as far as he was concerned.

He paused at the far side of the bridge, breathing in the fresh, cool air, examining the well-traveled road and the sparse plains between the river and the hamlet. He figured they should march the army a few miles beyond the settlement and set camp for the night. They'd push on toward the pass early in the morning. "No sense lingering around the town, making everybody nervous, eh, boy?" He scratched Guapo's neck.

Looking up, he saw three figures riding out of the hamlet toward him. They rode animals that looked similar to vidanii, though they were stouter and shaggier, and their horns were thicker and swept backward in a curl, kind of like a ram's on Earth. As they grew nearer, Victor saw they were all Ardeni. They all wore mismatched armor, though some looked like it was well made. The one in the middle was a bit older, a bit stockier, and carried two crescent-moon axes hanging from his belt. The others both had bows on their backs and had various weapons strapped to their saddles, from javelins to a fur-wrapped great sword.

Victor had begun to grow used to such sights—adventurers and fortune seekers coming to join the expedition. They made up a sizeable percentage of the new recruits they'd picked up along the march. The trio brought their mounts to a halt a good fifty yards from Victor, and the bigger one cleared his throat. "Well met, sir."

"Hello." Victor sat still, his hands folded on the muscular mound of Guapo's shoulders. Lifedrinker buzzed eagerly on his back, perhaps trying to urge him to leap into battle simply because three armed men stood before him. He grinned at her eagerness; he could relate.

"Are you him? Victor?" the same man asked, eyeing Victor through wide, silver-blue eyes.

"Of course he is, Thed. You ever seen another like him? Or that beast he's riding." The second speaker was on Thed's left, and he clicked his tongue, urging his sturdy mount forward a couple of steps. "We was surprised to see you come over the bridge so soon—word is your army's still a few hours out."

"I'm Victor. What can I do for you, fellas?"

"We," Thed said, nudging his mount's side with his heels, moving it forward so he was, once again, in the lead, "were wanting to join up with ya. We heard tale of your expedition some weeks back and rode like a banshee-chased boyii to get here ahead of you all. We made it with some time to spare; spent near a week at the tavern over yonder." He gestured back toward the walled hamlet. "Can't say I could stomach another pot of the stew the innkeep makes. What do you say, sir? Are you recruiting?"

“We’re all tier-four, sir; been making our fortune testing the dungeons out near the free cities.”

“Fourth tier, huh? That’s good.” Victor nodded, rubbing his chin, looking further and further down his nose at the three men as he and his big Mustang grew closer. He stopped when he was only a few feet away, and the men’s faces had lost a shade of blue, growing pale as they watched him loom over them; he wasn’t even in his titanic aspect. Still, he let just a fraction of his aura start to bleed out, touching the three adventurers, and watched to see if they flinched or, worse, fled. To his surprise, they held up all right, only tightening their grip on their reins and grimacing as they fought to control their mounts.

He grunted and pulled back his aura, nodding. “Good. All right, head up the road to the army. When the scouts stop you, tell them I sent you to speak to Sarl, the captain of the Glorious Ninth. You’ve got a lot of work to do to earn one of their armbands, but if you work hard and fight bravely, you’ll find yourselves surrounded by the best soldiers in the legion.”

The three men babbled their thanks, speaking over each other to profess their gratitude, and then they urged their mounts around him, cantering over the bridge in a noisy rumble. Victor grinned, always pleased to see more strong recruits joining the ranks. He’d just turned back toward the mountains when he heard a thunderous roar echoing through the air, reverberating over the wooden bridge. “Uvu,” he chuckled.

A few moments later, he felt more than he heard Uvu pad over the wooden planks and then stir some gravel nearby. “Hey, Valla.” He didn’t turn to watch her approach.

“Getting better at noticing people coming up behind you?”

“Not hard when Uvu’s scaring the shit out of some poor adventurers.”

“They didn’t react nearly as badly as the last ones who came along.” Valla and Uvu stopped on his left side, and she smiled up at him in greeting. Victor felt his heart racing as he looked down at her, saw those big teal eyes, and basked in the brightness of her smile. She really didn’t smile often, and he felt like it made the few she threw out every day a lot more meaningful. He supposed there was a lesson in there for him—something about swearing too much, perhaps.

He wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked to him at that moment, with the reddish-orange sunset lighting her eyes and face with a sort of golden glow. He’d tried that, though, and when he was blunt about his attraction, it seemed to chase her off, make her withdraw a bit. He’d found that if he just played it cool and made himself available, she was apt to show him a little affection, hinting at the heat they’d shared the night of the battle with the Imperials. She definitely wasn’t

ready for an open, romantic relationship, but he felt like slow and steady might win the race. He hoped. The truth was, Victor had no damn idea if he was doing things right—maybe he should be more forward. On a whim, he said, “Your eyes look pretty in this light.”

“Is that any way to speak to your Primus?” Her voice was scolding, but her eyes were laughing.

“Yeah, when she’s got eyes like polished turquoise, and the sunset makes ‘em look like they were dipped in gold . . .”

“All right, enough, Sir Legate.” She chuckled and, as some color flooded her cheeks, turned toward the hamlet. “We’ll push past before camping?”

“Yeah, I think that’s for the best. No sense panicking the locals.”

“Agreed. Imagine how it would look if we encamped outside their walls. The children would be terrified. Let’s march five miles or so past the walls. The moons will be out tonight, and the soldiers are sturdy. I know you’re eager to get through the pass in any case.”

“Damn right. I know this is important, and the rewards will be worthwhile, at least for everyone back there,” he jerked his thumb toward the army, “but I’m ready to do something else for a while. I’ve been talking to Khul Bach, and the old bastard still doesn’t think I’m anywhere near ready to do what he wants me to do on Zaafor. I think we need to find a place to adventure when we’re done here. A world that’ll challenge us and where we can learn ways to push ourselves into new improvements.” He frowned momentarily, reaching down to tug her chin toward him so their eyes locked. “You’re coming with me, right?”

“That’s my plan.” She nodded gravely, pushing his arm away. Then, in a softer voice, she added, “Not sure how I’m going to explain it to Rellia . . .” She always used her mother’s name when she was frustrated.

“We’ll cross that one when we come to it. She’s going to have her hands full, anyway.” He clicked his tongue, and Guapo started forward at a walk. Valla and Uvu kept pace with him. “I mean with the kingdom building and whatnot.”

“Indeed, she’ll be a pig in a banquet.”

Victor looked at her sharply, thinking the System had broken down for a moment when he heard the word “pig” come out of her mouth. Then he remembered all the bacon and stew laden with pork he’d eaten in this world and nodded. “Trips me out that you have an animal here close enough to the one I have on my world that the System uses the same word. It’s weird the System doesn’t call holbyis ‘sheep,’ too, ‘cause they’re pretty damn close.”

Valla didn’t reply immediately, just looking at him with narrowed eyes, perhaps trying to make sense of his words. After a moment, she shook her head slightly. “The System is certainly

interesting. Have you given any thought to the treasures we found after the battle? And the more potent items Edeya discovered in the valuables you had her catalog for you?”

Victor grunted, his mind turning to the list of items she was referring to. The army had scoured the fallen Imperials, taking their weapons and armor and recovering over a thousand storage containers, from rings to pouches to magical backpacks. Valla wasn't talking about the more mundane treasures—beads, jewelry, gems, various potions, lesser armor, or weapons. No, she was talking about the half-dozen racial enhancement items, a conscious rapier, and a few magical artifacts that would enhance users of certain affinities.

None of those treasures were of much use to Victor. He could eat all of the racial enhancements and probably only gain one rank. He didn't want the rapier, and none of the artifacts were much good for a Spirit Caster. Edeya had cataloged a trove of wealth, and he'd taken ownership of it all; he could pass some out here and there as rewards or use the money for purchases at another time. The racial enhancements were from the field, though, found in an overturned Imperial supply wagon. Could he just hand them to whomever he wanted? If Edeya had been the one to find them, he would have had her consume one immediately.

“I told you I want Edeya to have at least one.”

“And I reminded you that the unit that recovered those items spread the word around camp. Soldiers are eager to see how you'll assign them.”

Victor nodded, thinking it over while they rode. They were only a half mile or so from the town, and he wanted to assure the people within that the army would be passing by without any threat to their populace. “I have the lists from the captains. The ones I used to hand out medals and commendations.”

“Yes, but you already did that.”

“I've been thinking about this for a few days now, and I've come up with a plan. First, I don't care what anyone says; Edeya's getting one of the racial enhancements. After that, I think I'll put together a list. I'm going to write down all the treasures we have available, and I'll institute a token system.” He looked at Valla, instantly knew what she was about to say, and cut her off, “Yeah, I'm ripping off the Warlord's idea. We're going to have Campaign Tokens, and soldiers will earn one for every battle they're in.”

“That won't help if everyone has the same amount of tokens . . .”

“No, hold on, let me finish. They'll also earn them by doing special tasks, like scouting in dangerous areas or training recruits. They can earn extra tokens for valor, for which they have to be nominated by a higher-ranking soldier. We can flesh out the system and add some details, but I think if we have a bunch of items for, like, one or two tokens, many soldiers will blow them early, and then it will be a race for the more frugal ones to build up enough for the better items.”

"I like it." Valla didn't say more, as they were nearly in front of the gate to the little town. Victor admired the hard work that had gone into the wall—carefully chiseled stone blocks, likely cut with Energy, fit together nearly seamlessly to form a rather formidable barrier almost twenty feet high, and if the tunnel behind the gate were any indication, about half that wide. Nobody was present outside the gate or further down the road. Victor had watched them all going inside as he and Valla approached. The gate was open, though, so he didn't think they'd terrified the populace too much—that, or they were afraid of offending him.

After they sat outside the gates for a few moments, Victor heard some commotion from the tunnel, and then a woman appeared, walking hesitantly through the tunnel and out the gate. She was clad in soft-looking yellow linens, and a white fur cap sat atop her bright green curls. She was an Ardeni and young, with little freckles dotting her nose and cheeks. She stopped by the gate and looked from Victor to Valla to Uvu, then back to Victor. "May we help you, Lord and Lady?"

"We just want to assure you that we'll be passing by. The troops marching past your town will not seek to enter or harass any of your citizens." Valla spoke—Victor was used to her doing so when they met strangers together.

"Will it enrage you if we close the gates until you've passed by?" The girl, for Victor didn't think she could be older than fifteen, shrank back a little as she spoke.

"That's fine." Victor shrugged. "Why'd they send you out here instead of the mayor or whoever's in charge?"

"I lost the lottery . . ."

"What the fu . . ."

"Hang on," Victor said before the girl could fully turn around. He reached into his dimensional container and fished out a small bag of beads. "Catch." He tossed them to the girl, and she deftly snatched the pouch out of the air, causing the beads to click together satisfyingly. "Don't share that with those chickenshit assholes in there."

"Thank you!" Before Victor could reply, she was gone, slipping through the gates, already swinging shut—the operator must have heard Valla's words.

"A lottery," Victor scoffed, clicking his tongue to get Guapo moving again. "Come on; let's pick out our campsite. I want to set up my house and kick my feet up for a while before Borrius starts boring me." He shook his head, laughing at his choice of words. Valla didn't join in, so he stared at her for a minute until she broke, a smile spreading her lips as her low, soft laugh joined his.

Book 6: Chapter 2: The Granite Gates

It took the army another two days to climb into the wide pass of the Granite Gates. As they climbed the foothills, Victor saw that the wide, gravel road followed a sort of natural cleft between the two

nearest, enormous peaks of the range. Enormous was an understatement. The mountains began to take on a kind of mythical proportion as the distance shortened. Gigantic, dark gray, very lightly treed slopes rose to staggering heights, blotting out the sky, becoming the entirety of the marchers' world.

Fanwath was a big world, and though they'd moved steadily southward for weeks, they were still in a temperate climate, and the temperature began to grow chilly as they climbed into the heights. It didn't bother Victor, and it certainly didn't affect Guapo, but he saw the breath pluming forth from the soldiers and their roladii. He saw the soldiers pulling out furs, cloaks, and hats of all sorts. The shadows grew very long, and the going was dimly lit as they progressed. Thick gray clouds filled the sky, and snow that seemed distant, remotely nestled in the peaks when they'd approached over the plains, was now visible on the nearby slopes.

Rellia's airship never managed to rejoin the army; it had needed weeks' worth of refitting and repairs, and by the time she received notice in her Farscribe book that it was taking flight, they were only days from the pass. Victor had asked why it couldn't fly over the range or even through the very pass they were hiking, and Borrius had snorted, saying he'd understand when they got nearer the summit of the pass in a few days. Victor was starting to understand—despite the steep incline of the narrower and narrower roadway, they were nowhere near the highest point, and the winds were beginning to rip and hammer at the column.

On the third day of their ascent, Valla and Victor sat on their mounts, discussing their progress. "We're moving out of the settled lands." She tugged her heavy fur cloak tight at her throat. It was a pretty thing, made up of a dozen or more small-game furs. Each was white in some way, though dappled with different colored fur from black to red to pale taupe. "Energy is wilder up here and south of here in the Marches."

"Yeah, I heard the briefing last night, too." Victor grinned to show he was teasing; Rellia had droned on for a while the previous night in Victor's travel home. She'd spoken about the wild nature of Energy they were marching into, about how the System would be taking their measure, creating a suitable challenge for the army—it seemed new lands didn't come easily to the citizens of System-run worlds.

"Why do you think it does it?" He wasn't specific, but he thought Valla would infer his meaning. They were a mile or so ahead of the column, a short way behind the forward scouts, taking a small break for a bit of travel food and water.

Valla put a piece of dried fruit in her mouth, chewing slowly while she considered. She idly scratched Uvu's neck for a moment, then said, "I think the System gains something from us as we gain power. This isn't my theory; I learned it from one of the tutors Rellia hired for me before I chased him off. As we fight and die, we release Energy from those we kill. The System awards us some while it keeps a portion." She looked at him briefly, running her eyes over his frame.

"Imagine the Energy stored up in your body. Not just in your Core; you can see how much is in your Core, but what about all the Energy that was put into improving your attributes? If you died, that would all be released. Whoever killed you would profit, but how much would the System leach away?"

“So it wants us to have to fight and die . . . or kill to gain these new lands. But it makes the challenge? How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe monsters or savages are living in the Marches. Maybe the System will drag them from a dungeon or,” her eyes widened, “another world.”

Victor chewed on his last bite of dried meat, washing it down with a swig of cold water. He put away his canteen. “You think the System thinks about us? I mean, do you think it’s more like a force of nature or a being?”

“I don’t know. It communicates with words, but they don’t usually convey much emotion. Even those ‘warnings’ you got were sort of detached, right?” She shrugged and made a flicking motion with her finger. “It doesn’t matter. We’re like ants to it. Do ants try to understand the person stepping on their home?”

“I don’t like being an ant.” Victor looked down the road past Valla. “I can see the vanguard. Let’s keep going.” He turned and started forward, and the afternoon drifted by in a blur of gray rocky slopes speckled with patches of snow. The wind grew ever harsher, ever colder, and the climb grew steeper, the path narrower. By the time darkness fell, Victor was starting to worry that the larger wagons wouldn’t be able to continue much further.

The road’s edge was well-defined; whatever Earth Casters had built, it had cleaved the roadway into the Western, right-hand side of the pass, and the shoulder grew steep and rocky, and the fall on the left became a dizzying drop—it made Victor nervous to get within ten feet of it. In the evening, he asked Rellia about it, but she assured him that her record books indicated that the road would remain wide enough, if only by a matter of inches, for her wagons to make it through. They might have to clear snow or scree from the shoulder, but that wouldn’t be hard with more than six thousand soldiers ready to do the labor.

The next day, as the sky lightened from black to gray, the column started out again, eager to get through the pass. If Rellia’s records were correct, they should reach the summit by nightfall, and the most challenging part of the climb would be over; the trip down was shorter—the Marches were higher in elevation than the Imperial lands.

The cold wind began to sting even Victor as it delivered flecks of icy rain in its passage. Borrius called out the Wind Casters, risking the wrath of the elemental spirits in the heights by pushing the gusts to the sides, trying to clear a path for the army that wouldn’t be so punishing. It paid off for most of the day, but by the afternoon, the casters grew taxed, found their efforts too little to fend off the wild winds, and the army had to buckle down and forge ahead.

Visibility was poor, so Victor summoned his banner, riding Guapo with the vanguard, providing a beacon for everyone to drive toward. Though the sun was still hours from setting, it grew very dim and gray; snow dusted the stones of the roadway, kicked up in swirling eddies by the gusts, and Victor could see the soldiers, even Valla, shivering. He noticed the sharpness of the frozen flecks of moisture on the wind, but it didn’t bother him; his skin was ruddy with warmth, the magma in his chest keeping him warm despite his naked arms.

He still didn't know how to use the Breath Core, not really. He'd played around with it a bit, using his mind's eye to study the swirling, writhing ball of orange-red Energy, focusing his will upon it and trying to pull it into his pathways. It didn't move like the Energy in his other Core, though. It didn't seem to want to flow into the same pathways, and he knew there was a different trick to it, a different way to access it. He just hadn't figured it out. He'd begun to wonder if he had to do something else first. Maybe he had to build up the Core and get it out of the "seed" stage. Perhaps he had to build a different pathway, something he had no idea how to do, just like he didn't know how to cultivate the magma Energy.

He'd tried. He'd tried pulling Energy out of campfires, out of fire-attuned Energy beads, and from orbs of fire summoned by the Elemental Casters in the army. Nothing had worked; it seemed there was something different about cultivating Energy for a Breath Core. All that considered, Victor felt frustrated by his inability to help the army cope with the inclement, brutal weather in the pass. He looked down at Valla, shivering on Uvu's back. "Hey, why won't you ride with me?" He patted Guapo's back, sliding back to show there was plenty of room. "I'll keep you warm.

She looked up at him, frost in her eyebrows, and for a second, he thought she'd accept the invitation, but she glanced over her shoulder at the first line of soldiers marching behind them, steadily driving forward into the wind, chasing Victor's banner, and shook her head. "Bad example."

"Bullshit. Come on—Uvu's fine. Let him run off and hunt himself a snack. The soldiers don't care if you ride with me." Victor leaned down, holding out his hand. Watching her eyes, he saw her will crumble, and she reached up to grasp hold of him, and he tugged, almost effortlessly lifting her off Uvu's back to straddle Guapo in front of him. As the big cat yowled and ran off into the icy wind, Victor wrapped his arms around Valla, savoring the victorious moment.

"Ancestors, you're warm even in this cold." She nestled back into him, folding her arms up under her cloak. Victor reached up and pulled the front of her hood down as Guapo started plodding forward again, utterly oblivious to the weather.

"Yeah." He chuckled, once again wishing there weren't so many layers between them. Still, it felt good to hold her, and he wondered at that, at how he'd grown to think of Valla, and really, only Valla in that regard. When they'd spoken more than a month ago in Persi Gables, and Valla had called him out about his infatuation with Tes, he'd had to admit that she was right. If they had the same discussion today, though, he felt like his response would be different. Already, Tes was kind of like a pleasant dream, a beautiful unreal near-deity that he'd met in a strange far-off land. The whole thing was surreal to the point of feeling like a fantasy he'd conjured up.

Valla was real. She was brave, intelligent, talented, and very, very principled. "And beautiful," he muttered, wondering if she'd connect the dots and figure out his thoughts. She didn't speak, though, and he held her so close that he wasn't sure she was awake; maybe she'd dosed off. He hated that he had to move so slowly. If he and Valla were alone, they'd have crossed through the mountains in half a day, Guapo charging through the pass, ignoring the cold. "God, that would be fun!"

Victor looked over his shoulder and saw the shadowy, hunched figures of the vanguard pushing forward, many with balls of glowing Energy floating near their heads. They were doing their best; it was kind of shitty of him to want to bail on them, even if it was just a fleeting impulse. He urged Guapo to slow down a little, allowing the soldiers to gain on him so his banner fell on more of them. With a determined frown, he buckled down, using his will against himself for a change, reminding himself of his responsibilities.

As the gray sky darkened and the shadows grew long and thick, Victor heard a shout from behind and slowed, turning. He felt Valla stir and realized he'd been right earlier; she'd fallen asleep in his arms. He was grinning slyly, pleased with himself, when he caught sight of Rellia and Borrius riding forward. "Hey," he called, straightening, letting his hands and arms fall to his sides. For some reason, he was self-conscious about hugging Valla close as her mother approached.

"Scouts with Far Sight spells say they see shadows moving on the slopes. We're afraid we're about to be ambushed by rock trolls or . . . something." Borrius shrugged.

"We don't think we should camp," Rellia added, her eyes drifting from Victor's face down to Valla's shrouded, hooded form. Both she and Borrius were bundled in furs, though neither looked particularly chilly—Victor had already heard about their warmth-enchanted cloaks. They weren't the only ones in the army with such garments, but the vast majority relied on good, old-fashioned layers to make it through the cold.

"Yes. We'll call out for more lights and keep pushing forward. Victor, we had an idea." Borrius licked his lips, then drove ahead, "We think you should ride forward a bit more and unleash your aura. Let the denizens of this pass know what they're stalking."

"Oh?" Victor shrugged. "All right. I'll keep my banner up. Are we pushing through the whole night?"

"We think that would be best." Rellia continued to peer at Valla, then said, and when her daughter met her gaze, she asked, "Want to join me until Uvu returns?"

"No. I've felt Victor's aura many times. I'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm finally warm—ancestors, mother! Why didn't you warn us about the heights of this pass? I would have bought better cold-weather gear."

"Is it my fault you didn't study the geography of the lands you intend to conquer?" Rellia snorted, then tugged at her reins, turning her beautiful vidanii around. Over her shoulder, she called, "We'll be close behind should trouble arise."

Borrius nodded and turned also, and Valla, with some rare humor in her voice, said, "She doesn't like that I'm riding with you."

“Tough.” Victor clicked his tongue, and Guapo started forward, putting a hundred yards or so between them and the front ranks of the army’s vanguard. His banner still blazed, and when Victor let go of his aura, he felt like it brightened as the part of his will relegated to holding his aura in check was released of its burden.

“Oof!” Valla groaned. “It’s been a while. I think it’s heavier now.”

“Sorry.”

“No. Truthfully, it’s almost comforting. Something in me knows that pressure isn’t meant for me.”

“Hang on.” Victor concentrated for a moment. Then he summoned forth a pack of pony-sized, inspiration-attuned coyotes. As they yipped and howled, pacing around in the windy, frigid island of light cast by his banner, he willed them to patrol, to climb the slopes where they could and where they couldn’t, to pace the length of the army, weaving among the soldiers, spreading the influence of the inspiration Energy that bled from their silvery, misty forms. He watched them pad off into the darkness, and even outside his banner’s light, he could see them glowing with faint luminescence in the dark.

“Will they tell you if they find trouble?”

“Not exactly tell me, but I can feel what they’re up to. I’ll know if they find something.”

Valla nestled back into him, and Victor continued forward, his banner banishing the darkness as they climbed. Soon, he became aware of presences outside the glow, a vague feeling of animosity, and the occasional falling pebbles or stones. The impression he got from the lurkers was one of fear and flight; they weren’t sticking around to watch him; they were trying to get away. His coyotes’ howls, yips, cries, and yapping barks echoed through the canyon, and he knew they were heartening the troops as they walked back and forth through the column.

“It’s nice how the Energy you use summoning those companions of yours affects their nature.”

“Yeah. I felt the inspiration had the right note for what we’re trying to do. Courage would have been good, but the army isn’t exactly scared right now. At least, I didn’t get that impression.”

“Agreed.” Valla gestured to the left at the sloping, rocky mountainside on the other side of the dizzying drop. “I saw a shadow off that way.”

“Uh-huh, we were surrounded for a while, but most of them ran away.”

“Truly?” She jerked, twisting in front of him to look up into his face, perhaps to see if he was teasing.

“Truly. You didn’t feel them?”

“No, but I feel something else . . . we’re no longer climbing!”

Victor immediately realized she was right; the rocky roadway had leveled off, and though the wind still blasted at them out of the heights, he thought he could see a sliver of light in the distance. “Is that one of the moons?”

“If so, it’s kind of strange; doesn’t it seem green?” Valla leaned forward, reaching out to grasp Guapo’s mane. Victor could see she was right. The clouds and flicking gusts of frosty rain made it hard to focus, but somewhere ahead, as distant as the imagined horizon, a weird green light seemed to be glowing. “Definitely not a moon unless something in the air is tinting it oddly.” Valla leaned back again, pulling her hood down.

“We’ll see soon enough.” Nothing attacked, though Victor felt several more entities flee his banner and aura through the night. He didn’t know what they were, and they might not know what or who he was, but they knew they didn’t want any part of him or his people. As the night wore on, and the pass shifted into a downward slope, he chuckled, and Valla stirred, turning to look up at him again.

“What’s funny?”

“What if this whole thing is that easy? What if our numbers or our levels are so daunting to the creatures of the Marches that they just kind of flee ahead of us? What if we just walk down there and can claim all the land we want?”

“A lovely thought, but don’t get your hopes up. This pass is still, technically, part of the Ridonne Empire. Whatever the first peoples on Fanwath did to claim the lands north of here also counted for this pass. The creatures in the darkness, threatening the column, are just typical monsters similar to what you might find anywhere in the wilds of the Empire. When we emerge from these mountains, the real test will begin. Well, that’s what Rellia says. I believe her, though; she’s probably the most versed scholar on the subject in the Empire.”

“She’s wanted to do this her whole life, huh?”

“Maybe not her entire life, but most of it. Didn’t she tell you about how she used to chastise her uncles about their complacency? She’s wanted to conquer new lands since she learned about the Writs of Conquest.”

“Yeah. She mentioned it.” As they followed the road as it wound around an outcropping of solid stone, an uncommonly straight view down the pass resolved, and Victor could see the black sky was lightening, turning toward gray. He wished he could see through the mountains on the left toward the sunrise. However, the

thought of sunrises faded from his mind as the path switched to the right, skirting another bend. When it straightened again, they had a view of the distant sky from a new angle, and he felt Valla stop breathing. He couldn't blame her.

"What . . ." Her voice caught in her throat. Sensing Victor's stress, Guapo slowed to a stop, his front hooves lifting up and down, pawing at the rock road. Victor hardly noticed; he was staring at the brilliant ball of sickly green light in the sky. It had to be a hundred miles away, but it hung nearly at their eye level like a weird, diseased sun had fallen from the heavens to shed its light on a small part of the world. Victor could see the contours of hills, forests, lakes, and plains under that otherworldly light, though everything was glimpsed through a haze of thin, anemic fog. He tried to formulate a statement or question and was just about to give voice to his words when a System message appeared, blasting the thoughts from his mind:

*****Challenge of Conquest! Halt the invasion from the world of Dark Ember. Drive the forces of Prince Hector of Heart Rot from Fanwath and reclaim the lands they've begun to taint. Rewards: New territory, a Colony Stone, and Chests of Conquest at strategic locations.*****

Book 6: Chapter 3: Making the Rounds

Borrius counseled Victor to halt the army a mile from the bottom of the pass in a particularly narrow portion where sheer rock walls climbed for thousands of feet on either side of the rough, rock-strewn roadway. They knew what was behind them, and with the massive cliffs, they didn't have to worry about their flanks, leaving the southern road sloping down into the weirdly misty valley as the only avenue by which unknown enemies might attack. As the summer sun struggled to make itself known through the thick cloud cover, Victor watched the efforts of the army to fortify their position.

"It doesn't look like they've come this far," Rellia said from beside him, sitting on the edge of a large boulder. She, along with the other commanders of the army, had ridden a short way down the road, perhaps half a mile from where it abruptly ended in the rolling hills of thick scrub and grass.

"They?" Borrius asked, still atop his barded mount.

"The forces of this Prince of Heart Rot, whatever that is. What an absurd name; why would you call your lands something so . . ."

"Gross?" Valla suggested.

"It makes me think of death magic." Lam's boots scraped on the rough stone as she moved to sit by Rellia.

"Yeah." Victor nodded. "The whole System message was like something out of a cheesy video game." He waved his hand in the air. "Yeah, yeah. I know you don't know what that is. I mean, it's like a bad fairy tale. Does that make sense?"

“Sure.” Valla pointed down the slope toward the dimly lit expanse of land leading into the valley below the pass. Victor tracked where she pointed, watching as the landscape grew more and more dark, more and more covered by miasmic mists, until his eyes met the distant horizon where dark clouds roiled, utterly obscuring the land. “That’s no fairy tale, though.”

“This is good.” Borrius turned his mount, looking upslope to where the army engineers toiled, then shifting to scan the valley. “We’ve got the high ground. We can see any enemy approaching. We should build something a bit more permanent here. A keep that bridges the entire pass. It’s a solid foothold from which to march forth.”

“If we had true fortifications here, it would alleviate us having to watch over our shoulders for the Empire. We could make the pass very costly for them to come through.” Rellia idly massaged the palm of her left hand between her fingers and thumb as she spoke, her eyes distant, perhaps imagining the fortification Borrius proposed.

“There’s certainly plenty of stone in these cliffs . . .”

“Are you guys forgetting something?” Victor interrupted.

“I’m with Victor. That System message didn’t say anything about the influx of ‘invaders’ slowing. The longer we dilly dally up here building a keep, the more enemies we may have to contend with. If we were higher in the pass, and if it was still night, we’d have that green star hanging in the sky to remind us.” As she’d suggested, Lam’s words echoed Victor’s thinking; as the army had descended from the heights, the clouds had begun to block their view of the green orb or portal or whatever it was. Even so, in the dark, everything had been cast in an eerie greenish glow, especially the clouds and mist in the distance. Only as the sun climbed toward noon did it begin to fade.

“We can manage both.” Borrius chuckled, shaking his head. “The non-combat personnel will remain here, along with most of the Shadeni tribe. I’ll leave most of the engineers and Earth Casters to work on the fortification. I propose we peel off the extra troops from the various cohorts, forming an eleventh cohort to serve as a rear guard.”

“What happened to ‘swelling’ the cohorts to accommodate losses?” Valla knelt, picked up a smooth rock, and chucked it down the stone roadway. It flew a good distance, then clicked and clattered over the ground.

“We’ll have these reserves, holding our base and ready to fill in when called for duty. We still may have more volunteers heading our way through the pass. In any event, we’ll need a garrison here to receive and train them.”

“All right, Borrius.” Victor nodded to the old commander. “You’ve made a good argument, and I think it makes sense. It’s clear Rellia agrees with you, so I think we can go ahead and make the order. Meanwhile, I think I’d like to ride out with the Ninth and see if I can get eyes on this enemy we’re dealing with. It’d be good to size them up, don’t you think?”

“The Ninth?” Lam turned to Victor. “Because they’re the highest level?”

“Highest average level, and more than half of them have fought a hopeless battle already on this campaign. You know what I mean? They thought they were going to die before the Naghelli joined the fight.”

“Speaking of the Naghelli . . .” Valla pointed to the cluster of dark, round tents further up the pass where the winged fighters had set up camp. They kept to themselves each night, but Victor was glad to have them in the rear—nothing would be sneaking past Kethelket and his people.

“It would be good if they’d do some scouting . . .”

“I worry about that,” Rellia spoke before Victor could finish his thought. “Did they not serve a Death Caster?”

“Not happily. We’ve been over this, Rellia.” Victor hopped down from the boulder to look at her more easily.

“Still, what if this Prince Hector tries to recruit them? What if they like his offer?”

“So, we’re back to not trusting them?” Valla sighed, shaking her head at her mother.

Rellia held up her hands, signaling capitulation. “I’m only trying to suggest we use caution where they are concerned. Let us not leave ourselves open to an easy betrayal.” She saw Victor’s scowl and pressed on, “I know we owe them much! I know they’ve been good, easy companions on this journey. I don’t propose we sideline them; let’s give them more opportunities to prove themselves, but, at the same time, let’s be prepared for what will happen should they act out our worst fears.”

“Sure.” Victor stepped away from the others, feeling the need to walk, clear his head, and speak to some different people for a change. He wanted to see Thayla and Deyni. “By all means, be cautious with them. Anyway, I’m going to go check in on the Shadeni and maybe do some axe work. I’m so close to the edge of epic I can taste it.” He turned, stalking up the slope toward the encampment, pointedly avoiding making eye contact with any of the other commanders; he didn’t want to give them a chance to suck him back into another debate.

He felt a little guilty for not inviting Valla along, but he rationalized his abrupt departure by figuring she'd come after him if she wanted to. He'd spent a lot of time with her over the last few weeks, the last couple of days in particular. Hadn't he had her wrapped in his arms through the dark, frigid night? "And not a word from her when we parted." Was he being unfair? Maybe, but so was she, in his mind. More brooding was forestalled as soldiers called out greetings, snapping smart salutes, pride in their leader evident on their faces. Victor forced a cheerful expression and answered back with encouragement.

"Nice looking wall!" he said, inanely, to a pair of soldiers working to stack blocks from the innards of one of the massive supply wagons. They saluted, though, pleased with the praise. Earth Caster engineers would come along behind them and bond the stones more securely than concrete ever could. Despite his intention to make his way to the Shadeni section of the encampment, further up the stony pass, he caught sight of Sarl addressing his cohort near the western canyon wall and walked that way.

Victor had been practicing the traditional salute the army employed. It wasn't very hard once you got the order of things—Step one: Stand up straight, make a fist, and hold it out before you. Step two: Lift your right foot. Step three: Stomp your foot next to your left and slam your fist into your chest above your heart. That was it; you just had to hold that position until the commanding officer released you or, if you were the commanding officer, for a second or two. He responded to Sarl's salute with one of his own, then said, "At ease, everyone. I need to speak to Captain Sarl."

"Dismissed!" Sarl watched his cohort disburse for a moment, then turned to Victor. "How are things, sir?"

"Victor. Call me Victor when we're alone, please, Sarl." When Sarl nodded, a small smile altering his usual dour expression, he continued, "Things look good. We're going to build a base of operations here."

"A sensible plan."

Victor looked at Sarl closely, studying his shrewd eyes. The one-time Ghelli nobleman was a clever man with a strong will. He looked shabby next to a Ghelli like Lam, but he was a skilled fencer, and he'd been through hell in his life. Victor valued his opinion. "Any thoughts on the conquest quest the System handed out?"

"I think we're in for a difficult time. The System thrives on conflict, in my experience, and I believe it's clever enough to know how to challenge even you."

"Yeah. I know there are plenty of people in the System's worlds who can whip my ass. I just hope it remembers we're on Fanwath and doesn't throw something at us that'll

slaughter all these good people." Victor gestured around the bustling camp. "Anyway, we'll find out soon. I'm heading down there tomorrow, and I want the Ninth to come with."

Sarl's eyebrows arched up, and a savage grin spread on his face. Victor couldn't help noticing how his dragonfly-like wings stiffened, vibrating ever-so-slightly. "That's fantastic, Victor! You won't regret it!"

"Good. Have your men lined up and ready to go at dawn." By way of response, Sarl performed another sharp salute, and Victor nodded. "I've more people to speak to. See you later." As he walked away, he heard Sarl shouting orders to his lieutenants and sergeants. Something stirred in his chest as he thought about Sarl, thinking that at least one person who'd been there at the very beginning, back when he'd been a skinny kid fighting in the Wagon Wheel, was still with him. An image flashed through his mind of a face he hadn't pictured in a long while—Yrella. "God, I wish she was still alive."

Victor rapidly blinked his eyes, banishing the thought as he lengthened his stride toward the Shadeni wagons. He didn't have to struggle to find the people he sought; Chandri, Challa, and Deyni were standing outside, near the wagon he'd left behind with Thayla. To Victor's surprise and horror, Chandri was watching as Challa and Deyni performed spear drills. Deyni was still a foot shorter than Challa, but she was fierce and quick, her movements nearly as sharp as the vicious teenager's. More startling than anything, she'd painted her face like her stepsisters.

Sharp angles of white and black paint did the job of making her look tougher than usual, but the accent of red around her lips and eyes made it all the worse. Could little Deyni be learning how to kill people already? No, Victor stopped that line of thought; she was learning to defend herself, and a damn good idea it was, too. "Hey," he called, stepping up to the trio.

"Victor!" Deyni cried, dropping her practice spear and running to wrap her arms around his waist. Victor peeled her off, then hoisted her up, hugging her into his chest and kissing the top of her head.

"You little huntress! You're learning to stab pigs?"

"Not pigs! Imperials!" she growled, baring her teeth.

"Oh, man." Victor supposed there was no helping it; the Empire had made their bed, and now they had to sleep in it. Deyni had lost friends to their assault, people she'd grown to think of as family. It would take time for them to stop thinking about the Empire or characterizing them as villains. "We've punished those responsible. Don't carry too much hate in your heart; it gives power to things like fear, and you don't want fear to grow in your Core."

"You have fear in your Core!"

"I do, and I struggle with it all the time. I much prefer my inspiration and glory. Let's try to find something like that in your spirit, all right?"

"Will you still love me if I have something else?"

"Of course, silly." Victor had been holding her against his side, on his hip, and he squeezed her close again. "Love's the best, I think. I bet you have love in your spirit."

"How do you know? Do you have love, too?"

"Maybe. I just haven't found it yet. When I first came here, all I had was rage, you know."

"I know. Old Mother taught me about it before she walked away with the spirits."

Victor continued to squeeze her as he watched the two sisters standing nearby, Chandri smiling knowingly at him and Challa leaning on her spear, looking bored. "Can I count on you three to help build our base here? We'll need clever ideas to make a place that feels like home to people used to living on the plains."

"We're settling here?" Challa asked, disgust in her voice. "I thought we'd settle the plains and forests!"

"You can count on me, Victor." Deyni reached one of her tiny hands toward his face, gently rubbing her fingertips along the rough stubble on his jawline. "Pokey," she giggled.

"I want to join the legion!" Challa said, finally formulating a response.

"Uh." Victor frowned and looked at her. The truth was, she was probably the same age as many of the soldiers who'd joined back near Persi Gables. "You need to talk to Tellen about that. Even if you do, though, you'll start working here, near the base."

"Uh, uh, Challa," Chandri stepped in. "You'll be a huntress like me, and you'll help that way—with scouting and gathering food. You're not ready yet, though."

"I'm better at stealth than you are!"

"There's more to it than being sneaky, little shadow-Core! You need to have the will and discipline to make smart decisions."

"I can . . ."

"Hey, ladies," Victor interrupted. "I don't want to get in the middle of this. Can you point me toward Thayla?"

“She’s in the wagon . . .” Deyni pointed to the nearby conveyance.

“Of course you don’t.” Chandri folded her arms, scowling, then turned on her heel and started to walk away.

Victor looked at Challa, met her stormy eyes, and asked, “What’s up with her?”

“I don’t know. She’s moody. Come on, Deyni! Let’s get Wista and hunt some cliff bats.”

“How’s your adristii?” Victor smiled and squatted down to better look at Deyni’s face. The adristii was her falcon-like pet, a raptor she’d used to hunt small game all the way from Persi Gables.

“She’s good, Victor! I’m getting better and better at calling her and telling her what I want her to do.”

“That’s because animals can sense your good heart.” Victor smiled again, reached out, and gave her little arm a squeeze.

“Will you come say hi to Wista?”

“Not right now, but yes, I will.”

Deyni turned and ran to Challa, holding out her hand, and as they ran off, she called, “Just tell me when!”

Victor watched the two girls run around the side of the wagon, amazed at how quickly he’d been dismissed. Then he turned toward where Chandri had gone, seeing no trace of her; she’d slipped away between wagons, lost in the crowd of other Shadeni performing camp tasks. “Maybe Thayla knows what her deal is.” With that in mind, he walked around to the other side of the wagon and knocked on the door. A few seconds passed before the latch clicked, and Thayla pushed it open.

“Victor! I’m glad to see you; Tellen and I were just talking, wondering how long we’d camp here.”

“Yeah, I . . .”

“Come in! We’re having soup, and I know you like this recipe.” She backed away from the door, and Victor followed, ducking low to get through the opening but standing up straight as he stepped into the vaulted interior. The place was much smaller than he remembered it but a great deal “homier,” too. Woven tapestries hung on the walls, and more furniture filled the space, including several smaller beds along the wall with the two original, larger beds. Wooden, folding screens separated the bed in the far corner of the room, and Victor figured that was where Tellen and Thayla slept. He got a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach thinking about that.

When he’d purchased the wagon, he’d never imagined Thayla having a family here, including a husband. He knew the feeling was stupid, the thought was selfish, but he couldn’t help the emotion. Still, he swallowed it and brought forth a smile, turning to the long picnic-style table and saying,

“Hey, Tellen. Man, that soup smells good! I’ve missed the meals I had with your people last winter.”

“Come on, then. Sit down. Tell us what’s happening with the army and what we’ll do about those invaders and that strange green light in the sky.” Tellen slapped the bench next to him, and Victor walked that way, watching Thayla as she got a bowl off the shelf and began to ladle out some of the steaming soup from her big, well-used copper pot. Another powerful wave of emotion hit him, this time nostalgia. He remembered meals shared with her on the road, in various inns, and in this very wagon. Wouldn’t it have been nice just to stay with her? Why was he so intent on fighting, exploring, and adventuring?

“That’s just my hunger talking,” he muttered, laughing at himself. He winked at Tellen’s puzzled expression and sat beside the much smaller man. “I feel like I haven’t eaten in weeks, Thayla. I hope there’s plenty!”

Book 6: Chapter 4: Scouting Mission

Victor didn’t sleep much the night before his “scouting mission,” as Valla had been describing it. The two of them sat together at his big dining table, drinking the last of their cold, bitter ale from Fainhallow. It was a relaxing time, with hardly any conversation, but it was comfortable and pleasant, and he hadn’t wanted it to end. It seemed Valla felt the same way, and it was well past midnight before they’d gone to sleep. The lack of rest didn’t seem to bother him much. Now, he stood south of the encampment watching the soldiers muster, and his body, as always these days, felt strong, rested, and ready.

He’d been surprised that Valla hadn’t joined him for breakfast, and when he’d gotten ready to leave, he’d been tempted to knock on the door to her room but decided that if she wanted to join the scouting foray, she would; he’d never known her to oversleep. Meanwhile, the ninth cohort, or “the Glorious Ninth,” as Victor, Sarl, his veterans, and pretty much everyone else called them, was forming up. They were arraying themselves in thirty rows of twenty soldiers, their armor and weapons glinting in the dawn light.

The sun was just turning the sky gray, with brighter shades of orange and yellow to the east, pushing back some of the green glow leaching out of the dense foggy clouds near the horizon. Victor was eager to get out there, to see what that sickly fog was like, to find out what the green light in the sky was, and to test the mettle of the mysterious “invaders.” With that in mind, he wondered if bringing an entire cohort of foot soldiers was wise. He wondered if he should instead use a smaller group of mounted troops. “Need more mounts in this army.”

“It would be helpful, indeed,” a smooth tenor voice said from behind him. Victor whirled, always annoyed when someone surprised him, a scowl darkening his expression.

“Kethelket.” He tried to keep the word from sounding like an expletive, but he wasn’t sure how successful he was.

“Good morning, Legate. I see you’re planning an excursion.”

“Yeah. Gonna see the lay of the land, so to speak.”

“If it’s a scouting report you’re after, you might have asked me. I’d be pleased to pick a squadron of Naghelli to take a look into things. You know we’re a great deal more mobile and stealthier than those soldiers, no slight intended.”

“None taken. I’m still sort of formulating my plan. I’m also a lot faster than those soldiers, but if we’re supposed to conquer these lands, I’d like to have a decent force along with me in case we run into an enemy outpost or something.” Victor paused, considering. The truth was, Kethelket was right; his people could do this job far more easily. It all came down to trust, and Victor knew the issue was probably transparent to the Naghelli prince.

“Of course . . .”

“It’s not that I don’t think you all could do this on your own, but I want to ease into working with you. Do you understand what I’m saying? I’d like these soldiers to get experience not only with the territory and the enemy but with your people. Why don’t you pick fifty Naghelli to join this expedition? We can have you do the forward scouting, and then you’ll have this cohort to fall back to.”

“I think that’s wise. I’ll be happy to select a squadron of Naghelli to join. I will lead them.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Like you, I’d enjoy learning to work with the rest of the army. In particular, I’d like to learn to work with you. How long do you anticipate this scouting expedition to last?” Kethelket reached up and pulled some loose strands of long, white hair back, refastening his hair tie to keep them at the back of his head. It gave Victor the impression of someone getting ready to get down to work, to get his hands dirty.

“Depends on what we run into. No more than a week, but maybe as short as a day.”

“Well, if we do spend some time out there, camping, as it were, I’d enjoy a chance to spar with you. I’ve watched you with that burly Vodkin, Polo Vosh, and I think we could learn something from one another.”

“Oh yeah?” Victor grinned. “I’d love that! I feel like I’m stuck on a plateau—been feeling like I’m close to advancing for a while now but never quite get the breakthrough I need.”

“Excellent! I’m sure I can help.” He looked over the assembled soldiers, listening for a moment while Sarl called out orders. “Feel free to start them marching. My scouts and I will catch up. If you don’t mind, I’ll start getting the unit together.”

“Sounds good.” Before he could help himself, Victor held out a fist, and he was surprised when Kethelket reached up to knock his knuckles into his. He grinned madly, looking into the Naghelli’s dark, black eyes. Kethelket grinned back at him, baring white teeth with sharp canines, exposing another difference between his people and their cousins, the Ghelli. The fallen prince nodded, then turned adroitly on his heel and glided over the gravel-strewn rock roadway with unnatural grace and silence. Victor turned and tromped down the slope toward Sarl and his troops.

When he walked past the assembled soldiers, they struggled to ignore him, maintaining their attention as Sarl and his officers walked up and down their lines, inspecting their uniforms, weapons, and posture. Victor did his best not to make eye contact with them; he didn’t want to get anyone in trouble by distracting them. When he reached the front of the column, Sarl approached and held out a hand. Even though Victor was currently reducing his size, the man’s hand still felt small and fragile. He knew better than to judge his strength by his size, however. “Are we ready?”

“Aye, sir.” Sarl knew some soldiers could hear him, so Victor understood the formality. It was good to maintain order and discipline in front of the troops.

“We can move out, but I wanted to tell you that I asked Kethelket to join us with fifty Naghelli. We’ll use them as forward scouts.”

“Excellent.” Sarl nodded, and Victor stared into his pale eyes, wondering if he was being sincere. He didn’t seem at all bothered.

He nodded firmly. “Good. I’ll be riding ahead as well. Once we get down the slope and into the foothills, we’ll select landmarks for rendezvous.”

“Will you be alone, sir?”

Victor looked over the heads of the soldiers, suddenly a lot less cool about Valla not being there. Wouldn’t she have said something if she weren’t coming? What about Edeya? Shouldn’t he have asked her to come along? She’d been with him a lot during the march, managing his Farscribe book. “No, I won’t be alone. I wanted to let you know you can start the soldiers marching, and I’ll catch up. I’ve got a couple of others coming with me, mounted, so it won’t be a problem.”

“Very good, sir.” Sarl turned to his six lieutenants and nodded, his voice suddenly much harsher and louder, “Begin the march!”

Victor moved to the side of the roadway as the order was passed down the column. He summoned Guapo and rode along the side, against the flow of troops, back toward the encampment, feeling rather foolish about his sudden change of mind. Many more people were stirring now that the sun was up. It was hard to ignore the start of the day when the troops were making so much noise down the road. Victor didn’t have any trouble finding a sergeant, one from the Second Cohort, to holler at, “Find me Lieutenant Edeya!”

With that quest initiated, Victor hurried Guapo back to his travel home and, in the process, slapped himself in the head—wouldn't he want his travel home along with him on this scouting mission? Had he really left it sitting there just because he'd thought Valla might be sleeping in? What was he trying to prove? He hopped off Guapo and stepped inside, and he'd only taken two steps before he was hollering, "Valla! Are you up?"

"Victor?" she called almost immediately from straight ahead. He stomped up the hallway into the central living space, and there she was, leaning over a cup of steaming liquid, probably tea.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Hmm?"

"On my scouting mission!"

"Oh? You want me to come along?" She stood up, clearly feigning surprise, her voice rising comically with the question.

"Are you busting my balls right now?"

"Well, we spent four or five hours drinking together last night, and all you did was mope about Thayla and Tellen and how you missed her cooking and 'hanging out' with the Shadeni. I figured if you wanted me to come along this morning, you'd have mentioned it."

This was a side of Valla Victor hadn't seen before, at least not thoroughly on display. He stood there, slack-jawed, trying to wrap his head around what she was saying. He didn't remember their conversation going that way. He remembered them sitting together, comfortably getting buzzed, hardly talking about anything at all. Had he mentioned his feelings about seeing Tellen living with Thayla in the wagon? He probably had, but it had been a passing comment in Victor's mind. "Was I that bad?"

Perhaps his lack of a retort took some of the steam out of her because Valla's expression softened. "Well, I would have liked to hear a little less about your regrets. Let's leave it at that."

"Noted. I . . . Valla, I thought we were both venting a little, then I thought we were both relaxed and happy. I think I missed some subtext or something. Well, I mean, maybe I focus on myself too much sometimes."

"The Ninth is marching. I told 'em we could catch up."

"Truly?" A look of panic entered Valla's eyes, and Victor grinned, recognizing the cause; she hated to be late.

“Don’t worry. We’re waiting on Edeya too. I . . . forgot to tell her she’s coming.”

“Does Lam know?” Valla produced her wyrm-scale armor. It rustled and clicked as the scales rubbed together in her arms. “Help me with this.”

Victor moved around the counter to grasp the heavy coat, holding it open so she could slip her arms into the long sleeves. “Nope. Think she’ll be pissed?”

“She may want to come. You know how protective she is of Edeya.” Valla held her armor closed and passed her hand over the seam, sealing it. “I just need to grab Midnight, and then we can go.” She brushed past Victor, but not without squeezing his forearm gently, sending a tingle up his arm.

As his heart began to speed up, triggered by the tiny show of affection, Victor walked toward the foyer. “Meet you outside!” A stupid smile pulled his cheeks tight as he congratulated himself on returning to get Valla and for saying the right things—for once—when he found her. The sky was a shade brighter when he stepped outside, and he saw Edeya approaching, tromping along the stone pathway and kicking at loose stones.

Despite him giving her a racial enhancement elixir, she still looked lopsided; the wings on one side of her body cut down to stumps. He’d been bugging her to use the concoction for days, ever since they’d come into the pass, but she’d refused, afraid it would put her out of commission for too long; they didn’t know precisely how strong it was or how her body would react. She was just “waiting for some downtime,” she’d reply whenever he asked her about it.

“What did you need,” she glanced around, saw a few soldiers nearby, and added, “Sir?”

“We’re going scouting.”

“I know you are . . .”

“No. We. Go get Thistle and meet me outside the gate.”

“Oh, roots! Are you serious? I thought I’d be here a while; Lam said Borrius and Rellia want to build a fort here.”

“Hurry up! I’ll explain on the way. Be sure to tell Lam you’re going, and don’t forget the Farscribe book!” Victor chuckled as she turned and ran, taking his words literally. He’d just summoned Guapo again when Valla came out of the home, dressed for battle with Midnight on her hip.

“Give me a ride to the gate, will you? I think Uvu is out hunting.”

“Yeah, just a minute.” Victor turned back to his house, touched the polished wooden railing, and sent the command to pack itself up. While it vibrated and shrank, he said, “Might be out a few days.”

“It’s good you’re bringing Edeya. She can use the experience, and she’s much better about keeping in touch with the other commanders.”

“Well, it’s kind of her job, right?”

“Yes . . .”

Victor snatched up the still-trembling miniature travel home and slipped it into the leather carrying case on his belt, then he hopped up on the Mustang’s back and reached down for Valla’s hand. She jumped, and he pulled, and then she slid her arms around him, leaning into his back. Victor’s stupid smile returned as he urged Guapo to get moving. “How does Uvu always know when you want him? I’ve never seen you call him.”

“He’s an evolved creature, Victor. He can sense my intentions; we’re sort of bonded.”

“Seriously?”

“Why would I lie?” She squeezed his ribs, and Victor couldn’t think of an objection. They passed through the gate and sat there for a couple of minutes under the scrutiny of the guards on the camp fortification’s parapets while they waited for Uvu and Edeya. The cat got there first, and Victor swore he saw some pink stains on the pale fur around its jaws. It warbled a funny greeting, and Valla slid off Guapo to jog over to him, summoning his riding tack from her storage ring. While she got mounted, Edeya arrived, looking pleased with herself atop Thistle’s proud shoulders.

She greeted Victor with, “Lam says that she’ll do something terrible to you in your sleep if you let any harm come to me.”

“That’s . . . disturbing.” He shrugged and turned to Valla, now sitting atop Uvu. “Right. Are you two sleepy heads ready to go? Can’t believe how late we are!”

“That’s not . . .” Edeya started to say.

“Are you serious?” Valla cried.

Victor laughed and whistled, and Guapo launched down the road in a clatter of sparking hooves, leaving the two outraged women behind. He could see the soldiers down the road, just now reaching the end of the stone highway. It was still strange to Victor how the Empire had come this far, exploring through the Granite Gates, creating the wide pass and solid road, only to stop at the edge of the Marches. Had they gotten a similar conquest directive from the System and lost or backed down? He doubted he’d ever know the real story unless he went to Tharcray and beat it out of someone.

He easily caught up to the column and rode around them toward the front where Sarl marched. Victor looked over the soldiers’ heads and saw that Edeya and Valla were halfway to the cohort, trotting or loping, in Uvu’s case, down the road. Then he saw shadows leap into the sky behind them, orange and red patterns flickering in the air. “The Naghelli are almost here.”

“Perfect timing, sir.”

“You think the road’s end is the start of the Marches or up in the pass where we received the System quest?”

“No idea, I’m afraid.” Sarl ran his gaze up toward the high mountains and then out over the hilly plains below. Victor admired that the captain marched on foot with his cohort. He knew not all of the captains did so—he’d seen Rellia’s uncle, Ordus, riding a vidanii almost as fancy as hers.

“How far away do you think that greenish mist is?” Victor could see the haze hanging on the ground toward the horizon and, beyond that, the high bank of dark fog that everyone agreed had to be the doing of the invaders.

“We can see that fog wall because it’s so tall—likely fifty miles or so. The mist is much closer, maybe three miles. I can barely see it from the ground here, but I imagine it’s clearer to you up on that beast of yours.”

“Yeah.” Victor turned as Edeya and Valla caught up, Thistle pounding the ground as he slowed. “We’ll ride up and see what the story is with the mist. I don’t want anyone but me going into it—at first, anyway.”

“A little slower, please, Legate.” Valla gave him a funny look—half grin, half narrowed eye.

“Right. Sarl, when the Naghelli get here, have Kethelket catch up to us.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Come on, you two.” Victor clicked his tongue, Guapo started trotting, and the two women hurried after him.

“What do we do,” he said to Valla as she brought Uvu up on his right, “if that mist is toxic?”

“We’ll have the alchemists study it and create an elixir of resistance.”

“Ahh, yeah.” Victor nodded. “Magic helps everything. Still, that would be a pain in the ass.”

“True. Depending on what sort of duration the resistance has and how many troops we’ll need to push through to battle, it could pose quite a delay.”

Victor didn’t answer, contemplating the idea of having to craft thousands of vials of magical resistance potions and imagining what it would be like for the effects to wear off mid-battle. He hoped the mist wasn’t like that. As they continued into the brush and hardy grass of the low hills, leaving the Empire’s roadway behind, he noted how dark the soil was as their mounts kicked up the loose sod. It seemed rich and fertile. The air was temperate, not very humid, but not dry. “Nice countryside if that shit wasn’t up there.” He nodded forward toward the gray-green mist.

“Reminds me of the farmland south of Persi Gables,” Edeya said, urging Thistle to come up on Victor’s left.

Victor nodded to her, then looked over at Valla. “I was serious, by the way. I’ll be the first to ride into that haze. If I feel okay, you guys can test it. First Valla, then you, Edeya. It’ll give us a good gauge of its toxicity. You’re still tier-two, yeah?”

“I am, though tier three is calling me close after the battle with the Imperials.”

“Awesome.” He held his hand down, palm up, and when Edeya looked up at him with raised eyebrows, he said, “Slap my palm with yours. It’s called ‘giving five.’”

She grinned and did as he said, slapping her small hand into his meaty palm. “Why five?”

“How many fingers do you have?”

“Ahh!” She laughed, delighted by the stupid ritual, and Victor turned to see Valla’s expression. She was shaking her head, clearly struggling not to grin.

“What?”

“What’s wrong with a good handshake or a firm grasp of the wrist? What’s your obsession with all these hand and knuckle-slapping rituals?”

“It’s better than a slap on the ass,” Edeya added.

“Who’s slapping your ass?” Victor’s voice rose with outrage.

“The delvers used to do it all the time—clap me on the shoulder, squeeze me in a stinky hug, or slap my ass! They all did it to each other! You never noticed?”

“Nah. Maybe I was too ugly.”

“More likely too smelly.” Valla couldn’t contain her laugh as she fled, Uvu loping up the next hill. Victor and Edeya urged their mounts after her, her laugh trilling as she followed hot on Victor’s heels. They’d barely crested the hill, though, when Valla pulled Uvu to a halt, holding up a hand and pointing ahead. Victor followed her gesture and saw what had brought her to a stop—some dark figures were moving through the mists ahead, and one of them was very large with baleful red eyes that glowed through the obscuring haze.

Book 6: Chapter 5: Contact

“How many did you count?” Victor asked Valla, mentally urging Guapo to stop.

“I saw the big one and a few shapes behind it . . .”

“There were at least ten that I made out.” Victor had watched the shadowy figures as they turned away from him, shuffling further into the misty haze. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the army was still a ways off but noted the dark shape of Kethelket fluttering toward them. “Edeya, ride back. Tell Sarl what we found. I don’t want those things to get away.” He jerked his head toward the mist. “Valla, wait for Kethelket; he’s almost here. If that mist is toxic, I’ll warn you.”

“Victor, wait . . .” Valla started to say, but he’d already launched himself down the hill, and Guapo’s long strides left her objection behind. Twenty seconds later, the Mustang’s hooves were kicking up the mist, causing it to swirl and drift. It was thick and damp, and when Victor felt it clinging to his knuckles and arms, then onto his face, he took a breath, tasting his breaths, determined to see if there was anything for his troops to worry about.

The air was moist and carried a musty odor that reminded Victor of an old garbage bag that needed changing. It brought to mind rotting things and wet crawlspaces. Still, it fed his lungs, and he didn’t cough or feel ill. If there was something dangerous about it, it wasn’t immediately evident. Perhaps it was more a byproduct of the invading creatures than a tool of the conquest. He urged Guapo forward, and the big horse ate up the ground, even walking.

Victor found his ability to see inside the mist limited as it closed behind him. He could make out the ground nearby and perhaps twenty feet ahead. Beyond that, things grew hazy; the shrubs, occasional clumps of stones, and sporadic, small trees took on ominous appearances. Everywhere he looked, he thought he saw dark shadows lurking in wait. Victor frowned and cast Iron Berserk, savoring the power that swelled his being. As his vision tinted to red, he made room in his pathways and summoned his banner. The blazing golden sun seemed to have a physical impact on the mists, cooking them off and forcing them back.

He didn’t know if she would respond, but if so, she never got the chance. With strange grunts and hisses, a dozen shambling, bulky figures charged out of the mist, leaping at Victor and the Mustang. They were big, bipedal, and covered with ragged cloth, strange tatters of vegetation, and mismatched, patchwork armor. What flesh Victor could make out was pale, pitted with gross yellow ulcers and gaping wounds that oozed black fluid.

Victor was Berserk and no slouch, so he saw the attack coming and instantly urged Guapo to dance back. It would have been a good reaction if something massive hadn’t been flying at him from the top of the stone outcropping. A tremendous weight smashed into his right shoulder, bowling him over, off the horse, to tumble onto the rough ground where the other assailants piled on, grasping, clawing, and biting.

Victor roared and thrashed, grasping with his left hand, ripping anything he got ahold of, flinging the bulky figures off him. His right hand did even more to win him free, hacking Lifedrinker in wild arcs. Her blade almost immediately burst into smoldering orange magma-like fury, sizzling through

the attackers, ripping their armor, clothing, and flesh. The weirdest thing about the attack and the creatures perpetrating it was their utter lack of vocalization—they breathed loudly and grunted. Still, they didn't growl, scream, or cry out as Victor finally fought to his feet and began to lay about him with Lifedrinker in a series of masterful cleaves, feints, and hacks.

The shambling hulks were about half his size in his titan form, and they fully occupied Victor's attention, which might be why he lost track of the bigger one, the creature that had knocked him off his horse. He was soon reminded of its presence, though, when it smashed into him from behind, knocking him forward in a stumble. Despite the attack on his blindside, Victor gathered his balance by ramming into a pair of the smaller shamblers and breaking through before turning to put all his enemies in his frontal arc.

The bigger creature, for Victor had decided these weren't exactly people, was close to his size, bulky with arms so long they dragged on the ground. It was clearly a different species from the shambling monsters; it had a yellowed bone-like carapace that covered its chest and back. Worse, its brawny, too-long, spongy, gray-fleshed arms were spotted with knobby calcified growths. Despite its monstrous appearance, the thing wore black leather trousers on its stubby, thick legs. Victor hadn't been able to get a good look at its face because a thick leather mask covered it, exposing nothing but apple-sized, baleful, faintly luminescent, blood-shot eyes.

"Victor!" As he'd squared off with the gigantic, masked brute and the remaining shamblers, Valla and Kethelket stumbled onto the scene of the ambush. She called out as soon as she saw him with Lifedrinker held ready, pacing sideways, trying to get a feel for how fast the monsters could move.

Victor saw all that, but he wasn't standing idly. As soon as Kethelket moved, he leaped forward, and, Lifedrinker held high, hacked downward, determined to split the bony carapace-like armor on the hulk's chest. The bulky juggernaut flung one of its arms up, trying to intercept Victor's blow, but he was too slow; Lifedrinker, smoldering and trailing black smoke like a comet hitting the atmosphere, smashed down into that bony plate and . . . bounced off, a few chips of bone following her rebound as Victor struggled to maintain his grip. Meanwhile, the juggernaut's other arm swung up, and a fist like a wrecking ball hit Victor just under his left ribs, sending him reeling and gasping as his lungs emptied.

Again, Lifedrinker sang her fury and eagerness as she ripped through the air. Again, she crashed into the target Victor had chosen, and this time, her edge bit deeply, slicing the leather, spraying black fluids in a shower, and cleaving a two-inch trench through the monster's skull. The juggernaut staggered, grunting a weird whistling cry, a sound that made Victor imagine a large man trying to blow a note from a PVC pipe. Victor was a born fighter, a rage-fueled machine with a killer instinct, and he capitalized on the brute's stumble. He followed behind it, hacking left and right, aiming for any part of the monster not covered by that bony carapace.

Steaming black blood showered the battlefield, spraying the ground, the other monsters, and Victor. Lifedrinker easily bit through the gray flesh on the juggernaut's arms, hacking to the bone, biting into it, and leaving the limbs mangled and ineffectual. His rage simmered and boiled as he worked to savage the brutish creature. As he drenched himself in the hot, rancid blood, he began to laugh and roar. He worked his way around it, shredding the flesh on its arms, repeatedly cutting grooves in its skull. Finally, as he found himself at its back again, he hacked into its knee, again and again, until the thing toppled forward, causing the ground to shudder with the impact.

The juggernaut continued to writhe, flopping its ruined arms, trying to get them beneath it as though it might push itself up. Victor could see the gray flesh beneath the rim of that leather cap, and he stepped to the side, lifted Lifedrinker high, and brought her down like a guillotine blade, burying her silvery, smoldering edge halfway through that gray tree trunk of a neck. The monster bucked and thrashed, kicking its stumpy legs as Lifedrinker took her due, drawing the pulsing reddish-black Energy out of the festering flesh, helping the juggernaut realize its time in this life was over. While she feasted, Victor looked up through the eye slits of his helmet, watching the black blood drip off the metal.

Kethelket was still dancing with a couple of badly injured shamblers, and Valla was hard at work, weaving between another three. Victor looked down at Lifedrinker again and saw she was nearly done, the Energy flowing reduced to a thin trickle. "Come on, beautiful. Let's help Valla." He pulled the axe out and launched himself into the back of the nearest shambler, knocking it down and laying into it. In two heavy cleaves, it was dead, and then he pounced on another. By the time it was motionless at his feet, Valla had finished the last of the three.

Victor turned to see Kethelket whipping his swords in an elaborate flourish, flinging the black blood from their blades just before he sheathed them. He met Victor's eyes and nodded. "Sturdy creatures. If they hit us with numbers, we'll have to fight defensively lest we're overwhelmed."

"They were certainly more dangerous than the average Imperial soldier." Valla prodded at a dead shambler with her boot.

"Huh." Victor's lack of a detailed comment was due to him staring at the juggernaut he'd slain. He walked over to it and leaned down, knocking his knuckles against its bony armor. "I couldn't cut through this shit. Is it armor, or is it growing out of him?"

He heard the soft footfalls of the Naghelli as he came near, tiny next to the giant monster, and pressed his palm against the bone.

“This is a creature of death magic. I’m afraid it’s been purpose-grown with that bony armor. If this is an example of what the invaders are capable of, then we may indeed be in for a difficult conquest.”

Valla hopped up the side of the stone outcropping, pulling herself to the top. She stood there, looking southward, and said, “Do you think they’re aware of this? I mean, aware that we just killed some of them?”

“Belikot would know. He could feel when his creations were destroyed.” Kethelket tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“I see a structure!” Valla pointed further south into the mists.

“What kind?”

“Stone. High walls and square. It was visible for only a few seconds as the wind shifted this sickly fog.”

“This was a small party. Do you think they have larger forces nearby?” Kethelket was walking among the dead shamblers, examining them. Victor glanced his way, and then he noticed the Energy gathering among the corpses, and he braced himself; the motes boiling out of the juggernaut’s corpse were purple. He saw Valla hop down from the pile of jumbled boulders, and then it hit him, and he lost himself in the euphoria of victory.

When it was over, and he didn’t have any System messages waiting, he felt a little disappointed, but he supposed it was to be expected. Gaining levels was, as everyone kept telling him, slower the higher one’s tier. It wasn’t as though he’d been in any real danger during the battle—he hadn’t had to strain to win. “Maybe next time,” he said, flipping Lifedrinker and snatching her out of the air by the handle. She was a big axe, but not when he was titan-sized. Thinking about it, Victor cut off his Iron Berserk and resumed his normal stature. He looked at Kethelket, standing idly, perhaps reading a System message, perhaps just deep in thought.

“Hey,” he said. “The army should be here soon. Kethelket, can you get your people and try to scout out that building? I think we should proceed with caution; the main purpose of this mist seems to be to hinder visibility. My banner does good work on it, but I bet there are other affinities that can burn it off; maybe even fire would work.”

“I’ll speak to my people. We’ll have a look around.”

“Any thoughts, Valla?” Victor asked, watching Kethelket flutter into the air and then streak northward. As she contemplated the question, Victor kicked at the corpse of the juggernaut again, looking for any sign of a ring or pouch—anything that might be valuable. He supposed if he were in Coloss, they’d probably harvest some of the

parts. He didn't know what was worth harvesting, though, aside from maybe the dense bone carapace. How would he, though? He needed a knife like Tes's.

"If you consider the fact that the area of ground apparently affected by this mist and the thicker fog further south is hundreds, maybe thousands of square miles, and we stumbled upon this force of fifteen in the first hundred yards . . . what are the odds? What if there are units like this all over the place? What if they can communicate? What if another ten or hundred units like this are coming toward us as we speak?"

"How tough were they? I mean, really? I thought the shambling, rotting creeps were kind of weak."

"They aren't particularly dangerous one at a time, but they're incredibly resilient. Look at them; they're like constructs of dead body parts and . . . plants or fungus. Ancestors! They stink!" She'd approached one of the dead shamblers and showed Victor how the flesh was rotting on their strange, pale faces. Their eyes were milky, some even rotting with ooze and pus dripping from the sockets. Victor could see strands of hair, twisted and damp, hanging down over some of the creatures' faces, but worst of all was the way gray-green creepers and clumps of moss or fungus seemed to grow in the rotten flesh.

"Yeah. Let's get back to the soldiers." Victor looked about, and, as if in response to his thoughts, Guapo charged out of the mist. "Where'd you go, boy? Just hanging back watching me fight?" He pulled himself up and saw Valla looking around, a scowl creasing her brow. "No Uvu?"

"He was fighting with us at first . . . I think he chased something. He's usually better about checking back with me."

"We'll get one of the scouts to track him. Come on." Victor held his hand down, and Valla nodded, taking it. He hoisted her up behind him, and then Guapo began to pound over the ground. He'd only crested the first hill when Victor saw a group of soldiers, maybe fifty-strong, running down the next slope toward them. Sarl led them, and Edeya kept pace alongside, riding Thistle. When everyone had halted, Victor rode up to them and said, "They're dead, but we feel like more are probably coming. We should get the soldiers set."

"The rest of the cohort isn't far behind." Sarl gestured back the way they'd come. "What are we dealing with?"

"We killed some . . ." Victor let his words trail off as something new pricked at his ears. A distant low rumble that he almost missed at first. When he concentrated, though, he began to pick out the distinct notes—drums. He heard drums, and they

were in sync, rolling through the cloying mist like distant thunder. He couldn't pinpoint exactly where they came from, other than south, but he thought it seemed like there was more than one source. "I think you might have been at least partially right, Valla."

"Soldiers! Back up the hill! Form a front line! Shield wall formation!" Sarl immediately began barking orders, and the soldiers responded with alacrity, turning in an about-face and marching up the gentle slope toward the top. Victor hoped they'd be able to form up before whatever was banging those drums showed up. He hoped the soldiers were ready, and he hoped there wasn't anything much worse than what he, Kethelket, and Valla had already dealt with. "Any further commands?" Sarl asked him, breaking his train of thought.

"No. I'll be here. I'll keep my banner up, and I'll help deal with whatever comes our way. I'll be up in a minute; I want to talk to Kethelket first."

Sarl nodded and turned to follow his soldiers. "On the double!"

Victor turned back to the south, watching the mist, listening to the drums, wondering if he should just get the soldiers to start double-timing it all the way back up to the keep. What if a thousand shamblers came out of that fog? What if a hundred of the bone juggernauts did? What if the entire Glorious Ninth got wiped out because he didn't know better than to retreat when they had the chance?

"Here they come," Valla said, tugging on his shoulder and gesturing to the sky above the retreating soldiers. Victor looked and saw the Naghelli, all fifty, fluttering toward him. "What are you going to tell them?"

"Just to get us an idea of what's coming and to get a look at that structure you saw. I feel like we should maybe run. Another part of me wants to spit in my own face for thinking it. We've caught the invaders by surprise here. They might have a lot of units nearby, but for all we know, they're sending a response to the three of us. They don't know we've got more than six hundred soldiers on that hill. This might be our best chance to really sucker punch 'em."

"I'm with you. Listen to your instincts, Victor."

Book 6: Chapter 6: Hordes

Victor was once again enlarged by Iron Berserk, and he rode Guapo up and down the front rank of soldiers, looming over them, gigantic on his massive Mustang, his great banner blazing with light that pushed back the obscuring mists. In the cohort's compact, modified phalanx formation, that golden aura touched almost every one of the soldiers. The drums had grown louder, rumbling over the ground, but the troops didn't care; they were buoyed by Victor's presence, by the closeness of their shield brothers and sisters, and by the months of drilling they'd done, preparing for a battle like this.

He looked to the left, at the forward corner of the formation, and saw Edeya and Valla, both mounted on Thistle. Valla wouldn't admit it, but Victor could see she was very worried about Uvu. He'd asked her, outside of Edeya's hearing, to keep an eye on the young Ghelli, to stay with her during the battle and help her break free for a retreat if need be. She'd wanted to argue but knew how Victor fought, knew he'd be all over the place, shoring up the shield wall and pursuing the more powerful of the enemy combatants. She caught him looking their way and offered him a kind of salute, holding Midnight high and nodding her head. Victor nodded back.

He turned back to the approaching drums, and then he saw, materializing out of the mist, a pair of Naghelli, their wings a black and glowing orange blur, as they streaked toward him, covering the hundred yards or so in seconds. They landed before him, a slight woman with pale hair in tight braids and a tall, thin man, his head completely shaven smooth. They both wore close-fitting black leather armor with the signature glimmering, onyx-black chainmail vests of their kind. The man spoke, his voice breathless, while the woman leaned over, her hands on her knees as she regained her wind. "Kethelket sent us to report."

"Out with it then."

"More than five hundred of those you call shamblers, a half dozen bone giants, and a great many lesser undead, more than we could count."

"Shit." Victor's curse was nearly silent; he didn't want to break the troops' morale. "How close?"

"They run, and when we set out, they were less than two miles away. They'll break through into your light in minutes. They don't move like a disciplined army. Also, Kethelket wants you to know he's taken the rest of the Naghelli to inspect the structure you glimpsed."

"We could probably use their help . . ."

The woman straightened up and spoke in a surprisingly bright contralto voice, "We're to rejoin him with orders—the approaching horde did not seem to notice us in the sky. Kethelket thinks these are . . . 'simple troops,' I believe is how he put it."

"Okay. Tell him to see what the structure is, then fall on the enemy from behind. We'll hold this ground."

“As you say,” the man said, and Victor briefly wondered if he should have gotten their names. The moment passed, though, as they both crisply saluted him and then launched into the air, streaking southward toward the thicker mists.

The drums had steadily increased in volume while they spoke, and when Victor let his eyes drift down from the flying scouts, he saw the first figures break from the mists and start tearing up the slopes; they reminded him of the ghouls he fought in the dungeon near Greatbone Mine—pale creatures, hairless and naked, with long, clawed fingers running on all fours. They lifted their weird, noseless faces to the sky and coughed out their inhuman cries through mouths lined with jagged, gore-stained teeth. Their eyes were yellow in the light of his banner, and they seemed to shy from it and the sunlight that pierced the weakened mist.

Still, they charged forth in the hundreds, much smaller than the shamblers but quick and vicious-looking. When they were a mere fifty yards distant, the archers at the center of the modified phalanx unleashed hundreds of arrows at Sarl’s shouted command. They streaked through the air, trailing black smoke from their blazing shafts, and when they struck home, many of the ghouls fell, tumbling over the rough ground. Victor roared his approval and summoned an enormous, rage-fueled bear, placing it halfway between the army and the charging creatures. The bear roared to life, springing from a red mist of Energy and bounding into the face of the monsters.

“Hold!” Victor roared as he saw some soldiers step forward, perhaps feeling they should run to fight beside the bear. “Let my bear soften their charge!”

“Fire!” Sarl screamed, and another volley of arrows streaked into the charging ghouls with the precision only an Energy user could provide. More of them fell, and then, in a flurry of coughing shrieks, dirt, and claws, they fell upon the front row of soldiers, smashing into their shields. Meanwhile, Victor’s bear rampaged among them, throwing them left and right, snapping their limbs and heads off with vicious bites. Ghouls clung to its back, raking its thick hide with their claws, utterly fearless despite how the bear mauled their comrades.

Victor charged up and down the front line, smashing over the ghouls with Guapo, hacking down with his axe. Lifedrinker obliterated the monsters when she hit home, her scorching, razor-sharp blade more than a match for their leathery skin and hard bones. Meanwhile, his banner blazed, giving comfort and aid to his soldiers and, seemingly, causing pain and near blindness to the undead. He watched as the last of the ghouls crested the hill and the Phalanx opened, the sides moving out in unison to a trumpeted command, boxing in and flanking the creatures.

Victor and his bear rampaged among the enemy while the soldiers beat them back, hacking and stabbing over the shields of the front line. Arrows and spells fell upon the horde, and Victor laughed at the slaughter, a part of him thankful to the forces of Prince Hector for their lack of discipline—it wasn’t until the ghouls were nearly slaughtered that the larger part of the attacking force began to mount the hill. Sarl ordered the bugler to call for the phalanx to reform, and the wings collapsed, pressing in tight, forming that impenetrable box again. As the last of the ghouls were mopped up, mindlessly flinging themselves on the front line, Victor watched the next wave approach.

His earlier euphoria was challenged as he saw the numbers pouring out of the mist. These creatures were slower than the ghouls, but they were bigger and far more numerous—hundreds of shamblers and at least twice that number of smaller but better-equipped monsters. Despite the hundred yards between them, Victor's eyes were good, piercing the haze of the half-formed mist trying to seep into the light of his banner. He studied the smaller enemy combatants and saw they looked very much like zombies from movies he'd seen back on Earth but geared out with all sorts of armor, shields, and weapons.

They shuffled along with the shamblers, sometimes getting trampled or knocked aside by the larger undead. Their eyes were vacant, and their mouths, if they had a lower jaw, hung open. They looked almost pathetic in that regard, but Victor knew better. He could see the waves of dark Energy pulsing through their forms, and he knew they weren't just mindless, slow zombies that could be mowed down; they looked formidable.

Marching among the shamblers and zombies were at least half a dozen of the bone-plated juggernauts like he'd faced earlier. "Five too many," he grumbled, wondering how much damage they'd do while he struggled to kill them one by one. Victor whirled to find Sarl, saw him exhorting his soldiers to tighten up their shield wall, and urged Guapo over to him. "Sarl!" he called.

"Aye, Legate!"

"You need your casters to slow the giants. The ones with the bone plates. They're hard as hell to kill, and I can't get them all at once."

"Say no more, sir!" Sarl dove into the ranks of his soldiers, pushing his way toward the center of the phalanx, where his dedicated ranged units were arrayed. Victor, trusting the captain to get the job done, turned back to the advancing enemies and watched as missiles erupted from the formation behind him. Arrows and spells showered down among the zombies and shamblers, catching them alight, freezing them, or exploding in showers of sparks or even magma. Their slow, steady march didn't stop; they didn't scream or flee. The monsters simply continued to trudge forward, ignoring their fallen, broken brethren as more and more ranged attacks fell among them.

Victor, meanwhile, eyed the six juggernauts, watching them make their inevitable progress toward the phalanx. Arrows and spells hit them to no avail; they didn't flinch, and they certainly didn't fall. He glanced over his shoulder at the soldiers; they looked good, eager, even. He didn't see any dead or wounded. Either they'd had an exceptionally easy time with the ghouls, or they'd pulled their casualties back into their ranks. Victor let his eye drift further into the phalanx, looking for Sarl, wondering what he and his casters could do about the rapidly approaching juggernauts.

Victor urged Guapo into a charge, and he saw another ball of icy water streak over the zombies and shamblers, bursting into the chest of yet another juggernaut. Victor veered to the left; the now-frozen giant had been his intended target. He didn't have to look far to see a new goal. Not thirty yards distant, the front line of shamblers and zombies surged toward him, and just a few ranks back marched another juggernaut. It wasn't quick, but its larger stature afforded it more speed, and it was, literally, trampling its smaller comrades in its hurry toward the front line of Victor's soldiers. Victor leaned forward, and Guapo leaped into motion, streaking toward the enemy.

The shamblers were big, maybe big enough to stop Guapo in his tracks, so Victor aimed for gaps in their ranks, trusting the giant Mustang to trample the smaller zombies despite their armor and shields. His trust was well founded; the horse crashed into the first rank, utterly flattening one zombie and then bowling aside two more as Victor's outstretched boot kicked a shambler aside. Five seconds later, they'd crashed through two more ranks, and the juggernaut was before him.

Victor couldn't have accurately guessed his speed when Guapo charged past, and he swung Lifedrinker into the juggernaut's leather-wrapped forehead, but it had to be pretty damn fast. He put everything he had into that hacking cleave, trusting that his instinct was right, that Lifedrinker could handle it, and that she wouldn't bounce off or break. He believed her haft was stronger than the juggernaut's skull. At least, he hoped so. He hoped this particular creature wasn't any tougher than the one he'd already killed.

Victor held Lifedrinker high, her blade smoldering and streaming black smoke into the air, and he screamed his battle lust. Despite the imminent assault on the phalanx by shamblers and zombies,

many of his troops echoed his warcry, having watched him drop the giant bone-plated monstrosity. Victor whirled Guapo, hacking downward with this axe, giving the Mustang some room to move. As he spun, he took in the battlefield and saw that three of the juggernauts were now frozen in place, only two more still making progress toward his army. He zeroed in on the closest one, and Guapo leaped into action.

The shamblers' claws and the zombie's weapons cut through his sturdy leather pants, and when they met his flesh, they left shallow cuts that his Berserk Energy rapidly healed. Nevertheless, the wounds stung, and something vile was on the blades and claws, something that his body had to fight off. He began to notice the effect and felt his rage seeping away as the Energy was forced to fight harder and harder to heal him. "Dirty assholes," he growled as, with a tremendous yawp, he brought Lifedrinker down on the back of the second juggernaut's skull. She split the thing's head like a dry log, showering brains to either side as it collapsed in a heap.

Victor felt Guapo fading, so he released him. As the mount dispersed in a cloud of sparkling golden mist, Victor landed on his feet and began to lay about himself with Lifedrinker, slaughtering shamblers and zombies. The zombies were surprisingly sturdy. Even though Victor was more than twice their size, some of them managed to deflect his blows. Of course, this only furthered to enrage Victor, and he began to lose himself to the mad dance of slaughter. He swung Lifedrinker one-handed, and with his left hand, he grabbed his opponents, threw them, and swung them about, smashing them into each other and creating openings for his axe.

Simultaneously, he became aware of a low roar, like a distant river crashing over boulders, and he felt a pang from his Battle Awareness feat. Victor paused his slaughter and jerked his head toward the formation of his soldiers. Sure enough, the roar was the sound of zombies and shamblers pounding on shields, punctuated by the shouts, screams, and battle cries of the troops. Then his eyes fell on the other unfrozen juggernaut—it was carving a swath through the phalanx, already three ranks deep. Victor roared and leaped, bunching his mighty legs and exploding into the air. He arched his back, hoisted Lifedrinker in a two-handed grip, and, screaming like a wyrm-scale-clad meteor, fell toward the colossal monster's back.

His aim wasn't perfect, or the monster moved, or both, but Lifedrinker's edge cut a groove through the back of the juggernaut's skull instead of completely splitting it. She slid through the bone, and then her smoldering edge impacted the back of the undead monstrosity's bone carapace, and, with the sound of a cannon shot, she split it.

"Good work, beautiful. Take what's yours." Victor released the axe and reached into his storage container, the one he'd taken from Karnice, and pulled out a massive, two-handed maul. It was a hugely heavy weapon, one that Victor had examined before

and determined would be a nice weapon in a pinch. Every part of the maul was made of a copper-colored metal, a single piece from which the handle and the two hammerheads were forged. The handle was grooved and rough, easy to grip, and the sides of the anvil-sized hammerhead were etched with black-inlaid runes.

Book 6: Chapter 7: Glory and Death

Nonetheless, the effects of all that weight and momentum were satisfying; Victor cleared great swathes of zombies and shamblers with a single swing, putting all his strength into massive, ripping cleaves that required him to take several steps to keep control. It would have been a disastrous battle if he weren't so tough, so well-armored, and so large. With each swing, as he smashed the undead aside, a dozen more rushed in behind him to claw and hack at his sides and back. The maul was a tedious weapon to redirect, and he rarely found himself able to put it between himself and an attacker. Instead, he had to focus on his ability to be mobile—he leaped, he charged, and he smashed pathways for himself, always turning, spinning, and dodging to relieve the pressure on his flanks.

Meanwhile, the soldiers in the Ninth fought like the rugged, resilient terriers they were. They maintained their shield wall, pulling back dead or dying comrades and filling the gap from the next rank. They used their Energy abilities to bolster their lines, to fling fire and other elements onto the hordes of undead, and, encouraged by Victor's banner and his roaring, screaming, smashing titanic form, they slowly but surely began to turn the tide of the battle. They must have been outnumbered nearly three to one at the start, but with the quick dispatch of the ghouls and the steady whittling of the zombies and shamblers, the mounds of dead, destroyed, or maimed attackers began to grow, and the numbers of those still pressing against their shields dwindled.

Things took a different turn when the undead drummers finally joined the fray. Perhaps they'd held back, lurking in the mist, using their otherworldly, gut-twisting music to bolster the attacking hordes. Maybe their Energy was running dry, and their default next action was to attack. Or, just maybe, the intelligence that drove this army against Victor and the Ninth saw that their drums weren't helping enough and urged them forward. Whatever the reason, six gigantic, humanoid skeletons with purple flames dancing in the sockets of their eyes charged onto the field of combat.

The skeletal drummers carried polished bone clubs in one hand and enormous bone, disc-like shields in the other. Victor knew they were the "drummers" because they came onto the battlefield, smashing those clubs against their shields, creating the low, concussive beat that had been the backdrop of the entire battle. This close, though, the concussions rolled up the slope, smashing through the undead and into the phalanx shield wall. The drumbeats had a physical presence—one of the giant drummers was down the hill directly in front of Victor, and when it banged out that note, the shockwave rolled into him, knocking him back several steps. It felt almost like a wave of water had crashed over him.

The undead knocked down by the drummers' magic sprang back to their feet, almost like they'd been invigorated. Unfortunately, the shockwave had the opposite effect on the soldiers of the Ninth—they were knocked flat, and when they struggled to their feet, they looked dazed and disoriented. The shield wall began to crumble, the invigorated undead rushing to take advantage of the downed soldiers.

Throughout the battle, Victor had worked to kill the frozen juggernauts, and only one remained, held fast by the mages' repeated balls of icy water Energy. Victor had smashed the skulls of the other two and had been on his way to the final one when the drummers joined the fight. Seeing the effects of their sonic attacks, he made a split-second decision and used Titanic Leap to close the distance, aiming for the centermost skeletal drummer as it climbed over the corpses of its comrade zombies toward the phalanx.

He landed behind and to the left of the giant skeleton, marveled that he had to look up to see its head, and then brought the maul, whistling through the air in a two-handed, overhead blow, down on the creature's spine. An ear-bleeding concussion resounded from the impact, and, to Victor's shock, the skeleton stumbled forward, and the enormously heavy maul rebounded—he couldn't see any damage to the bone. "No way!" he said, wondering if even Lifedrinker could cleave that bone. He felt like he'd hit the monstrosity hard enough to flatten an engine block. He might not have killed the skeleton, but he'd gotten its attention.

As it turned faster than it seemed it should be able to, the skeleton lashed out with its bone club, catching Victor in the ribs. The wyrm-scales ate most of the damage, disbursing the force, but he still stumbled, though hot rage began to replace his battle euphoria. Victor needed a better weapon, and he didn't have time to hunt for Lifedrinker. Rather than dig around trying to find something else in his rings, he gripped the maul's handle tight and cast Imbue Spirit, sending his most abundant, potent Energy source into the spell pattern—fear.

Victor felt a piece of himself detach and flow with the spell's Energy into the maul. The weakness and lethargy from the loss was brief; he quickly adjusted. As the process completed, he saw the coppery, dense metal of the weapon darken. Purple-black swirls of Energy began to pulse along the haft, up to the hammer. Then they multiplied, magnifying each other, creating weird, smokey discs of Energy that radiated outward from the center of the hammerhead and toward the business ends of the hammer. Victor grinned, marveling at the sudden lightness of the weapon, the sudden vibrancy of it. Why hadn't he ever tried imbuing Lifedrinker? "Because her spirit is already in there . . ." he reminded himself.

The giant skeleton staggered at the blow, its shield vibrating wildly, pulling its arm back, giving Victor room for a perfect follow-up smash in the monster's chest. The Energy-driven hammerhead sent a wave of purple-black force through the bones, shattering them, releasing whatever Energy or spirit or malignant power drove the skeleton onward. It collapsed in a heap, and Victor whirled, looking for his next target. Panic gripped his heart as he saw the other four drummers were already

assaulting the lines, pushing the soldiers back, flinging them left and right with their polished bone cudgels.

He ran toward the closest one, trying to get close enough to activate Energy Charge again, and then he heard a new sound, the susurrant of rapidly flapping wings. He looked up and saw that the Naghelli had finally made a return appearance led by none other than Kethelket. They split into three groups, flying toward the furthestmost skeletal drummers, and Victor took the hint—they were leaving the center one to him. When he'd closed to twenty yards, Victor cast Energy Charge, but he didn't lead with the maul; he didn't want to kill a bunch of soldiers with the explosion.

Instead, he slammed his shoulder into the giant's back, sending it flopping forward, crashing into the ground, and knocking back several shield bearers who'd been bravely trying to hold it at bay. Victor hoped they'd be all right, but in his mind, they should be—no one should be out on this battlefield if they couldn't take getting knocked around a little. He stomped over to the skeleton, kicking it down as it struggled to rise, and brought the maul down, smashing the monster into the bloody dirt. The giant's spine shattered, and Victor drove the fragments into the ground, pulverizing a handful of ribs and the creature's sternum along the way.

The soldiers nearby cheered, but Victor roared, "Don't stand around! Reform the line!" Then he scanned the field and saw the Naghelli were engaged with the skeletons, baiting them with rapid attacks, darting out of their reach, leading them away from the phalanx lines. Satisfied that the immediate threat was being dealt with, Victor turned to the last juggernaut and saw that it was starting to break free of its icy prison—the mages had been killed, drained of Energy, or too distracted by the collapse of the shield wall to maintain the spell. Victor tried to leap at the distant juggernaut but found his ability unresponsive.

As he struggled to figure out what was wrong, he ran toward the monster, smashing through the sparse lines of zombies and shamblers. He looked inward, wondering if the answer was at his Core, and found his hunch was correct—his Energies were dangerously low. He was about to lose his Berserk because his rage Core was nearly empty. His fear Core was holding steady at around ten percent; had he really sent so much of it into the maul? His glory-attuned Energy was less than half, and so was his inspiration-attuned Energy—he'd been using that to power his charges. He didn't remember his Titanic Leap ability saying anything about Energy requirements, but something in his gut told him that was the problem; with his Energy so low, it wouldn't work.

Growling and gripping the maul tightly, Victor determined to finish the juggernaut before his Berserk faded. He primed his pathways with inspiration-attuned Energy, and when he was within a dozen strides, he cast Energy Charge. He tore over the ground to the side of the juggernaut, holding the maul over his left shoulder, and he timed a decisive blow at the monster's chest as he streaked past. It was a perfect hit, and the enchanted maul absolutely obliterated the juggernaut's bony plate armor. The shockwave rocked the battlefield as the enormous undead creature tumbled head over heels down the slope, devoid of the Energy that had earlier animated it.

Victor was protected by the weird magic of his charge, which was probably what drained his Energy so much each time he used it; part of the Energy went into the charge, but another, sometimes more significant, part went into creating a shell to protect him from the destructive forces. Regardless, he didn't feel the concussion of his collision, but the straggling undead nearby did; they came apart in it, their rotting flesh and armor peeled off their bones. Their limbs were torn away, their necks and backs shattered, and their weapons and shields were ripped from grasping hands.

Victor felt his body contracting, felt the rage seep away from him, and he stood there, leaning on the maul's handle, now long enough to come to his chin. He lifted it, found it was still easy to hoist with part of his spirit inhabiting it, and turned back to the formation of soldiers. Just as his eyes fell on them, horns sounded—the signal to charge—and the soldiers holding up the shield lines parted way, allowing the third, fourth, and fifth lines to rush forth, smashing into the remaining undead, beating them back. Victor looked to the Naghelli swarming around the last of the skeletal drummers and saw that they were winning, somehow slowly draining the Energy from the giant undead, weakening the magic binding the bones.

“Victor!” Valla's distant voice made Victor jerk his head around, looking for her, wondering how he could have forgotten her for the entirety of the battle; not once had he worried about her safety or thought to seek her out. He finally laid eyes on her, waving Midnight high above her head, her other hand on Edeya's shoulder. The young Ghelli was gore-splashed, but she wore a toothy grin, and Victor jogged toward them. Along the way, he broke the connection to his Impart Spirit spell and sent the now-mundane maul into his storage ring. Leaping corpses, weaving between the last of the skirmishes, he saw Edeya waving her spear above her head, trying to catch his eye.

“We did it! We won!” she cried as he drew near. Valla stood over her, fatigue clear in her expression, and Victor wondered how hard she'd had to battle to keep the young Ghelli safe. Hopefully, they'd both reap plenty of rewards for the effort. Thinking of rewards, Victor turned to scan the battlefield. Only a handful of small fights were yet taking place, and it was clear most of the Ninth had survived, though an undeniable number of corpses wearing the campaign uniform littered the field.

“Another hard-fought victory for the Ninth.” Valla followed his gaze, taking in the dead.

“Let's hope. I don't see any motes yet.”

“Combat persists.” Valla pointed to the last of the battles out on the slope. Victor was about to reply when, with a flutter of wings and shadows, Kethelket landed before them.

“We made an important discovery,” he announced, forgoing niceties. Victor saw fatigue in his eyes, and blood spatters dotted his pale flesh.

“Good work on those bone drummers.”

“Thank you. It costs a heavy toll in Energy, but we can weaken the death magic that binds their spirits, allowing us to damage their nigh-indestructible frames. Put that to the side, though, Lord. We must discuss the keep yonder.” He pointed south into the mist where Valla had seen the stone structure.

“What about it?”

“It housed many of the creatures your army slew here on this field. When they marched past, we hid in the trees that dot the slopes near the walls. Afterward, we went inside and slew a guardian beast in the courtyard—a great rotting mound that moved with evil intent. The System then announced that we could capture the ‘strategic location.’ When I tried to do so, resting my hand upon a strange floating stone at the center of the courtyard, it said that a greater force must be present. I think we should go there, with this army of yours, before the invaders can rally more forces to thwart you.”

Victor looked at Kethelket again, at his dark eyes and shimmering swords, at his glimmering armor and glowing wings; he seemed to know a lot about death magic and seemed highly competent. He hoped he could trust him because it was damn nice being able to rely on someone else to get shit done. He glanced at Valla, took in her slight shrug, and said, “Right. We’ll get marching as soon as I speak to Sarl. Edeya, contact Lam and the others. Give them an update.” He paused, looked at the gore-splashed Ghelli, and then at Valla and said, “Where’s Thistle?”

“He took a bad gash to his haunches, and we sent him off. He’s not meant to be surrounded by undead, Victor.” Valla had seen his frown and responded in kind, as though daring him to second-guess her.

“All right. Try to call him; you guys know how?”

“I know the whistle.” Edeya demonstrated, holding two fingers between her lips and making a trilling call, the same one Victor had learned from Chandri.

“Good. Keep doing that, but message the base first.” Victor turned toward the milling soldiers, and then he saw the golden motes starting to gather among the dead.

“Sarl!” he called, walking toward the captain, getting ready for the stream of Energy that would no doubt throw everyone off task while it rewarded the victors. He’d only made it a few steps before his eyes were drawn to the thick purple motes growing out of a juggernaut corpse. He turned toward it, slapping a hand at Lifedrinker’s empty harness, and hurried to retrieve her.

“Hey! Good work! Nice fighting! Gather your brothers and sisters! We march soon!” he called out to the soldiers he ran past, and then he was before the giant corpse, and he saw Lifedrinker’s haft sticking out of its hunched, rotting shoulders. He reached forward, grabbed hold of her, and, just as he pulled her gore-covered axe head free, a torrent of Energy smashed into him.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 53 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

I learned much from the dark Energy I drank from the bone-clad one we split. I grow eager to taste more of his kind; my edge itches to part their bones.

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t get to kill all these assholes with you. I wonder if you’d like to try something sometime.”

Try something?

“How would you feel about me putting a bit of my spirit in there with you?”

I . . . I think I’d like that, Victor. I think I’d like that very much.

Book 6: Chapter 8: Old Walls

After the battle, Sarl began to order his cohort to collect samples from the various undead, loot them for valuables, and then gather them into mounds so the Pyromancers could reduce them to ash. When Victor heard him giving the command, he approached the captain and said, “You’re going to burn them all?”

“When dealing with the undead, it’s usually best.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.” Victor looked over the battlefield, taking in the piles of undead. The soldiers had been quick to gather their fallen comrades, but Victor thought he saw a legion uniform here and there beneath the rotting, gory bodies of zombies. No doubt, they’d be recovered as Sarl’s orders were carried out, but Victor hated to see them, hated to think that people he’d just watched vibrantly marching forth were now cold flesh, spattered with gore, pinned beneath these vile creatures. “How many did we lose?”

Sarl inhaled slowly through his nose, frowning as he followed Victor’s gaze. “Headcounts from the sergeants indicate seventy-four dead, but we’ve only recovered sixty-two bodies.”

“I’m sure they’ll turn up. I’m sorry for your losses, Sarl. Your troops fought damn well, though. I was amazed by those phalanx maneuvers.”

Sarl stiffened his back at Victor’s words, some pride bleeding into his stature. “Thank you, sir. I’m proud of them. We saw great gains after the battle.”

“Damn right. The Ninth is going to be formidable at this rate.”

“As you say, sir.”

Victor watched him walk over to speak to one of his lieutenants, then turned to gaze over the field to where Edeya and Valla stood with Thistle. The vidanii had come around after the battle ended, limping from a deep gash in his left haunch. Valla had been treating the wound, rubbing some healing ointment into the cut, when Victor left to speak with Sarl. Frowning, wondering what had happened to Uvu and how he should broach the subject with Valla, he walked over to her. “How is he?”

“He’ll be fine. Just a scar he can show off to Starlight,” Edeya answered. She was upbeat, cheerful, even. After the battle, she’d announced that she was level twenty-nine, so Victor could see why—it was exciting to be on the cusp of a Class refinement. Valla didn’t look up, still massaging another layer of ointment into the vidanii’s course fur, watching with a satisfied expression as the swollen, red flesh around the puckered scar faded and diminished.

“Edeya, you better chug that racial advancement soon. You won’t be able to advance to tier three without it.”

“I’m well aware, sir.” Edeya’s toothy smile told Victor she probably couldn’t think of much else.

“When we return to the base, then.” Victor turned to Valla and placed a hand on her shoulder, gently squeezing. “I hate to bring it up, but . . . Uvu?”

“I can’t feel him.” She didn’t look at him, refused to meet his gaze, as she continued her ministrations on Thistle’s haunch.

“Can you usually?”

“Always.” She sniffed, then looked up from her work. Her soft, seafoam eyes were bloodshot as she said, “I can ride with you for now.”

“Shit, Valla, I . . .”

“Nothing to be said. He’s not a vidanii. He’s a creature of war and conflict. I’ve been bracing myself for the possibility he’d get himself killed since Rellia gave him to me as a cub.” Victor could see she was trying to put on a brave face, but her voice choked on the last sentence, and he knew she was hurting. He wanted to hug her, pull her close, and stroke her hair, but they were surrounded by soldiers, and Edeya was standing right there; he knew Valla wouldn’t appreciate it—not at that exact moment.

“Maybe he’ll come around.” Edeya squeezed Valla’s hand, interrupting her slow, methodical stroking of Thistle’s course hide, trying to break the gloomy spell. “Maybe something in this mist or a different effect of the invaders’ magic makes your connection to him silent.”

“Maybe . . .” Valla shrugged but offered Edeya a small smile. “Thanks for the thought.”

Victor summoned Guapo, once again using glory-attuned Energy. He liked the Mustang in that guise; he was showy and positive, and his brilliant eyes and the sparks of his hooves helped to drive back the gloom of the mist that kept creeping toward the army. The horse erupted from his weird, sparkling, golden pool of Energy and pranced about, his neck arched and his eyes flashing. “Good boy,” Victor immediately said, patting his muscular shoulder. He glanced at the two women and was pleased to see some light in Valla’s eyes and a broad smile on Edeya’s face as they took in the proud animal.

“Let’s go see what Kethelket was talking about.” He swung onto the horse’s back, then reached down to pull Valla up behind him. Edeya stepped into Thistle’s stirrup and nodded her readiness. Before they left ahead of the army, Victor rode over to Sarl and said, “As soon as you’re done here, Captain, march due southwest until you see the structure Kethelket told us about. We’ll be waiting.”

“Will do, sir!” Of course, he had to snap a perfect salute, which Victor had no way of returning from atop the horse. He slammed his fist into his chest, though, and gave the captain a solemn nod. Then he clicked his tongue, and Guapo leaped down the slope, weaving between the various squads of soldiers as they did their dirty work on the battlefield.

They’d already concluded that the mist, while not exactly harmless, wasn’t much of a risk to soldiers. Victor couldn’t notice anything when he stood in it, but some of the lower-tier soldiers complained of shortness of breath, a certain lassitude of the muscles, and a desire to get back to camp for a good sleep. Still, with the presence of stronger individuals driving them on, none seemed to be at any risk of being overcome.

Guapo and Thistle made short work of the slope, diving into the thicker mists as they thundered over the ground toward the structure Kethelket and his Naghelli were currently securing. Victor looked over at Edeya. “Doing all right?”

“Sleepy.” Her eyes looked heavy, and she leaned forward toward Thistle’s neck as she rode.

“I’m okay!” Her voice rose with outrage as she thrust his hand away, steering Thistle so he veered a few feet further from Guapo. Valla was silent through the exchange, her grip steady on Victor’s ribs, and he suddenly felt ashamed for horsing around with Uvu missing. Before he could worry about it further, a dark structure loomed out of the mist ahead. He steered Guapo to the left, aiming to circle the building where, according to Kethelket, he’d find an open gate on the other side.

As they neared the corner, he felt Valla stir, and she said, “Those stones look old.”

Victor eyed the building, noting the smoothly chiseled gray stone blocks and fine dark mortar lines. They'd been cut with precision and were huge; the blocks had to be three feet square. Victor followed the smooth, flat wall upward with his eyes, noting crenellations about forty feet above them. Valla was right, though—the base of the stone wall was overgrown with lichen, and green-leaved vines were trying to climb the heights, though they only stretched twenty feet or so upward. It didn't look like something that had been built in recent history.

As they rounded the corner, he guessed the edifice was a square; it seemed this new side was the same length as the one they'd just ridden past. "A square, ancient keep." Valla's voice was soft and speculative.

"Does it mean something?"

"I wonder if this is part of one of the old empires from before the joining. A castle from one of the worlds that made up Fanwath. It reminds me of a story about an Onaghi empire—they were adept at manipulating earth-attuned Energy even before the System came."

"Onaghi . . ." Victor let the word trail off, his mind searching the depths of his memory for the meaning.

"There aren't many left," Edeya bailed him out, "They don't look like the rest of us; they float in the air and have kind of translucent skin . . ."

"Ah, yeah! The jellyfish people." Victor nodded, remembering a group of the strange folk he'd seen in Persi Gables. He turned Guapo around the next corner, and, true to his word, Kethelket waited for them before an open gate halfway along the stony wall. He stood in the swirling mists with five of his people standing in a semi-circle around him, all wielding wicked, gleaming blades.

"Not sure what that is," Edeya said, responding to Victor's comment, "but Onaghi definitely aren't fish."

"Yeah, my bad." Victor only half paid attention to her; he was too busy studying the front of the keep and the area before it. Like the side and rear, it rose in a sheer wall of perfectly cut stone blocks, but above the open stone gates, long slits were carved in the wall. Victor wondered if they were meant to allow defenders to launch attacks on enemies who might try to breach those thick, flat slabs. He examined the gates and noted the gigantic, black metal hinges and the massive bolt affixed to the inner side; it seemed they'd be hard to break.

More than that, Victor felt the Energy in the stones around him—this was a place steeped in power, built with magical defenses that he didn't understand. He wondered why the undead had charged forth to attack him rather than try to hold on to it. As they drew near, he voiced his curiosity to Kethelket. "You didn't have to fight any defenders?"

"I didn't say that, Lord."

“Lord’s a bit much, Kethelket. Call me Victor or, if you want to show respect in front of the troops, sir.”

“My apologies. If I wasn’t clear before, let me amend my report: most of the defenders charged forth to attack you, but a garrison of fifty undead was left behind, along with the mound of . . . undead matter and fungi. We slaughtered them.”

Victor hopped down from Guapo and held up a hand to help Valla. She took it, though he thought he saw a flicker of annoyance in her eyes as she slid down. She stepped away, down a gravel-strewn dirt track that led from the gates into the misty rolling hills, and he saw her staring searchingly into the distance. He wanted to go to her, to ask if she was looking for Uvu or if there was anything he could do, but other things were vying for his attention, things he felt a duty to address. “So, show me this stone you tried to interact with.”

“Right inside, sir, at the center of the courtyard.”

“Take notes, Edeya.” Victor left Guapo standing where he was and started toward the opening, but first, he looked at the Naghelli standing nearby and gestured toward Valla as she walked in a slow circuit around the front of the keep. “Keep an eye on her.”

“I heard that.” She turned to scowl at him, but he could see it wasn’t a real scowl. Some lightness in her eyes gave away the fact that she appreciated his attention.

The Naghelli didn’t respond, but every single one offered him a salute. Kethelket nodded to them, then gestured between the massive stone gates. “Shall we?”

“Yeah.” Victor followed him through, looking up at the impressive stone slabs, noting that the insides were banded with dark metal. The oversized bolt he’d seen when riding up was one of four; three smaller ones were on the inside of the other gate. “Looks like it’d be a bitch to break this gate open.”

“The warding glyphs worked into the stone are of an ancient design. I haven’t seen the like; I believe this keep is from Havah.”

Victor paused in the oppressive stone tunnel behind the gates, looking up at the hundreds of dark holes in the stone overhead. “Havah?”

“The world from which the Onaghi and Bogoli originate.”

“Oh? The little guys who paint themselves? They came from the same world?”

“That’s right. Of all the races who came to Fanwath, those two were known for their high Energy affinity and talent with using it. Well, of the races who were friendly. The Yovashi were similarly gifted.”

“Yeah, I’ve met a Yovashi. He tried to destroy my Core.” Victor turned and continued through the tunnel, imagining what it would be like if some horrible magical fire or

molten metal were poured down out of those murder holes. Whether his remark had surprised Kethelket or not, he couldn't tell; the Naghelli shadowed him noiselessly without comment. When he emerged from the tunnel, Victor was surprised by the brightness of the sky. The clouds above, though pale gray, weren't obscured by any of the mist that had been ever-present outside the keep.

As he shielded his eyes, allowing them to adjust, Edeya's voice echoed out of the gate tunnel, "I can breathe again! The mist doesn't come in here?"

"Not since we killed the defenders. My people carried the corpses out and burned them. A short time after that, the mists receded beyond the walls. That's when we noticed the stone yonder." Victor jerked his gaze down from the parapets where he'd been observing the other Naghelli lurking in the shadows of the crenellations. As he surveyed the courtyard, he instantly saw what Kethelket was talking about—a cylindrical stone hovered there. It was maybe two yards high and half a dozen inches thick. It spun slowly in the air, its smooth gray surface interrupted by shimmering yellow runes. They looked like the System runes you could find on any City Stone, like the one at the center of the citadel in Coloss.

"That's from the System."

"Yes, I agree." Kethelket walked toward it. "When I tried to interact with it, the System put a message in my vision saying we needed a larger force to interact. So, we flew forth to help you slay the undead and fetch your army here."

"Ah, yeah. Do you remember what the System said when it gave us the conquest quest?"

"Chests of Conquest at strategic locations!" Edeya practically shouted.

"Exactly." Victor stepped toward the stone. He could feel the power in it; it was dense with Energy in a way that reminded him of the Warlord's cultivation chamber back in Coloss. He'd felt something similar from the City Stones he'd interacted with, but this was different; it felt more volatile, as though it had a certain raw edge to it. He felt like it was waiting for him, and when he reached his hand toward it, the stone stopped its constant spinning, holding still while he rested his palm on its cool, lightly vibrating surface.

*****This stone is undefended, but you must have a larger force in the vicinity to interact.*****

"Still need more people here. Sarl and the Ninth will be along soon." Victor turned to examine the courtyard, noting the stone benches here and there, the piles of rotting refuse, some bones and decomposing flesh, and a large mound of decaying plant matter near a broad archway that led into a dark interior. He wrinkled his nose,

wondering at the idea that the air had smelled fine to him before he'd seen the bones and refuse. "You've cleared the inside?"

"Aye. Nothing but stone remains; whatever wood was present has long rotted away. We slew the undead within and dragged them forth, but there are messes like this," Kethelket gestured to a pile of bones and rotting flesh, "inside as well. It'll take a good, deep cleaning, and we didn't think we should begin while watching for undead reinforcements."

"How many troops can be housed inside?"

"Barracks for a few hundred, and then there are finer rooms for the commanders or nobility. I'm assuming; I know little of the peoples of Havah." Kethelket shrugged, resting a foot on a stone bench and leaning an elbow on his slender, leather-clad knee.

"They come!" one of the Naghelli on the wall cried out.

"The undead?" Edeya asked, hurrying forward to put Victor between her and the gate.

"No, no," Kethelket chuckled, "the soldiers."

Victor looked at Edeya and grinned, noting she held the Farscribe Book in her arms, hugging it to her chest. "You updated the base?"

"Yes. Lam wants us to return before dark, but they're waiting to hear from you about this keep."

"We'll see." Victor moved to sit on one of the ancient stone benches, idly drumming his fingers on Lifedrinker's haft. "I wish these assholes weren't undead."

"You'd prefer a different sort of enemy?" Kethelket raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"Well, yeah. They don't carry much in the way of loot, and my ancestors have little use for their empty husks after we've slain them."

"Your ancestors?"

"He sends them treasures in the spirit realm; it helps them to conquer the new worlds they walk upon."

Victor looked at Edeya in surprise. "I don't remember telling you about that."

"You talked about it for about an hour one night when we gathered in your travel home. Well, you and Valla; she went on and on about the treasures you 'burned up' back in that world you two visited."

"Is she still out there?" Victor frowned, looking toward the gate tunnel.

“I’ll check on her.” Edeya jogged off, still clutching the Far Scribe book, into the shadows of the intimidating keep wall.

“She’s eager to please you.”

“It’s funny ‘cause she used to give me a pretty damn hard time.” Victor sighed and shook his head, a smile touching his lips at the fond memory. “That was a different life, though. Hey,” he turned to make eye contact with Kethelket, “do any of your people have some skill with the spear?”

“Of course. The spear is nearly unrivaled in its versatility. Before I took up the sword, I reached epic proficiency with the long spear. Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to help Edeya. She uses a spear, but I’ve never seen her training with anyone. I think she could learn a lot from one of you . . .”

“I will train her,” Kethelket spoke quickly, heading off further words from Victor. “I will consider it an honor to help a close companion of yours, Victor.”

Victor stood up and held out a hand. “Thank you, Kethelket.” The Naghelli prince nodded solemnly and took Victor’s hand in his. As they shook, a great roar echoed through the gate tunnel, a roar that Victor recognized—it was Uvu, and he sounded distressed and angry.

Book 6: Chapter 9: Outpost

Victor ripped Lifedrinker from her harness and charged for the tunnel. As he surged through the darkened opening, he almost instinctually cast Iron Berserk, and by the time he exploded out the other side, he was hunched over, his shoulders scraping along the stone ceiling. A chaotic scene greeted him—Valla and the five Naghelli who’d been watching the gate were dancing around a frenzied Uvu and a monstrous aggressor.

The giant cat’s rear haunches were both speared by barbed harpoon-like, bony tines, and, attached to those tines, long vibrating sinews stretched forth to a pulsing, sucking mound of bone-filled gelatin. The jelly-like heap shivered and pulsed. The bones within its translucent structure shifted and seemed to heave with its movements as it surged forward and back, trying to, if Victor were guessing, reel in the cat—to pull Uvu into the slurping, toothless maw that kept opening and closing on the near side between the weird sinew-bound harpoons.

Valla danced forward, swinging Midnight at one of the sinews holding Uvu, but her blade bounced off. The Naghelli were fast, too fast perhaps for the mound to respond to their attacks, but their efforts were fruitless; they slashed and stabbed it, only to have the wounds they imparted instantly refilled with the clear jelly. Valla regained her momentum and went in for another strike, but then, with a sick explosion of puss-like gel, another harpoon fired out of the mound and impaled her leg. She screamed, stumbling and falling back, dropping her sword as she scrabbled at the ground, joining Uvu in his attempts to keep from being reeled in.

Victor had seen enough. With hot rage coming unbidden to fill his pathways to bursting, he focused his blood-red vision on the near side of the mound and cast Energy Charge, leading with Lifedrinker’s gleaming, red-hot edge. Like a smoking meteor, he ripped over the gravel and grass,

and when he smashed into the mound, he buried the axe and his arms up to the elbows into its gooey, flaccid body. The impalement was only an after-effect, though—the real damage came from the concussion of his enormous body smashing into the monster. He hit it so hard, riding on a wave of powerful rage-attuned Energy, that the shockwave rippled through the thing, sending the bones inside exploding out the far side, spattering its gel-like innards and flesh over a dozen yards.

It didn't make a sound as it continued to deflate, the gel breaking apart, becoming liquid before his eyes, leaving a wet spatter of bones and rubbery sinews scattered over the stony ground. Victor jerked his eyes from the destruction to Valla and Uvu. Valla was up to one knee, her impaled thigh held out straight as she worried at the jagged, ivory-colored harpoon. She kept glancing toward Uvu, but the cat was doing better now that it wasn't being pulled by those bloody impalements. He lay on the ground, stretching his neck to chew and worry at the harpoon in his left haunch.

"Be still, boy," Valla said. "We'll help you in a minute."

Victor started toward her, ready to help remove the barbed tine, but then some movement caught his eye, and he looked back at the splattered monster and noticed the fluid-like material was slowly flowing away, trickling over the gravelly ground. "Somebody burn that shit!"

"Tuvai!" Kethelket yelled, and one of the Naghelli who'd been trying to help Uvu, sprang forward, a ball of flames forming between her hands. The ball grew in density and brightness until it was yellow-white, and then she flung it forth. It smoked through the air to smash into the center of the flowing pool of oozing liquid, where it burst into a carpet of brilliant flames. This time, something screamed, or maybe it just made that sound as it burned, and thick black smoke billowed into the air as the puddle ignited, almost like an oil slick had been set alight.

Victor nodded and moved over to Valla, kneeling to get a better look at the barbed harpoon. As he knelt, he ended his Iron Berserk and cast Alter Self, reducing his size further so he could better see what he was dealing with. He followed the sinewy rope away from Valla to where it ended in the smoking, burning pool. Nodding to himself, he said, "Hold still." Then he hacked Lifedrinker into the sinew near Valla's leg, where it lay on the ground. Lifedrinker's smoldering, razor edge made short work of the material, slicing through and into the ground, shattering a few gravelly clumps of granite. "Sorry, girl."

"It's okay . . ." Valla started to say, then she looked at his axe and into his eyes and sighed. "You were talking to her."

"Sorry to you, too." Victor gripped the barbed end of the harpoon sticking out of Valla's leg and said, "One, two . . ." rather than say three, he jerked and pulled the tine and the much-shortened sinew through the wound. To her credit, Valla didn't cry out, though she hissed in pain and clamped her hands on either side of the puckered hole in her leg. Hot, dark blood pumped out between her fingers, and Victor dug out a healing potion, popping the wax seal and holding it to her lips. She drank it thirstily and then sighed as the magic went to work.

"Thank you. Let me help with Uvu so he doesn't bite your arm off."

Victor looked at the bloody barb he still held, frowning at the almost imperceptible edge. “This thing’s sharp as hell. I wonder if your armor would’ve stopped it.”

“I’d like to think so.” Valla grunted, climbed to her feet, then moved over to the grumbling, softly growling cat. As Victor moved to help her, Kethelket barked orders at his men, having them spread out in a semi-circle, watching the mists more closely. They’d gotten one barb out and were working on the other when the fire finally stopped smoldering, and Energy motes bubbled up out of the blackened sludge left on the ground. They were shimmering, purple and rich, dappled with other tiny, rainbow hues, and Victor realized the monster they’d slain had been formidable indeed—it was lucky his attack had been so effective.

When the Energy streamed forth, some of it went to Victor, and tiny streams went to everyone else, including Uvu, but the Naghelli who’d burned it, Tuvai, received an enormous share, and she whooped and hollered as it lifted her into the air, limning her with bright white light. When she settled back, she looked around and proclaimed, “I’ve leveled! The first in a decade!”

“Congratulations!” Victor said as he yanked the second barb out of Uvu’s thigh. Valla stood between him and the cat’s head, an arm over the big creature’s neck, but he still flinched away as Uvu roared his displeasure. “Quiet,” he laughed, “big baby! Doesn’t it feel better to have that out of you?”

“He’s grateful.” Valla’s smile had been ever-present since they’d lit the gelatinous monster on fire—it was clear to everyone that she’d been sick with worry about her companion and was relieved to have him back. Victor nodded, took the barbed bone harpoon, and set it on the ground with the other two.

“Maybe my ancestors can use these.” Without waiting for a comment, he cast Honor the Spirits, and in a silvery flash of ghostly fire, the three harpoons ceased to exist, disappearing in a cloud of spirit smoke that drifted out of this world and into the next.

“That was well-fought.” Kethelket moved closer, eyeing Uvu warily.

“Indeed, it was,” another voice called out. Victor turned toward the sound to see Sarl approaching. Behind him, a long line of soldiers marched around the keep, passing through the gates to the courtyard beyond.

“You saw?”

“Aye, we heard Valla’s valiant mount roaring and hurried around the corner only to find you smashing into that . . . thing. After I saw it set alight, I figured we could continue our march into yonder keep.” Sarl jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the open gateway.

“Good. Help the Naghelli set up a watch rotation and get the men started cleaning out the debris and filth.”

“As you say, sir.” Sarl snapped a quick salute, then marched back toward the keep. Victor saw Edeya moving in the opposite direction toward him and Valla, and he paused to wait for her.

“What should I report about that . . . monster?”

“It’s dangerous but apparently weak to fire. You got a good look at it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so describe it and mention the bit about burning it. Also, concussive damage seems to break it up.” Victor turned to Valla. “Can you bring him into the courtyard? I want to try interacting with that stone again now that the cohort is here.”

“Yes.” Valla screwed the top back onto a jar of healing salve she’d been spreading into Uvu’s puncture wounds. She took hold of his reins, muddy and splattered with gore, and led the great cat toward the gateway, speaking softly and scratching him with her free hand behind the ear.

Victor turned to Edeya. “I’m sure glad he fought his way here. That mound of jelly had to weigh a thousand pounds, and he dragged it here with two harpoons through his legs.”

“He’s a valiant animal.” Edeya nodded, though she only gave Victor half her attention; she was busily scribbling into the Farscribe Book.

“All right,” Victor snorted, “come on.” When he returned to the slowly rotating System stone inside the keep, the courtyard was far more crowded. Soldiers were gathering refuse into piles where Pyromancers set it alight, rendering it to ash. The lingering smoke tickled Victor’s nose as he looked around, watching the cohort’s engineers as they rapidly constructed doors to mount in the doorways and built railings to line the stone stairways that led up to the parapets. It was amazing how much faster things went when dimensional containers and magic were a factor.

Victor approached the stone and placed his hand upon its surface. Once again, it paused its rotating, and a message appeared in his vision:

*****This stone is undefended, and you have sufficient forces in the vicinity to claim this outpost. Do you wish to do so?*****

Beneath the message was a simple menu with a yes and a no option. Victor mentally selected the affirmative, and almost instantly, a breeze began to blow into the keep. The wind tickled his senses, buzzing along his pathways, and he knew it was rich with Energy; some magical working was taking place. The stone tingled under his hand, and he gently tugged but found he couldn’t pull away from it. He wished he could go up to the wall to see what was happening from a greater height, but failing that, he asked, “What’s happening on the wall?”

Kethelket stood nearby and shouted his question to his men, and one of them called down, “The mists recede! I can see trees and hills now! Dark creatures flee to the north! More undead!”

Another guardsman, this one a Shadeni, laughed and shouted, “They smoke in the sunlight! You should see the panic in their flight!”

“So,” Edeya said, nodding, “the mist signifies their controlled lands.”

“I mean, I kinda figured that, didn’t you guys?” Victor looked around, and Kethelket and Valla nodded.

“I suppose if I’d thought about it . . .” Edeya stuck her pen between her teeth and chewed on the wooden end in contemplation.

Before Victor could respond, another System message appeared in his vision:

*****Congratulations! Your forces have claimed this outpost and its surrounding lands. Defend it from your enemies and continue your conquest! For your victory, your faction will be rewarded a Chest of Conquest—this only occurs the first time you claim any given territory.*****

Victor felt the weird grip on his hand fade, and as he pulled it away, a thick blue fog began to swirl out of the stones at his feet. He backed up and watched as the fog or smoke or steam—he couldn’t detect any smell at all—began to swirl together, thickening and then blowing away on the weird, magical breeze. In its wake, a large wooden chest sat on the flagstones of the courtyard, the planks of which were stained the same shade of blue.

“Woah!” Edeya cried, “I’ve heard of System chests, but I’ve never seen one!”

“I have, but only in dungeons.” Kethelket stepped toward the chest, squatting to examine it better.

“Same.” Victor moved to rest his hand on the top of the chest. It was warm and solid and throbbed with Energy. “Did any of you see the messages from the System as I was interacting with the stone?”

“I did not.” Kethelket straightened and looked at Victor with those depthless black eyes. In his reduced state, Victor was only a couple of inches taller than the lanky Naghelli.

“No.” Valla stepped up next to him, for some reason eyeing Kethelket warily.

“Nothing big; it just said we’d claimed this outpost for our faction, that we needed to defend it, and that we were being awarded this chest. Oh, and we’ll only get a chest the first time we claim ‘any given’ territory.”

“Interesting. I suppose the System wouldn’t want two generals from opposing factions to take turns swapping an outpost, collecting chest after chest.” Kethelket

noded as though the System were being clever, and Victor had to admit he'd had the same thought.

"Would anyone ever? I can't imagine working together with these undead monstrosities." Valla's frown had only deepened at Kethelket's words.

"I doubt every conflict the System sets up is between such polarizing factions. What if it were Shadeni fighting Ardeni?"

"I . . ." Valla closed her mouth and looked around with more understanding. "Yes, I suppose with countless worlds and even more peoples, such things might happen."

"Anyway, let's see what's in here." Victor reached for the chest's clasp, but Kethelket held up a hand.

"A moment, sir. Have you considered it may be trapped?"

"Would the System trap a reward?" Edeya's eyes bulged at the implication.

"I doubt it," Kethelket said, "but it wouldn't hurt to be sure. I have a rather talented artificer here with me. Perhaps we can give him a moment to examine the container?"

"Yeah. Sure." Victor shrugged.

"Relekani!" Kethelket called, turning around in a slow circle, trying to lay eyes on the Naghelli in question. A shadow detached from the parapet near the keep where one of the engineers was crafting a wooden door for the upper level. He drifted down to the courtyard in a flutter of softly glowing orange and charcoal wings.

"Sir?" Relekani was a slight Naghelli, a good six inches shorter than Kethelket and with very slender limbs. He had a delicate, narrow nose and wore his white hair short and parted to the side, smoothed down with some sort of wax.

"Examine this chest. Ensure it will not harm the one who opens it."

"Ahh, of course." Relekani produced a pair of spectacles with dark amber lenses and put them on, then he held out his hands, muttering something under his breath as he carefully studied the blue container. He started in the front, staring at the clasp for a solid minute before slowly moving around it, scrutinizing every corner and edge.

"What do you guys think is in it?" Victor asked to pass the time.

"Weapons!" Edeya said with certainty.

"I don't know. It could be anything from armaments to rations to alchemical ingredients. Perhaps it's just beads—the System loves to encourage trade." Victor noticed that Valla wasn't even looking at the chest as she spoke; her eyes were on

Uvu. The big cat was resting in the shadows near the gatehouse, cleaning his long, sharp claws with his enormous pink tongue.

“Agreed.” Kethelket nodded, eyes on Valla. “It’s hard to say what the System would think was a worthy reward for this keep. I wonder if the blue color is any indication. I suppose we’ll learn more as we continue with this conquest.”

Victor grunted and was about to make a guess when Relekani straightened up. “I see nothing of concern.”

“Good! Thanks for checking.” Victor didn’t wait for any further objections and stepped up to the chest, flinging the latch up and lifting the lid. More blue mist escaped the interior, and when it faded away, he peered inside. “Oh, nice!” He spoke reflexively as he saw the rack of six shimmering, pearlescent white potion bottles at the top of the chest. He felt the others crowding near to look within, so rather than explain what he’d seen, he kept looking.

He lifted the potion rack, handed it off to Valla, then picked up the next item—a bolt of dense black cloth that smoked with the dark shadowy-Energy that pervaded it. Kethelket hissed in appreciation, but, again, Victor handed it to Valla. She set it on the ground near the chest, and Victor heard soldiers muttering as a crowd began to gather. “Yeah,” he said, glancing at Kethelket and Edeya, then around at the milling soldiers, “how about everyone stand back a bit? Valla will lay the items out as I retrieve them.”

“You heard the Legate!” Sarl barked from up the steps near the keep door. “Form a wide circle and show some respect!”

Victor glanced at Kethelket, saw a slight frown on his face, but nodded as the man took a few steps back. Edeya hurried to comply as well. Victor returned to the chest and lifted out the next object—a dense hunk of charcoal-black metal. He lifted it easily but could tell it was incredibly dense. It almost reminded him of his helmet, the way it pulled at his fingers as though trying to get to the ground. He handed it to Valla, and she grunted as she carried it in two hands to set on the flagstones next to the shadowy cloth.

“Is there more?” Edeya asked.

“A lot.” Victor reached into the chest again and lifted out a tooled leather container. At first, he wasn’t sure what it was, but as he turned it, he saw an opening on one end that was densely packed with red-fletched arrows. “Huh.” He passed it to Valla. Next, he pulled out a fist-sized metallic ball densely inscribed with runes. He could feel the Energy in it—it throbbed so richly that he felt it in his knuckles. “I have no idea what this one is, but it’s full of power.”

“I can help to determine the use of these objects,” Relekani offered.

“Careful with that one,” he said, handing it to Valla. She nodded and quickly set it down, careful not to allow whatever magical odor permeated the contents to waft toward her nose.

Victor looked into the chest and saw only one more object. As he retrieved it, the chest vanished in a puff of dense blue smoke. Victor waved it away with the final reward—a folded, silky flag made of cream-colored fabric and emblazoned with a blood-drenched golden sun. “Huh! I guess the System likes my glorious banner.”

Book 6: Chapter 10: Pieces on a Board

Victor hung the flag, or banner, he supposed, over his shoulder and looked around at the expectant faces of the soldiers gathered in the courtyard. “Well done, everyone! We’ve captured our first outpost and driven the enemy deeper into their conquered lands. Once again, the legion has the exploits of the Glorious Ninth to live up to!”

The soldiers cheered his words, pumping fists and weapons in the air, slapping each other on the back, and, generally, creating quite a din. Edeya stepped closer to Victor and gestured at the treasures arrayed on the flagstones. “What will we do with these?”

“Right.” Victor cleared his throat and held up a hand for quiet. As the raucous celebrations died down, he yelled, “We need to examine these items to find out their value, but they’ll all be going into the Campaign Token Exchange.” Some of the soldiers’ faces fell at that announcement, and Victor heard some grumbling, so he followed up with, “Cheer up! You all just fought a battle and won! You’ll gain a token for that, and Sarl has my permission to award another sixty tokens for exceptional skill and bravery displayed during the fight!” Victor turned to Kethelket. “You too, Captain—three extra tokens for your scouts to use at your discretion.”

“Thank you, Legate.” Kethelket saluted, and Victor saw something like approval in his eyes. Victor hadn’t called him a captain before, but it made sense; he had more than three hundred flying scouts and killers under his command.

“Edeya, you have the book. Take note of the awarded tokens, collect these treasures, and make sure the quartermaster hears of it.”

“You heard the Legate! Get back to work, soldiers!” Sarl barked, and then the moment was over, and the outpost was abuzz with activity again.

Edeya leaned closer and, in a voice pitched low, asked, “Victor, um, Legate, I know the token system is fair, and the soldiers appreciate it, but don’t you think some of these items might better serve the army if they were awarded personally by you? Or, I guess, used by you?”

“Well . . .”

Valla stepped in, where his words faltered, “She’s right, but we can work within the system you’ve created. You should be sure to award yourself tokens for your various victories. You’ve personally destroyed many of the most dangerous combatants and dozens or hundreds of lesser creatures. Not even Kethelket and his kin come close to your impact on the battlefield.”

“All right.” Victor shrugged. He wasn’t going to argue about what sorts of treasures he deserved, and if he claimed a prize, it didn’t mean he had to use it. He could always gift it to a captain or commander if he thought they deserved it more than he did. Edeya began to gather up the treasures and scribble notes in her Farscribe Book. “Should I tell the other commanders you’ll be returning?”

“Just a minute.” Victor grabbed the shoulder of a passing sergeant. “Hang this over the gates, will you?” After he’d handed off the new banner, he turned back to Edeya. “Tell them we’re staying here with the Ninth for the night to assess the keep and surroundings. We’ll check in tomorrow.” Victor turned to Kethelket. “When we depart tomorrow, will you leave some of your people here with Captain Sarl?”

“Of course. Will five suit the outpost’s needs?”

“Yeah. I just want some capable scouts with good mobility here. Sarl has his captain’s book, so he can keep the rest of the army updated on his situation here.”

“That’s right, sir.” Sarl nodded, but then his eyes narrowed, and Victor could see something was bothering him.

“What is it?”

“We won’t be stuck on garrison duty, will we? Just because we took the outpost?”

“No, Sarl. You’ll hold it until we settle on something more permanent. I’m sure Borrius will have some ideas.”

“Very good, sir.”

Victor looked around the courtyard, then at the new door the engineers were installing over the entrance to the tall, narrow interior keep. “I think I’ll have a look around in there.”

“Good idea.” Valla’s words said something different than her actions—her eyes were on Uvu, still licking his scarred-over wounds in the shadows near the gate.

“Talk to me. What’s the deal with your cat?”

“He’s . . . we aren’t the same, our connection, I mean. When I lost contact with him, it was the first time in nearly a decade. Now I can feel him, but,” Valla paused, taking a deep shuddering breath and slowly shaking her head, “it’s not the same.”

Valla nodded, pressing her lips together firmly. “Yes. Yes, I’m sure that’s it. I need to be patient. Let’s have a look around in there.”

“Legate.” Kethelket, who’d been lingering, perhaps waiting for the right moment to interject, stepped up to Victor as he, flanked by Valla and Edeya, began to ascend the short flight of steps to the keep. “Would you mind if I sent some of my people out scouting? I think it would be wise to determine the extent of the lands we freed from the mist by claiming this keep. Perhaps they might set eyes on the next fortifications we need to target.”

“Yeah. Of course, that’s a good idea. Keep me posted, all right?”

“I will do so. If you find time before you retire, I’d still enjoy sparring a bit.” Kethelket bowed this time rather than salute, and Victor noticed he almost stopped himself halfway; perhaps it was an old habit of a culture he’d left behind. As he straightened, his broad, shadowy wings fluttered rapidly, and he ascended to the parapet where some of his people waited.

“It’s strange, this ancient keep being here.” Edeya paused near the top of the steps and looked around once again, and Victor followed her gaze. “I haven’t been many places in my life, but I always thought we built up the cities and castles around the Empire long after the System joined the worlds.”

“Well, you know better than that. Remember the mines? The ancient shit we dug up down there?”

“Oh, aye, that’s a good point.”

“I wonder how many places of power the Empire has snatched up, painted over, and claimed as their own accomplishment.” Valla nodded to the Engineer attaching the latches to the new doors, then passed inside. Victor followed, watching her closely. He hoped things were okay with Uvu, but he could see the strain in her shoulders and neck. His thoughts fled, though, when he saw the strange but elegant construction inside the stone keep.

A vaulted hall opened directly behind the doorway, a delicate, molded, circular stone stairway dominating the center of the space. Victor couldn’t see any seams in the stonework of the stairs, and he wondered what sort of magic must have been used to carve or shape or join so much stone into the graceful shape. It fit in well with the rest of the entry hall—tall, shapely pillars held up an arched ceiling that would seem high even to his giant alter-ego. The design of the interior was, in effect, the polar opposite of the exterior. Where the building’s outsides were sturdy, square, and utilitarian, the interior was a masterpiece in filigrees, spirals, shapely curves, and smooth, almost seamless joinery. “Shit, this is a lot nicer than I imagined.”

“The light playing over the stonework from the high windows is a masterpiece in design. Look how the afternoon sun highlights certain carvings.” Edeya pointed with one slender arm, and Victor marveled at how, even now, he was seeing a new side of her.

“You have a good eye.” He turned to take in what she’d pointed out, noting how a circle of light fell on a stone tree, its branches heavy with meticulously carved bunches of tiny fruit.

“Aye, she does.” Valla’s voice was hushed, and Victor was pleased to see some of the tension leaving her posture.

“Legate, sir, you should see this,” one of Sarl’s Lieutenants called down from over the stone banister at the top of the circular staircase.

“Coming up,” Victor grunted as he mounted the steps, taking two at a time. He could hear the softer footfalls of his companions behind him as he rounded the stair and emerged on a wide landing that ran the length of the rear and two sides of the entry hall. Just as below, everything was smooth stone with arches and delicate carvings at the focal point of every viewing angle. Soldiers were scattered about sweeping, dusting, and mopping, bringing the ancient keep back to life, and the lieutenant who’d summoned Victor, a tall, lanky young Ardeni with shockingly bright yellow hair, gestured to one of the arched openings leading toward the back of the keep.

“Sir, I think it’s a System thing.”

“Oh?”

“Aye, it has them runes, like the ones in the stone in the courtyard and in the town and city stones.” He fidgeted slightly, taking a step back, reaching up to tug at his uniform collar.

“I’m just a man, Lieutenant. You don’t have to stress out in my presence.”

“Aye, sorry, sir. Begging your pardon, though, sir, you aren’t just a man. We . . . me and the lads in my division, we’re damn grateful to be following you into battle out here.” He ducked his head several times as he stepped back, making room for the trio to pass by.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Valla said, pushing Victor’s shoulder, propelling him forward past the soldier. “Do me a favor, though.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Don’t forget the soldiers in your division aren’t all ‘lads.’ Give the ladies some credit, hmm?”

“O’ course, ma’am! I’m sorry!” Again, he ducked his head several times, touching his knuckles to his forehead. Victor smirked and kept walking, torn between wanting to laugh at Valla’s very valid point and feeling sorry for the soldier. “Just straight down that hallway, sir! It’s the circular room at the end.”

Taking the man at his word, Victor ignored the four side passages and aimed straight for the arched, sunlit opening at the end of the long corridor. When he stepped through, he immediately saw what had caught the lieutenant's attention. The room was circular, about ten yards in diameter, and lining the upper third of the left-hand wall, west, if Victor's sense of direction hadn't failed him, smooth, seamless glass let in the setting sun's light. That, alone, was noteworthy, but the center of the room was what made him catch his breath and proceed into the room with great care.

"Ancient Grandfathers," Valla hissed, following him in.

"A . . . map?" Edeya breathed, close behind her.

"Sort of." Victor walked around the slightly raised platform and eyed the golden runes lining the perimeter. They shifted and pulsed inside the stone—a sure sign that this was something left for them by the System. On the platform itself was a miniature model of, if Victor had to guess, the area around the keep. He could see the tiny, square edifice situated in a green vale. North of the building were the jagged rows of the Granite Gates and, amazingly, a tiny representation of a partially built fortress at the mouth of the pass. More importantly, the area around the keep was modeled with tiny, lifelike trees and blue, silky ribbons representing water and lakes.

"Is it clay?" Edeya began to reach toward the rough, realistic spikes of the mountains, but Victor snatched her wrist.

"Don't touch it. I doubt we can do any damage, but let's not risk it. I think we can learn a lot of shit from this map. Look." He gestured to the area outside the keep's influence, at the weird, cloudy smoke that clung to the majority of the space. "I think this is the invaders' territory. You can just make out the land at the edges of it, though." Victor leaned forward and tried to blow at the smoke, but his breath had no effect. "Yeah. Sorry, I grabbed your wrist, Edeya. I'm pretty sure we can't do anything to affect this map; it's System magic."

"Look." Valla pointed to the misty area west of the keep. "If you observe closely, you can see the trees of a forest at the edge."

"And here." Edeya pointed to the eastern edge. "Mountains."

"That's different. Look how the mountains are at the very edge of the map—I think they're part of the boundary of this 'conquest' we're all a part of. Not the forest, though." He nodded to Valla. "Those look like contested lands."

"Right." Edeya nodded. "I see why—there's a lot of map area beyond, a lot of mist. So, if you really think this is the extent of the contested lands, we've only conquered about . . ." she ran her hand above the visible part where the keep and the pass were represented, trying to calculate.

"About ten percent," Valla helped.

“Shit,” Victor laughed, “I’m not complaining about conquering ten percent of the invaders’ lands in one day.”

“It’s strange, though, isn’t it?” Valla walked around the large, mostly foggy, magical map.

“What?”

“Why is the System showing us this? It’s like . . .”

“Like a game.” Though Valla nodded at his words, Victor knew she wasn’t thinking of the same kind of game he was. “I mean, we’re given a clear goal, and now we get to see the board. The System . . . it’s like we’re the pieces it plays with.”

“Well, we know the System loves conflict.” Edeya shrugged as though that was all there was to say.

“Right, because we release Energy when we kill each other.” Victor spoke sarcastically, a definite edge in his voice, so he wasn’t surprised by the puzzled glances the two women sent him. “Look, I’m not arguing against the idea that the System leeches some of the Energy away when we kill each other. Think about it, though; before the System came around, people used to cultivate, gather, and claim their own Energy from those they killed. Do you even know how to do that? I mean, if you killed a . . . bone juggernaut—Victor used his internal name for the undead monster out loud for the first time, but the two seemed to know what he meant—would you know how to claim its Energy if the System didn’t gather it up and send it your way?”

“No.” Valla shook her head, and Edeya shrugged.

“So, like, if the System just wants Energy, why doesn’t it just kill us all and take our Energy? Why do we need to fight each other so it can steal our Energy?”

“Could it?”

“Kill us? I mean, it’s pretty damn powerful, right?” Victor gestured to the map. “It’s everywhere.” He gestured around, indicating the world at large. “It knows a hell of a lot more about everything than any of us. Nah, I’m not buying it. I think there’s more to the System than it simply wanting to leech off us.”

Edeya surprised him by nodding. “I agree, Victor. There’s more to it. Why do we call it a ‘system,’ after all? We all accept the name, but . . . it must have had more meaning in the beginning, don’t you think? A ‘system’ for what? The very name implies complexity; it also implies impartiality. You don’t set up a system for things to be random or arbitrary. You don’t make a system for something you want to display sentimentality or favoritism. Whatever the reason, the System is in charge of many aspects of our usage of Energy, and . . . well, I don’t know where I was going with this, but I think I agree that it’s got to be a much more complicated than some of the detractors make out.”

“Yes. I’ve listened to many debates about it. We all have our jaded viewpoints, but I think, deep down, most of us know there’s more that we don’t know than we do.” Valla shrugged and gestured back at the map. “But back to the original topic. What’s the point of this?”

“I dunno.” Victor squatted down and pressed a thumb onto the keep that represented their current location. It was like pressing onto a stone—jagged and hard and not at all moveable. “Maybe to incentivize us, to keep our interest. We can see the progress we’re making, and, I’m guessing, so can the invaders, especially if you’re right, Edeya, about the System’s impartiality. When they see this area we’ve liberated, what do you think they’ll do?”

“Send another army. They likely have victory conditions just as we do,” Valla said, smacking her fist into her palm.

“Edeya,” Victor turned to the plucky lieutenant, still clutching her Farscribe Book, “tell Borrius I think we’re going to need reinforcements here. Tell him if he’s smart, he might be able to smash another undead army between his forces and the walls of this keep.”

“On it!” Edeya snapped the book open, and a magical pen appeared between her fingers. Victor watched her scribbling for a few seconds, and then he started back down the corridor.

“Where are you off to?” Valla followed close behind.

“I want to talk to Kethelket. I want him to send a scout into the forest we saw at the edge of this keep’s territory. I want to see if there’s another keep in that direction. If we can capture it, we’ll have the northern section of the ‘conquest territory’ locked up.” Victor noticed the corridor and the beautiful hall beyond were much dimmer than when he’d first come in. “Sun must’ve set.” He saw some of Sarl’s soldiers hoisting an Energy lamp up to one of the stone arches and followed the pulley line with his eye, wondering how they’d secured it to the stone, hoping they hadn’t bored a hole in it. He sighed with relief when he saw the ancient ceiling was carved with elegant hooks, almost like they’d been designed to hold just such a contraption. “And why not? They had holes for the door hinges.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. Just kind of wondering what this place looked like when it was new.”

“I imagine much like it will when we’re done fix . . .” Valla’s words were cut off by a sharp horn note blaring from the courtyard. She locked eyes with Victor. “They’re here already?”

