

## Victor BK6: Ch21

Book 6: Chapter 21: A Ghostly Gambit

“You can’t do it here!” Valla gestured around the forest, at the mists pushing against the light of his banner like it was some kind of palpable barrier.

“I’m not going all the way back to the keep. Besides, the Ninth will be here soon, and you know Borrius and the others are expecting us to take this keep sooner rather than later. They can’t keep up an ambush position forever. Who knows when some undead scout or scrying magic will reveal them? We need to capitalize on the invaders’ urgency, their need to get back what we’ve taken.” He saw she wasn’t happy, looking into his eyes with doubt in hers. “I’ve got you and all these Naghelli to watch over me. I’ll summon my coyotes, too.”

As Valla frowned and folded her arms over her chest, Kethelket spoke up, “Will your banner persist while your spirit walks?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. My totems can think for themselves, but the banner . . .” Victor searched for the right words, “It kind of needs me to concentrate on keeping it around.”

“Aye. I have a spell or two that require concentration.” He nodded and turned to Valla. “My kin have slain any undead within a mile of this location. The mists don’t bother us much; our eyes see through most of the obscuring magics. We’ll see that nothing bothers Victor.”

“Are you sure?” Valla wasn’t speaking to Kethelket; her eyes were boring into Victor’s. He reached out, resting a hand on her shoulder, running a thumb gently along her neck, brushing the soft, stray hairs hanging down beneath the rim of her shiny helmet. Kethelket pointedly turned away, ostensibly to observe the positions of his scouts.

“I’m sure, Valla. We talked about this. Something in me feels the challenge these ghostly assholes are presenting. They took Kethelket’s men and hung them from the keep’s walls. I can’t turn away from that.” His words were soft, meant for Valla, but he saw Kethelket’s shoulders stiffen. He hoped he hadn’t offended the man. Valla’s helm had a nose guard and angular slits for her eyes, making them look perpetually angry, but her mouth was exposed, and a soft smile curled her lips as she shook her head in resignation. Victor wanted to kiss those lips but knew their helms would clash long before his mouth could find hers.

“There’s no way you and Uvu would let anything happen to me, anyway.” Victor loosened Lifedrinker from her harness, holding her in both hands, crossways over his lap as he sat down on the damp mulch, back to a huge tree. He concentrated briefly, summoning his coyotes with a surge of inspiration-attuned

Energy. "Good boys," he said and wondered if they were all boys. They were aspects of his spirit, so he assumed they were, but he'd never made the effort to examine them all that closely. A chuckle escaped him at the random thought.

"Something's funny?"

"Nah, just thinking about my coyotes." Victor watched them as they took shape from the white-gold mist his spell called into being. They yipped and whined, pacing around, sniffing at the Naghelli, and taking up positions in a loose circle around Victor and the tree he leaned against.

"Fascinating creatures." Kethelket knelt next to the closest coyote and stared at it, his dark, depthless eyes peering into its bright, shining ones. "Like large boyii hounds, but those sounds they make; it's like they speak to each other."

"They're bigger than normal coyotes. I put a lot of Energy into their summoning."

"It's the same ability that allows you to create that steed of yours and the great bear?"

"Yeah."

"Amazing. I've never heard of a Spirit Caster with such talent. It puts our contest of weapons in a different light. How would I fare should you unleash these loyal guardians while we matched blades?" He shook his head, sighing as he stood up, making the rhetorical nature of his question evident.

Victor replied, nonetheless, "Don't sell yourself short. You've got some abilities you held back while we sparred."

"Thank you." He bowed briefly and then turned to face the mists, drawing his blades, ready to take up his guard. Victor admired that he didn't try to push the comparison of their abilities further. He could have protested, pointing out that Victor could go Berserk or turn his banner or spirit affinities against him. Instead, he took the compliment and let the matter drop.

He turned to Valla and smiled again. "All right. I'm heading out. See you soon." He closed his eyes and began to form the pattern for his Spirit Walk spell, but he'd only just started to pull some Energy into it when he felt Valla's hot breath on his lips, and then she pressed her mouth hungrily against his, and he kissed her for a long moment. When she finally pulled back, and he opened his eyes, he saw she'd taken her helmet off in a rush, her teal hair hanging loose and wild.

"Hurry back," she said, then she stood, pressed her helmet back onto her head, and whipped Midnight out of her sheath. Victor smiled and closed his eyes again. He had a warm spot in his chest as he cast his Spirit Walk.

When he stood up, he still clutched Lifedrinker, but she was different—her dark, polished haft was brighter than ever with the starry motes that lurked within, and her blade shone with ghostly light. If Victor were guessing, he'd say it was her spirit, more evident in this realm than in the land of the living. He looked around, heartened to have her close, and saw that the twilit Spirit Plane was darker, more foreboding, and ominous than in other places he'd walked. The trees had persisted across planes, and their great, dark canopies blocked out the brilliant starfield usually visible on Victor's Spirit Walks and, adding to that gloom, was the mist that had somehow persisted in this realm.

"Fucking Death Casters." Victor's words were a growl as he stared into the fog, twisting his hands on Lifedrinker's haft. "All right, chica, let's go find out what these ghosts are made of."

*I hunger for your foes, Victor! When will you share your spirit with me?*

"Oh, yeah, well," Victor was caught by surprise by her sharp, lilting, but vehement words. "It's been a busy few days. Maybe we can try it here, huh? Let's see what we're up against first."

She didn't respond with words, but he felt her emotion, transferred through the axe's haft, straight to his heart—eager anticipation, acceptance, trust.

Victor turned toward the west, wondering how stealthy he should try to be. He'd never tried to sneak around on the Spirit Plane before. He walked boldly, probably too boldly, and never feared what he'd encounter. Did he need to worry about scaring the ghosts off? They were defending a location; if they ran off, wasn't that a win for him? Was he worried that he might draw too many of them? Victor couldn't find any sense of caution in his heart. He was on Fanwath; the spirits knew him there. Who were these invaders to come into the Spirit Plane where he'd hugged Old Mother goodbye and act like they owned the place?

Victor growled, twisting his hands on Lifedrinker's haft again, and then he did what he wanted to do; he cast Iron Berserk and summoned his glorious banner. As he exploded in size and his banner's light burst around him, he lifted Lifedrinker into the air and screamed his challenge into the shadowy, twilit forest. His voice echoed through the trees, leaves fell, and the mist rolled away from his light, seeming to retreat from his roar. Victor began to stomp through the forest.

He held Lifedrinker in his right hand, her ghostly edge bright in the darkness. His eyes smoldered with the red heat of his rage affinity as he prowled forward, the mist pulling back before his light and very slowly, almost reluctantly falling back in behind him as he passed through the woods. Victor's long strides were quick to deliver him to the keep. He hadn't gotten a good description of the place from Kethelket, so he couldn't compare its appearance on the Spirit Plane to what his Naghelli friends had seen. However, he imagined it must be vastly different because he couldn't believe they wouldn't have described it if they'd seen anything like what his eyes beheld.

Black, bus-sized stones stood vertically at the base of the round walls. Atop them ran a ring of horizontal stones of the same size, and then another row of vertically aligned blocks, and so on. The circular keep rose a thousand feet into

the starry sky of the Spirit Plane. Victor stood at the edge of the trees, looking out over the faintly luminescent grassy clearing at the massive keep and wondering how he was supposed to assault the ghosts within. Growling, he stalked into the open and began to walk in a wide circle around the walls, looking for a gate. "If I can't find a pinché gate, I'm going to climb that son of a bitch."

As he walked through the wavy, knee-high grass, he heard a faint whistling and looked up toward it, only to see a dozen bright bolts of Energy rippling through the air toward him. He broke into a jog and watched over his shoulder as the magical missiles struck the grassy turf, sending up ghostly white flames that did no harm to the environment. He didn't think the bolts would be so harmless if they touched him; they gave off a chill he could feel in the bones of his spirit body. He picked up his pace as he heard more whistling in the air, and he wondered how long it would take the shooters to figure out they had to lead him a little in order to pelt him with those spells.

Rather than take chances, as he scanned the walls for a gateway, he began to zig and zag, cutting left, right, and even leaping periodically. The keep was enormous, at least here on the Spirit Plane, and it took him several minutes to make his way halfway around it, even as he jogged and leaped. When he'd seen no sign of a gate or doorway after covering more than half the perimeter, Victor's frustration began to mount. He glanced at the wall, squinting in the dim, silvery light, trying to determine how hard it would be to climb. "Doesn't look that bad," he grumbled. He felt a pulse of encouragement from Lifedrinker, and that was all he needed.

With a burst of speed, he sprinted toward the wall, bunched his massive, powerful legs, and launched himself with a Titanic Leap toward the wall. He'd timed his jump well; Victor had just hit the apex when the wall came within grasping range. "Sorry, beautiful!" he cried as he aimed Lifedrinker for a seam in the giant black stones. Her silvery head burst into molten glory as she smoked through the air and buried her blade between the monolithic stones in a shower of sharp, black chips.

Of course, being an axe, her wedge shape was perfect to lodge her firmly in place, and Victor held onto her handle as his body smashed into the hard stones. Hanging there, Lifedrinker's blade creaking and the stones cracking further, tiny crumbles falling down the wall, he wondered what his plan was. The gap between stones was too thin to jamb his fingers between. How would he climb it? When he looked away, up and down the wall, he found his answer. The stones, side by side, were nearly seamlessly lined up. Lifedrinker could find the gap, but his fingers couldn't. The tiers, though, one atop the other, were offset by half a foot or so; the tall circular keep grew ever-so-slightly narrower with each level.

Victor grunted and wriggled Lifedrinker's haft until she slipped free, and he fell—two feet to the tiny ledge atop the tier below him. He hooked Lifedrinker into her harness as he pressed his body against the wall, arms spread wide. His toes in their boots worked heroically, holding him there, fifty feet or more above the ground. Victor craned his neck to look up, gauging the next ledge's height, then he bent his knees and exploded upward. He didn't activate Titanic Leap, but he still soared up enough to grasp the next ledge with his fingertips. Grunting, he pulled himself up. The only tricky part was leaning forward so he didn't topple as he got his feet underneath him.

Victor looked side to side. The curved wall of the keep stretched away in either direction, disappearing in the fog. Then he craned his neck and looked up toward the top of the towering, impossibly high wall. Again, the smooth obsidian wall disappeared in thick fog. It hadn't seemed foggy from the ground, and he wondered if some sort of twisted enchantment was at work, messing with his perspective. "Huh." He rolled his neck side to side, eliciting loud pops, and then he jumped up to the next ledge. "Let's see how high this fucker is."

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Valla watched Victor's still form. He seemed serene, untroubled, sitting there against the tree. His eyes were closed, but his dark brow was unfurrowed, his hands at ease on Lifedrinker in his lap. When he'd first gone into the Spirit Plane, she'd felt the surge of Energy, then a short time later, a much greater surge, and she knew he was casting spells in that other realm, a place that was a complete mystery to her. She couldn't quite understand how Victor could be here yet travel about in that other place.

She'd known of people with spirit Cores, Spirit Casters, everyone called them, but she'd always thought they did things like make love potions, help troubled children, or cause problems—berserkers, fear casters, and the like. She'd never known about Spirit Walks. In a way, it gave her comfort; if Victor's spirit was on the loose, moving about in some parallel world, didn't that mean there was proof that further lives were possible? She'd begun to believe so, and she knew Victor did. She'd tried to show him as much when she'd said they'd find happiness together in the next life, if not this one. She found the idea romantic and, judging by his amorous response, so did Victor.

"I knew he was a powerful Spirit Caster," Kethelket's voice broke her from her musing, and she, perhaps a little guiltily, jerked her gaze away from Victor's face, "but I had no real idea, I think. I shouldn't be surprised; Belikot was formidable on the Spirit Plane, a dangerous man indeed with his knowledge of breaching the veil and dominating the spirits he pulled through. Still, Victor slew him, so I shouldn't be surprised that he's willing to rush forth and do battle with those 'ghosts,' as he termed them. A fitting name, I think." He squatted, resting his elbows on his knees as he stared at Victor.

"Why?" Valla found the ancient Naghelli fascinating. He had something interesting to say about nearly any topic, and his skill with those swords was inspiring; she could see he knew things she didn't, even with Midnight in her hands. She wasn't surprised he'd achieved the epic rank.

"Ghost. It's a word we use to describe one who moves without sound, unseen, a killer who can send your spirit out of this world with a silent touch. It was a title given out by our queen in the old world. Only a handful ever walked the face of Kthella at any given time."

"Kthella? The Ghelli home world?"

“Aye, and we Naghelli, don’t forget.”

“Of course.” Valla nodded. She knew as much, of course, but she hadn’t heard the name of that particular home world in a long, long while—not since she’d studied with the myriad tutors Rellia had saddled with her, perhaps. “So, you think those spirits, the ones who killed your men, are like those ghosts? I think it makes sense.” Valla looked at Victor again, her heart swelling and fluttering in her chest as she stared at his strong brow, angular nose, and sharp jawline. As she thought of her youth and all that came with it, she realized she felt like that again, like she was a girl, sent off to the Legion, spending time with young men who weren’t in some way related to Rellia for the first time. Victor had woken something in her heart that she’d let go dormant, and it frightened her.

“He’s a master of spirits. Even his banner is doom to the undead. We’re lucky to have him in the battle.”

“Yes.” Valla watched as Kethelket stood and turned, scanning the forest in a slow circle. His soldiers were all around them, hidden in the trees, behind trunks, and even in the fog. They were silent, efficient fighters, and she knew most of them were many times her age, with experience she could only begin to comprehend. Knowing that, her chest swelled with pride a little, knowing she was a match for any of them, save maybe Kethelket. Victor was right; she’d vastly improved in the time she’d known him. Of course, Tes was the main reason, but she’d never have met Tes if she hadn’t been following him.

“I’ll go speak with Sarl, check on his cohort, and see that they’re ready to charge.”

“Good.” Valla nodded and watched him move off to the east, where the Ninth was encamped near the edge of the fog. Too many of Sarl’s troops were affected by the strange malaise the mist caused for him to have them stand ready, idle, in the forest. Instead, he’d set them in a ready position close by, prepared to charge when the word came down. She let her mind wander, trying to picture how things would go. Victor would find and kill or at least get an understanding of the spirit guardians on the walls of the keep. He’d return, and then they’d attack? She wasn’t sure how things would go at that point. Perhaps he’d find he couldn’t affect the “ghosts,” even from the Spirit Plane.

“Ware!” Kethelket cried, interrupting her reverie, charging toward her from around a trio of trees grown so close together that their canopies were intertwined. At almost the same time, Victor’s ghostly coyotes broke into yips and howls and grew restless, coming closer to Victor and pacing in little circles, eyes focused outward, watching the mists.

“My scouts are engaged. Undead have come in great numbers; they swarm this way. I sent word to Sarl, but in this darkness and the mist . . .” Valla didn’t need him to finish the thought—they were on their own, at least for a while.

Valla whipped Midnight out of her sheath and put her back to Victor, standing between two coyotes. “Which direction?” she called.

She heard Kethelket’s swords ring as he pulled them free. She glanced at him and watched as he put his back to her on the other side of Victor, “All.”

#### Book 6: Chapter 22: A Fated Meeting

The climb to the top of the keep’s wall was brutal, but whatever had been bombarding him on the ground stopped, so Victor was thankful for small mercies. He wondered if perhaps the defenders so high up couldn’t see him clinging to the shadows of the black stone monoliths, especially now that the mist seemed to have made a reappearance, crowding the light of his banner, making it difficult to judge his progress. In any direction beyond fifty yards or so, all he saw was gray. Still, he climbed, leaping from one narrow ledge to the next, devouring the heights with superhuman endurance, strength, and agility.

He’d been climbing for several minutes, perhaps longer, when he felt some agitation from his coyotes. Something was happening around his body, but Victor refused to leave, to retreat to the Material Plane, as one of Valla’s books called the realm of the living. He’d come too far to give up now. Distances were strange on the Spirit Plane; Victor had always found them to be shorter so long as he knew where he was going, a person or place he wanted to reach. He was beginning to understand that things could work in the opposite manner. Something the Death Casters, perhaps Prince Hector himself, had done to this place made it difficult to find the top of the keep’s wall. It wasn’t this high in reality, but here, in the land of spirits, it seemed to stretch endlessly.

“So,” he grunted, leaping to the next ledge, “is it a matter of wills? Is their desire to keep me away stronger than mine to end this climb?” He growled, stoking his rage, allowing his vision to tint red as he pulled himself up. “Bullshit.” This time, before he leaped further, he stared at the wall before him, not the ledge he aimed to climb. He focused on the wall and firmly planted his desired destination in his mind, the wall’s top, an area with no stone in front of him, only under his feet. Focusing on that image, he stretched his hands up, fingers ready to grab the top of the wall, and jumped. This time, he felt it, the familiar blur of passage, the sensation he usually felt when he was “walking” toward Old Mother on the many occasions when they’d met in this realm.

When his fingers found purchase and his knees bumped against the hard stone, Victor opened his eyes and pulled, a savage grin of triumph baring his teeth as he pulled a leg over the crenelation to stand atop a dark stone parapet. He yanked Lifedrinker from her harness and stalked toward a weird, flickering red and black shadow to his right. One of the guardians, if he had to guess, was standing with smoky hands atop the stone wall, leaning down in a posture that made Victor think it was searching for something. Was it looking for him? Victor didn’t have to wait long to find out. As the circle of his banner’s light fell on the shadow, it screamed and turned to him with wide-open, blood-red eyes.

The smoky shadows blasted away from it as though the light was a gale-force wind, and the ghost, as Victor had come to think of the keep's defenders, summoned a shadowy spear and charged. Victor met the spear haft with Lifedrinker's shimmering, moonlight blade, cleaving through it like a twig, then he brought her up in a loop, arcing to the diminutive spirit's armpit, and she lopped its right arm off in a spray of weird, luminescent black-red blood. The ghost was the size of an average human with weird gray-tinted, faintly translucent skin, and when Victor maimed it, its mouth stretched into a noiseless howl of agony.

The ghost tumbled back, stumbling in its haste to avoid another cleave. Victor's moves with Lifedrinker were machine-like in their perfect execution, though, and he compensated for the ghost's movement, slipping the axe through its shadowy black leather armor, disemboweling it as it fell. Shiny, slippery entrails fell forth onto the black stones. They were silver, red, and cloaked in smoky shadows, and the ghost thrashed, bucking in silent agony as the smoky red Energy spilled out onto the stones. It grew paler and more translucent, and then the spirit was gone. Nothing but a slippery mess of weird Energy remained on the stones.

"Not so tough, are they, chica?"

*Simple pawns with weak Energy. Let us seek their master!*

"Not a bad idea," Victor growled, stalking toward the inner rampart and peering left and right, then down, wondering where the rest of the defenders were. His vision was limited to the circle of his banner's light, however, and he couldn't quite make out the stones of the inner courtyard. He thought he could see a gap in the parapet near the edge of his light. "Maybe some stairs there." He was tempted to jump down, come what may, but decided he'd check the perimeter a bit further first.

Victor started around the corner, moving along the walkway, aiming for the gap he'd seen, but then a horde of silently screaming ghosts burst into the light of his banner, black smoke flowing off them like it was caught in a stiff wind. He tried to take stock, to count the enemies coming toward him, but it wasn't easy with them bunched into a crowd, obscured by the smoke as they were. He thought there must be more than twenty.

Victor took advantage of his much greater size, reach, and strength, stepping toward the throng and cleaving Lifedrinker in a wide, powerful arc, shearing through their weapons, armor, and ghostly bodies, breaking their charge. He stomped forward and used Project Spirit to send a wave of sickly yellow, twisted, inspiration-attuned Energy through the crowd. His cleave and the wave of anti-inspiration broke their momentum, and the survivors stumbled back, only to have Victor dance among them, weaving a deadly Lifedrinker through them like they were practice dummies.

"Pathetic!" he roared, ripping them apart, and then another crowd of the ghosts came from the other direction, and he was forced to increase the ferocity of his deadly dance, kicking, hacking, whirling, cleaving, grabbing, throwing, and utterly destroying the spirit-like assailants. To their credit, though he broke their momentum, smashed their comrades, and dashed their ghostly blood in a thick mist, they never fled. Pack after pack came at him, and Victor felt his



movements forming a rhythm, his cleaves and chops the percussion for the roars, howls, and screams he and Lifedrinker let loose.

When he stood heaving for breath, Lifedrinker's metal head blazing with ghostly light, engorged on the bloody Energy of his foes, the keep's high, black stone wall was drenched in the weird, luminescent blood-like remnants of his enemies and the mist stretching away from his banner's light seemed thinner. Many minutes had passed while he wove his dance of destruction, and he could feel the rage in his Core ebbing low. Victor let his Berserk fade, wanting to give his Core a chance to recover. As his size reduced and the slick, ghostly blood slowly misted away, he stalked toward the gap in the now much taller-seeming parapet. He could see it clearly; his banner was still burning brightly; only half his glory-attuned Energy had been spent.

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Valla wrenched Midnight, trying to pull her from the ghoul's skull, grunting with the effort as the bones clung to the blade and the creature's undead body flopped along the ground. A shambler, as Victor called the giant, plant-and-corpse monstrosities, lurched toward her, and she ducked a shoulder, trying to present her armor to its claws as it raked at her while she struggled to free her blade.

They were surrounded, overwhelmed, the Naghelli outnumbered ten to one and falling back into an ever-tighter circle around Victor. Still, the undead broke through, and Victor's coyotes, Kethelket and Valla, struggled to keep them from charging past to attack his freakishly serene body. In the distance, she could hear the horns of the Ninth, and she hoped it meant Sarl was pushing his soldiers into the mist, into the rear or flank of the undead horde. She didn't know what position they held relative to the monsters; all she knew was that they were beset from every direction, and they were losing ground.

The shambler knocked her back, and she fell to the damp mulch, using the momentum to give another yank to Midnight, pulling her free from the ghoul's corpse. She jumped up, only to see two of Victor's great coyotes pull the shambler to the ground, grabbing its arms and loose bits, yanking them apart with frenzied jerks of their necks.

Valla took the short respite to look around. The Naghelli were fast and deadly with their weapons, their coordination the polar opposite of the undead horde's fanatical, mindless charge. She could see them fighting, shoulder to shoulder, in the nearby mist, moving like orange-lit shadows, slashing, stabbing, and hacking at the endless wave of monsters that pushed at their thin line. How long could they hold? Would the Ninth be enough? It seemed thousands of undead beset them, and Sarl commanded a mere six hundred. They needed Victor's banner, its light, and its bolstering effect. Should she wake him? Could she wake him?

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Victor started down the steps, noting the lack of any sort of Energy award from the hundred or so ghosts he'd just slain. He wondered if the System deemed his combat still ongoing or if the Energy wasn't coming to him on this plane. He supposed it was possible the ghosts hadn't been worth any;

maybe he hadn't even really killed them. The fog continued to retreat as he pushed forward with his banner, and when he reached the base of the steps, he could see a wide circle of black flagstones leading away into the courtyard. He felt something ahead, something malevolent and powerful, a different sort of presence than the weak ghosts who'd thought to challenge him. Was it their leader?

*I feel it, my champion! Let us go! Let us fight what awaits! Don't you wish to taste its blood?*

"Easy, chica. Of course I do. Give me a minute to breathe, though. Let me get my rage back." Victor looked inside himself, at his Core, and saw his fear and inspiration were full, his glory above half, and his rage slowly building, stoking itself from the ever-full furnace of his spirit. His Core was different from those like Valla's; it fed on emotions, not elements or other forces that existed in the world. He could be in the vacuum of space, and his Core would recover, building up its power from the feelings that roiled within Victor's spirit. Could other cultivators say the same? He honestly didn't know, but the important point remained—he was recovering even in this strange place controlled by death.

As he stood there at the bottom of the steps, gazing into the fog at the edge of his light, a voice came to him, whispering sibilantly on the wind, "Why delay? Come to me, warrior. Come and let me behold you, who have slain my guardians. Let me feel the fury of that mighty spirit." The voice was decidedly feminine and seductive. Victor knew that, had he a weaker will, he would have felt a powerful pull, an urge to obey and walk into the mist, releasing Lifedrinker to clatter upon the stones. His will wasn't weak, though; he could detect the pull, ignore it, and grasp Lifedrinker's haft even more tightly, twisting it between his hands as he stood there, watching his rage Core grow ever brighter.

He was feeling good, almost ready to charge forward, when a pang struck him, a pain in his heart that told him one of his guardians had fallen, one of his coyotes had succumbed and returned to the Spirit Plane. "They're fighting, and it must be bad."

*Let us make haste, then! Slay the presence before us, and we will return to our corporeal bodies and lay waste to whatever threatens our mate!*

"Our . . ." Victor let the thought drop; there was too much to unpack at that moment. Instead, he took Lifedrinker's advice and began to stalk forward, revealing more and more of the courtyard as his banner's light burned off the mist. The stones he trod upon were black and smooth, enormous like the ones on the walls. His boots clicked upon them, echoing oddly in the foggy space. He'd traversed a dozen yards when he heard the voice again.

"Good, come to me, angry one. Let me help you find peace in that throbbing heart of yours." The words came to him as a husky, feminine whisper, and it sent shivers along Victor's spine like the lips that uttered the words were just an inch from his ears. He swore he could feel the cold breath of the speaker on his flesh,

and, despite his will, his love for Valla, and his simmering rage, he could feel his pulse quicken at the touch.

“I’m coming,” he growled, stalking forward toward the presence he could feel but couldn’t see. Lifedrinker vibrated in his palms, grounding him, and Victor opened his pathways, pulling some rage into them, letting it smolder through him, limning his body in waves of red, flickering light and tinting his vision crimson. As the mists continued to part before his banner, he finally saw her, the author of the whispers. She was a woman, ghostly in complexion, her flesh luminescent and faintly translucent. She was tall, lithe, and utterly naked, swaying back and forth on long legs, moving to a rhythm or tune Victor couldn’t hear.

Her eyes were piercing, bright, cobalt blue that seemed backlit by the Energy within the woman’s frame. Her hair, long and black, drifted behind her in the nonexistent breeze, reminiscent of how hair floated when a person was submerged in water. Victor tried to ignore her naked form, but his traitor eyes wouldn’t avoid a darting glance down, taking in the woman’s pale, bare chest and the dark triangle between her legs. When he jerked his head back to her face, she smiled seductively, spreading cherry-red lips to reveal white teeth that, like her eyes, seemed too bright. “Why so grumpy, warrior? Come, wouldn’t it be better to talk and take comfort in my hospitality? You’ve slain my watchers; surely you owe me the courtesy of a conversation.”

Victor stalked forward, Lifedrinker held crossways before him, her comforting buzz a reminder of who and where he was, something he needed as the woman’s mesmerizing gaze locked with his. He found himself looking her in the eye, that she was nearly as tall as he in his non-Quinametzin form, and he frowned at the realization. Was she so tall before? Wouldn’t he have noticed something like that? “A spirit then,” he growled.

“Aren’t we all in this place?”

Victor had to admit she had a point. Even Old Mother had looked young when she Spirit Walked. He knew very well that he could manipulate his appearance on the Spirit Realm if he tried hard enough. He’d simply never felt the need. “Where’s your body?” he asked before he realized the words were forming on his lips.

“Nearby. Does it matter? Tell me, angry one. Why do you come to my keep? Why do you attack my guardians? Now you stand before me, full of rage, murder in your eyes, and I have to ask, again, why?”

“This keep, these lands, they aren’t yours. You’re part of an invading army, and you’ve slain men of mine.”

“Have I?” She frowned, an expression that looked decidedly like a pout on her beautiful face. Victor, forced to stare into her eyes lest he look upon her nakedness, found they were pulsing ever-so-softly with pale blue light. “Who were they?”

“The Naghelli. Two men who came bravely to scout your keep, to have a look at the ghostly guardians atop its walls. Not only did your ghosts slay them, but you

hung them from the walls. You shouldn't have done that." Victor's final sentence was a growl, and he began to pump his pathways with rage again. His red, flickering aura surged intensely, casting a red glow that reflected from the polished black flagstones.

"I shouldn't make an example of assassins that came out of the darkness to attack one of my guardians? I thought to forestall further violence. I hoped their display above my gates would deter further invasion!" She'd come closer as she spoke, and Victor was stunned to see her cool, pale fingertips resting on his wrist, just above his fist where it gripped Lifedrinker's haft. "Wouldn't you like to put that brutal weapon down? Sit with me and see what I've done with this special place. I've built it up here on the Spirit Plane, and there are wonders to behold within these walls. Can't you feel them?"

Victor loosened his grip on Lifedrinker as he looked into her eyes. He wanted to stare into them, to plumb their depths, and to learn more about this mysterious, amazing woman. "What's your name?" he asked, letting his rage recede, pulling back his aura and holding it close.

"I'm Victoria. And you, angry one? What do I call you?"

"Seriously? I'm Victor . . ."

"A fated meeting!" Her expression brightened, her eyes lit up, and Victor found himself letting go of Lifedrinker with his left hand, letting her fall to his side, loosely held in his right. "We were meant to come together here, Victor! Can't you feel it? I think we could learn much from each other. Such strength flows through you, and now that your rage has ebbed and you've let go of that brutal aura, I can see there's a great deal more to you . . ." She'd come close, just inches separating them, and Victor smiled into her face, his hot breath mingling with her cool, quick exhalations. She tilted her chin, staring into his eyes, and Victor felt like she wanted him to kiss her. He could feel her willing him to do it.

Victor brought his left hand up, brushed her wild, black, opalescent hair away from her cheek, and then let his fingers settle against her neck, the side of his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. "You're beautiful, and I bet there is something interesting about you, but," quick as a viper snatching up a rodent, he wrapped his fingers around her pale, slender throat, "I don't like Death Casters trying to mess with my mind!" He growled, tightening his grip and flooding his pathways with rage again. He lifted Lifedrinker, and her edge burst into ghostly orange flames as she howled her fury.

Book 6: Chapter 23: A Risky Bargain

Valla looked to her Core, saw her Energy was dwindling, and cut short her plan to launch another lightning strike into the pack of ghouls that harried one of Victor's coyotes. The brave, white-gold hounds were beset, as were she and Kethelket. If she looked further than the small circle they made around Victor, she knew the other Naghelli and, likely, the Ninth were also overwhelmed; there were just too many of the damnable undead pouring out of the fog-shrouded forest.

She was tired, her body sore and battered, her helmet dented and smeared with gore, and her arm like a lead weight. If not for the magic of her blade, if not for Midnight's desire to fight, she didn't think she'd be able to swing the sword with any effect. Desperately, she stole a glance at Victor, still sitting with his back to the tree, oblivious to the battle despite the ghoul corpse atop his lap—Kethelket had beheaded it at the last instant—and the splashes of gore that marred his fierce countenance. "Wake up, Victor!" she cried for the dozenth time, and then she lowered her shoulder, allowing her wyrm-scale armor to block the slashing claws of yet another ghoul.

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Victoria's beautiful, ice-blue eyes sprang open with shock, and her mouth twisted in fury as she burst into mist, leaving nothing but damp air between Victor's fingers. Lifedrinker cleaved the cloud, but nothing came of it save a swirl of steamy moisture, and the axe screamed her frustration. A trilling laugh echoed around the courtyard, and Victor spun in a circle, scanning the area illuminated by his banner and seeing nothing. "So vicious!" Victoria's mocking, laughing voice echoed without a source. "What a will! Were you even tempted?"

"Come out here and let me show you." Victor released his aura, letting it fall around him like a blanket of murderous intent. He, in fact, had not been tempted by the ghostly woman's words or her beauty. When he felt her will pushing against him the entire time she spoke, it turned a part of him critical, and he'd seen through her façade; she was a Death Caster, and her attempts to bend his will to hers were a low and dirty kind of magic, a prettier version of the control collars the slavers in the mines used. Victor wasn't having it. Her laughter echoed again, but Victor thought he heard the original note in the air above him this time. She was flying, perhaps.

It made sense, he supposed, that a Death Caster who'd taken on a spectral form would be able to fly. He thought about Berserking and leaping into the air, hacking Lifedrinker about when he next heard her voice. He discarded the idea. Iron Berserk was a marvelous ability, but it wouldn't serve him here. He needed something a bit more versatile, a bit more unexpected. She'd seen and tasted his rage. She'd felt his will. Perhaps it was time to give her a taste of fear. Before he could talk himself out of it, Victor formed the pattern for Aspect of Terror, channeling his fear-attuned Energy into it.

As always happened, black shadows exploded into being around Victor and began to wrap around his rapidly changing form. He grunted and screamed, a sound that started deep in his gut, rumbling with bass, and ended with a high shriek—a sound no human throat could make. As his cries and shrieks echoed around the courtyard, Victor felt his body changing, elongating, shifting, and hardening as it absorbed his mass, his weapons, and his armor. His vision changed as the colors faded away; everything turned gray, and the misty fog summoned by the Death Caster no longer troubled him; his hungry eyes saw through it, spotting bright, flaring spirits here and there, but none that shone as brightly as the one that hung in the air a hundred yards overhead.

When Victor's baleful yellow-red eyes settled on the brilliant spirit, clearly staring right at it, it seemed to realize he could see it. It began to fly in a slow, lazy circle, perhaps thinking he'd caught a glimpse and that it could lose him in the fog. It was wrong. Victor's hunger surged, his Core cried out for Energy, and he tracked that spirit with his deadly hunter's vision. As it settled, hovering near

the top of a round tower, a structure Victor hadn't been able to see before, he took a step toward it, and his hard, razor-sharp talons clicked on the obsidian stones.

"What have you done to yourself?" a feminine voice asked his mind, but Victor had no patience for words. He shook his long head, clicking his razor beak angrily, then he focused on that bright spirit, on the Energy within it, and he leaped into the air, his great, black-feathered, shadow-clad wings snapping with a crack that echoed off the courtyard walls. Victor hadn't cast Iron Berserk prior to taking on the Aspect of Terror, and his pathways were utterly flooded with fear-attuned Energy. The shadowy steam streaking off his feathered form was rife with it, tainting the air, radiating outward, giving everything within sight of his terrible aspect a taste.

More than the sight of him, the sounds he made carried the palpable fear in his nature through the Spirit Plane. Any spirit not belonging to the Death Caster who'd claimed that keep and its environs fled at the sound. Victor was dimly aware of the lesser spirits' flight; he could see their bright forms streaking away through the twilight realm. However, the prize, the brilliant one he'd seen flying above him, was the center of his focus, and its radiant Energy kept his attention. Victor wanted to breathe his fear into that being, wanted it to feel it, to experience it, and to send it back to him. He would feast on one so bright.

He screamed his hunger as he streaked through the misty air, a gigantic, vulture-like, hunched form of black feathers, razored talons, and glowering red eyes. The radiant spirit erupted with blue Energy, launching a beam of the stuff directly at him. It hit Victor in the chest, turned his feathers to ice, blasted them off, and froze the leathery black skin beneath, peeling it back and frosting the white, ivory-hard bones beneath. It hurt, an icy fire that spread to his very marrow, but Victor was beyond caring about pain. Pain was a matter of concern for lesser things, things that didn't hunt in the dark and feed on the terror they inspired. He shrieked and snapped his wings all the harder, hurtling toward the startled spirit.

Completely absorbed by his Aspect of Terror, Victor didn't think to cast spells, channel Energy, or project it; he had one plan—grasp onto the spirit, drive it to the ground, and consume the fear he would pull forth. It was a simple plan, but sometimes simplicity was what a situation called for. The spirit flitted indecisively left then right, perhaps surprised at his ability to shrug off its attack. When it finally chose a direction and began to flee, it was too late; Victor was upon it, his great dark talons gripping the faintly translucent pale flesh between its shoulder blades, and, as he'd planned, he cracked his enormous black wings and dove for the unforgiving black flagstones, planning to use the spirit as a landing perch.

His quarry screamed, thrashed, and with a surge of Energy, attempted to apparate, intending to burst into ghostly mist and flee again, but Victor was wise to it, and his hungry talons, formed from his Energy-drinking axe, pulled the spell out of the spirit's pathways, foiling her attempt to flee. He crashed to the hard flagstones, and his talons burst through the shimmering flesh and bones to gouge the stone, leaving an enormous bloody smear as he came to rest atop his prey. The spirit screamed and cried, thrashing its limbs weakly. Victor felt the fear and terror truly begin to flow from the being, great waves of it that washed over him, adding to the frenetic edge of his hunger.

His ability to impart fear was unchecked now, the spirit unable to fight him off, and its deep wells of Energy began to convert, rolling out in those heavy, satisfying waves of fear-attuned Energy that Victor's Core greedily drew in. Despite his hunger and the glorious feeding frenzy he undertook, Victor never truly lost himself; his Born of Terror feat wouldn't let him, not to mention his prodigious will. That said, he didn't really want to control himself, and he gave in to his hunger for a long while, pulling until only a trickle of Energy still drizzled forth from the pale, dull spirit. He was contemplating pulling that last bit into his Core when the spirit shivered violently and coughed out a hoarse plea, "Stop! Please! I can save your army!"

The words struck a chord in Victor, and he climbed out of the shadowy corner of his mind, pulled back on the Aspect of Terror, pushed his way into the driver's seat, so to speak, and took some control. He shifted away from the spirit, carefully, methodically extricating one talon after another from its dull, gray form. The satisfaction of his feast began to fade as he came more and more into himself and slowly severed the connection to his spell, grunting with discomfort as his body, wrapped in writhing shadows, returned to its usual form. When the dark cloak of shadowy tendrils faded, he found himself straddling Victoria's blood-drenched body, a bloody Lifedrinker held crossways over her naked chest.

She shivered and trembled, pale as snow. All her luminescent blood lay pooled around them, shimmering on the black flagstones. Only a tiny spark of light still hung behind her sky-blue irises. She coughed weakly and whispered, "I'm sorry I underestimated you. I'm sorry I tried to control you. Please don't kill me. A horde, a true undead horde, is attacking the army you brought here."

"And?" Victor growled, leaning forward, staring into her nearly dead eyes.

"And they are winning; your troops are outnumbered fifty to one."

"Fifty thousand?" Victor couldn't help the surprise in his voice.

"Yes! Mindless, but fearless and tough. They will overwhelm your forces before you can rally them and fight free. Spare me, and I'll issue a command for the horde to be still. It will buy you a reprieve."

"Fifty thousand . . . And you're in the keep?"

"I am! I was here with my spectral guards, whom you slew."

"Call the horde off and open the gates. We'll come inside."

"Impossible! Prince Hector will . . ."

"Nah, no deal. I'll kill you now and take my chances." Victor lifted Lifedrinker, and the woman flinched and took a slow, shuddering breath.

"Very well. Very well. Perhaps you're strong enough to break the tether he has upon me. If you can do that, then I can aid you. I'm close to death, though! Let me leave this place so I can seek healing. I can only grant you a short reprieve from the horde; when Hector sees what I've done, he'll retake control."

"How short?"

“Minutes!”

“Listen.” Victor stood up and glowered down at the once beautiful figure. “I found you once on this plane, but I can find you on the other, too. Don’t make me hunt you down. Get your gates open and wait for my army.”

“You have my word.” She coughed the words, chasing them with flecks of luminescent blood, and Victor found he believed her. He didn’t trust her, not even a little, but he believed she’d complete this bargain, at least. He pulled back his aura, released the almost unconscious hold he’d pressed on her with his will, and then she was gone in a puff of pale mist. He took one last look around the black stone courtyard, and then he cut the ties to his Spirit Walk spell.

Victor’s eyes sprang open, and he was greeted by chaos. Undead corpses lay piled around him, his four remaining coyotes snarled and howled, whining with angst as they wove between ghouls, biting at their legs, pulling out tendons, dragging them away from him. Valla, drenched in gore and blood but still bound in lightning and wind, hacked Midnight in a two-handed grip, grunting with the effort to hold the ghouls, zombies, and shamblers at bay. Other forms writhed in mortal combat nearby, Naghelli, no doubt.

Victor surged to his feet, cast Iron Berserk, and summoned his banner. Many of the Naghelli had invoked orbs of light, but they paled in comparison to the light that poured out from the bloody sun on his standard. The undead shrank back, cringing, their flesh steaming, and Valla turned with wide, relieved eyes to see Victor towering over the piled corpses at the center of their circle. From his new height, Victor could make out Kethelket and Uvu fighting a cluster of shamblers further afield. He filled his lungs and bellowed, “Follow me! We need to join up with the Ninth!” Then he strode to the east, toward the edge of the fog-filled forest, hacking Lifedrinker in wide, whooshing arcs as the Naghelli, his coyotes, and even Uvu fell in behind him.

His banner had broken the enthusiasm of the undead creatures’ charge, winning his guardians a bit of a respite as they followed him through the trees. Victor could hear the Ninth fighting and knew they weren’t far. He hoped to get to them before Victoria called off the undead; he wanted to lead them through the fog to the keep. Part of him questioned the sanity of his decision to bring the army further into the forest, to put them into the keep while nearly fifty thousand undead lurked outside. Part of him thought they should break free, charge over their claimed lands to the keep they already held, to the support of the rest of the army.

Victor didn’t like that idea, however. If Prince Hector had such a huge force here, in this territory, it stood to reason that other parts of his lands weren’t so heavily guarded. If Victor could find a way to occupy this horde, even destroy it, then Borrius and Rellia could push harder into the next territory. He drove forward, hacking, kicking, even throwing undead out of his path, carving the way for those who’d so steadfastly defended him. He still couldn’t quite believe that they’d been fighting so



vigorously around him, and he hadn't noticed a thing. The idea that Valla and the Naghelli had been bleeding, maybe dying for him, caused a twinge of guilt, but he shook it off. Hadn't he bled for them? Hadn't he been willing to die to defend his troops?

When they burst through the tree line, Victor found the Ninth in a defensive phalanx, surrounded by a sea of undead. Thankfully, this horde lacked the giants they'd faced earlier—no bone colossuses or gigantic skeletal drummers stood out in the massive army, and the Ninth seemed to be holding their own, able to keep the immense horde of undead at bay with their Energy-bolstered shield wall. Victor didn't know how many of the monsters surrounded them; it would take hours to count them all, even if they stood still. In that thrashing, surging throng, all he could do was estimate.

The Ninth had roughly six hundred soldiers, and he could see them clearly at the center of the horde. If he were guessing, he'd say there were easily ten times as many undead heaving and pressing against those shields. Where was the rest of the horde Victoria had warned him about? Were they still in the forest, still coming this way? Victor looked left and right over his shoulders and saw the Naghelli, blood-soaked though they were, ready to follow his lead. Victor was proud of them, proud of Valla, who stood stoically to his right. They didn't know a reprieve was coming, didn't know Victoria had promised to call the horde off. For all they knew, they were about to charge into a hopeless battle to try to help the Ninth.

His banner kept the undead off them, the ones behind in the forest, but he could still see clusters of them breaking from the trees further away, rushing over the plains to join the thronging horde pressing against the Ninth's shields. "Listen!" Victor roared. "This looks hopeless, but it's not! These undead will break away soon, and then we'll have minutes to make our next move. Stay by my side, and we'll get through this!"

The Naghelli responded with cheers, weapons smashing on shields, and feet stomping the ground. Kethelket, standing to Victor's left, whipped his twin blades in an elaborate flourish and said, "On your lead, Lord!"

Victor didn't want to waste the time or breath correcting him. Instead, he ensured his boost from Sovereign Will was on his strength and vitality, then he held Lifedrinker high, and he began lumbering over the muddy, torn-up grass toward the rear ranks of that enormous undead army. His four coyotes loped beside him, and he contemplated sending them home and calling for this bear, but they'd fought so hard to keep him alive that he didn't want to take this from them. No, they deserved to join him in this charge. "Come on, muchachos!"

When he was just a dozen yards from the thrashing, bucking horde, Victor cast Energy Charge and ripped over the ground to smash into them. Dozens of zombies flew away from his impact like pins before a bowling ball. Turf exploded into the air, and blood, torn, rotten flesh, and bones showered down in a rain of destruction. Victor didn't slow. Rather, he capitalized on the momentum, using his enormous size and strength to push his way among the undead, cleaving their smoking, smoldering flesh apart with a red-hot Lifedrinker.

His banner did more damage than any cleave of an axe. As its illumination fell on a vast area of the battlefield, the undead lost their focus, cringing away from it, physically affected by the fiery light. It seemed to cook at the bindings of death magic that held them on this plane, held them together. They writhed and screamed their silent screams as they fought with each other to get out of it.

Victor drove forward, the Naghelli, Valla, his coyotes, and Uvu at his back, slaughtering the few that escaped his cleaves, pushing through the ocean of undead, and carving a pathway through it.

As he grew nearer and his banner's light fell on the Ninth, cheers erupted over the sounds of battle, and Victor roared his encouragement as he drove ever closer. The undead were weak and mindless, and he began to wonder if they might be able to win free even without Victoria's help. At one point, when he was a mere fifty yards from the front lines of the phalanx, he looked over his shoulder to see thousands of undead pressing toward him over the plains, hanging back just far enough to avoid his banner's light. He grunted and reassessed his idea that they might survive out there—when he ran low on Energy, things would get ugly.

As if she were somehow reading his mind, Victoria waited until Victor began to feel some doubt in his assessment of her word. He began to wonder if something had gone wrong, and she'd failed to issue the command to the horde—however that was done—to fall back. Had she died, after all, from the damage he'd done to her spirit form? As that doubt took shape, and Victor pressed his way through the last few hundred zombies and ghouls between him and the Ninth, something happened. A bell toll sounded like a great clarion gong that rang through the air on reverberating waves of magic.

The undead, already creepily silent in their aggression, grew still, lowering their arms and swaying in place like horrible, rotting corpses somehow put to rest in a standing position. In the stunned silence of the living combatants, Victor shouted, "Glorious Ninth! With me! To the west, into the forest! We're going to take the keep while these pendejos sleep! Come on!"

#### Book 6: Chapter 24: Good Habits

Victor didn't wait for the soldiers to respond or for any of their leaders, Sarl included, to rush forward with questions that might delay their movements. He didn't know exactly how long Victoria's command to halt the undead would last, but she'd said minutes, and they were several miles from the keep. They had to move. "Let's go! Let's go!" he roared, turning and stomping back the way he and the Naghelli had come. He could hear Sarl's sergeants shouting commands, could hear the Ninth moving forward, hacking and bashing their way through the strangely dormant undead that still surrounded them.

Victor wondered how much of a dent they could make in the horde if they went wild with slaughter. How many could they slay before Prince Hector gave them the command to resume their attack? "Can't risk it," he grunted. There might have been twenty thousand undead on the field, but that meant another thirty thousand lurked in the woods, still making their way to the fight. The undead were sturdy and not so easy to dispatch for a typical soldier. It would take a long time to kill them all, and Victor didn't think they'd be halfway done before they reanimated and fought back.

"What's going on?" Valla asked, jogging to keep up with his long strides. Now that they didn't have to fight through the undead as they progressed, Victor wasn't surprised she'd taken the chance to get some answers.

"I fought with the commander in the keep. I beat her, and she swore to halt the undead long enough for us to win free."

“In exchange for?”

“For not killing her.”

Valla muttered something under her breath. Victor grinned as he realized she'd cursed. “Let me guess—she was beautiful with soulful eyes and a pout that tore at your heart . . .”

“I was in my nightmare form. It was hard to stop feasting, but she managed to say something about my army—you—being surrounded. I pulled back at those words.” Victor didn't enjoy talking about “feasting” on a sentient being, but he knew it would straighten out Valla's perception of events.

“I'm sorry. I was being petty.”

“Nah, don't apologize. She did try to seduce me at first. She tried to twist me to her will, but mine was stronger. Besides,” Victor leaned down from his towering height to speak more softly, “all I had to do was think about you.”

Valla's answering smile swelled his heart, and Victor almost canceled his Iron Berserk so he could more easily hold her hand and run beside her. He held off, though—no telling what heroics might be needed before his army was safe behind walls. Thinking of the army, he turned and walked backward for a moment, looking between the trees to see the Ninth rushing behind the Naghelli, a loose column of soldiers. They held their shields and weapons ready, eyes wide as they looked at the piles of vanquished undead and the shifting, listless hordes that still lingered further from the trail of destruction Victor had wrought. “Keep moving! No slowing!” Victor roared, then he turned and continued to trudge forward.

“The keep will open to us?” Kethelket asked, hurrying to jog beside Valla.

“It better,” Victor growled. He gave the Naghelli captain another look and added, “I have a bargain with the lady inside. She swore to open it to us.”

“And if she betrays her word? We'll be smashed between this horde and the walls.”

“If it comes to that, I'll open those fucking gates. Believe it.” At his words, Kethelket looked up and locked eyes with Victor, nodding gravely. He believed him. The confidence made Victor feel glad and proud but also nervous; what if he couldn't deliver? Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to the present. They were traversing the scene of Valla's and the Naghelli's stand, where they'd defended Victor's insensate body. The corpses of the undead were so thickly piled that it almost seemed like an impromptu fortification around the loose circle of slaughter.

Victor pushed through the area, past the tree where he'd sat, and then he sent his four shimmering, white-gold coyotes ahead, ranging toward the keep, seeking the best path. He didn't wait for their report, though, continuing between

trees, working his way in a generally westerly direction. All the while they walked between trees, they passed by clusters of undead, and Victor didn't hesitate to smash and decapitate them as he strode by. He could hear the wet thunks of others' weapons doing the same and knew the Naghelli and the Ninth would carve a bloody path through the dormant horde. The idea that, though they might kill a thousand, they were hardly denting the undead army was a little daunting.

"I see Lam," Valla said at one point. Victor turned and scanned back over the column, and, sure enough, he saw Lam's shimmering, golden Energy hammer smash apart another cluster of idle undead.

"I'd forgotten she was with the Ninth. Do you see Edeya?"

"No . . ." Valla's voice was pensive, and Victor knew she was worried. He slowed further and concentrated, looking back. After a while, near the rear of the column, a flicker of bright blue movement caught his eye, and, staring, he made out Edeya's slim form striding among the rear troops. Her wings were back; they were larger than before, and they glittered with sparkling blue Energy.

"I see her! Near the rear of the column." Victor pointed, and Valla sighed with relief.

Following the wordless messages from his coyotes, Victor wound his way between trees, clusters of zombies and shamblers, and past other obstacles like great, fallen trees, lichen-filled ravines, and tumbled boulders; the forest wasn't anything close to parklike, and though his banner burned away the fog, the going wasn't easy. They'd only been traveling for about twenty minutes when the zombies began to stir. Thankfully, the undead were far less dense in this part of the woods, but Victor and the army had passed by thousands and left tens of thousands behind. As the creatures woke, they began to noiselessly make their way toward the column as if they somehow could feel their presence.

"Let's go!" Victor roared. "Double-time! Run for the keep!" Though he ordered the soldiers to run, Victor continued to walk, urging them to rush past him as he tried to benefit as many as possible with the light of his banner. When he felt like he was in the middle of the troops and they were surging around him, jogging with their shields up, he started forward again, pleased to note that Valla rode beside him, once again in Uvu's saddle. Clashes sounded from the edges of their column, and Victor knew the undead were closing in again. Still, if they kept moving forward, he knew they could outpace the bulk of the horde. He hoped. What if a great many undead sat outside the walls, waiting? Had he led the Ninth to their doom?

His doubts were unfounded. When they broke out of the trees into the clearing around the keep, only a hundred yards of gravel-strewn dirt and patchy grass separated the troops from the high black walls. Mist still clung to the area, thick in the air near the keep, but as Victor started forward over

the cleared land, his banner's light drove it back, and he saw the gates standing open, the corpses of two Naghelli hanging above them. He frowned at the sight and stood still, waiting to take up the rearguard, letting the rest of the soldiers pass him by.

The keep was impressive, though nothing like the Spirit Plane version. The wall was circular, carved from obsidian-colored stones, but there the resemblance ended. The parapet was only thirty feet high, maybe forty, and the gates were made from iron-banded wood. No towering walls disappeared into the clouds, and no monolithic stones made up the walls—the black blocks that formed the keep were more the size of overlarge bricks. Still, the keep was large. The walls were probably a quarter mile in circumference, and the tall, round towers that rose behind them were impressive. There wouldn't be any trouble fitting the Ninth and their Naghelli comrades into the fortification.

As the last soldiers rushed past him, Victor turned and watched the tree line as their undead pursuers began to break through into the light of his banner. They shied back, parting as they rushed forward, working around the banner's glow along the edges of the clearing as though they meant to go around him to keep up their pursuit. Victor chuckled and turned, walking with long, heavy strides toward the rear lines of the soldiers as they pressed forward into the keep.

The gates were probably twenty feet high, and when Victor stood before them, he took a moment to reach up with Lifedrinker to slice the cords holding the dead Naghelli against the stones. He carefully cradled their lifeless, pale bodies, strangely light and limp, in his arms as he stepped into the tunnel behind the gate. The passage was long with high ceilings and lined with various defensive measures—murder holes for arrows, flanged, wide-mouthed brass openings that looked perfectly suited for spraying oil, and large ballista tips protruding by the dozens. Victor was grateful Victoria hadn't yet betrayed him; he'd hate to be walking through that tunnel observing the damage done to the troops he'd sent through before him.

When he stepped into the courtyard, he noted, again, its similarities and differences from the Spirit Plane version. Smooth black stones lined the ground and the inner walls, but, again, everything was smaller. He could see the ramparts easily. The steps leading up to the keep with its round towers were just a few dozen yards beyond the gate, and standing atop them was a tall woman clad in black gossamer. Lam, Sarl, and Kethelket stood before the steps, the soldiers arrayed in rows, filling the courtyard. Still sitting atop Uvu, Valla waited just beyond the inner gates and nodded to Victor as he stepped through.

Victor wanted to address the woman and reassure his troops before someone did something violent, but first, he looked at the nearest sergeant and said, "Take some soldiers and get that gate closed. The undead are coming."

"Sir!" She saluted him sharply and then addressed the line of bloodied soldiers she was standing with. "Come on, Green Squad!"

Victor watched them hurry into the tunnel behind him, and then he gently laid the corpses of the dead Naghelli on the black stones to the side of the gateway. Straightening, he turned and strode forward down the central aisle between the ranks of soldiers. Valla rode beside him, keeping pace atop Uvu. The soldiers stood up straighter as he passed. Whether it was pride or the bolstering effect of his banner, Victor didn't know. Voices muttering echoed over the stone flags, and Victor knew the

soldiers wanted to know what was happening. Who was this black-clad woman, why were they in the keep, and what would they do about the horde of undead closing around them?

Victor stopped behind Lam and the others and looked up the steps, making eye contact with the woman—Victoria. She looked similar to how he'd seen her on the Spirit Plane, but not exactly the same. She was tall, pale, and had blue eyes and long hair, but she didn't glow with ethereal light here. On this plane, her eyes were like pale ice, not cold stars. Her skin wasn't like polished ivory; it was a white, almost sickly pallor, and her lips weren't plump and red. They were thin, pressed together in something like a grimace as she obviously struggled to stand before them. She swayed slightly and gripped her side with one long-fingered hand, clearly in some discomfort.

"Lord Victor. I've kept my part of the bargain. Will you keep yours?" Her voice rang through the courtyard, high and clear, and the soldiers grew quiet as they realized they were about to be privy to important talks.

"My part?" Victor's voice rumbled, rolling over the stone, bass notes echoing off the hard black walls.

"You agreed not to kill me, to help me free myself from Prince Hector."

"I'll give you a chance." Victor reached down and jostled Kethelket, getting the Naghelli's attention. "Choose three of your best. Three with the highest will. Take this woman to a room in the keep and hold her until I have a chance to come speak with her." Victor turned back to Victoria. "You are not to speak a word to anyone—not until we've spoken further. Your guardians will report to me immediately if you utter so much as a syllable. Is that clear?"

"It is clear, Lord." She attempted to curtsy and nearly collapsed. Sarl moved to climb the steps, intent on aiding her, but Victor shot out a long arm and held him by the shoulder.

"Careful, Sarl. She's not one to be underestimated." Victor stepped forward, mounting the steps three at a time, and when he loomed over Victoria, he held out his left hand, palm up. "All of your rings, jewels, and dimensional containers. Don't test me by trying to be sneaky."

If possible, she blanched further, but she started to comply, pulling several rings off her left hand.

"Lord, some of these are precious to me. Heirlooms. Will you grant me a chance to bargain for their return?"

"I'll keep them safe for now." He stood there, waiting as she deposited ring after ring onto his enormous palm, then she untied her silky lace sash and unwound it from her waist. She rolled it into a neat ball and pressed it to his palm.

"A container," she sighed. Victor had to hand it to her; he wouldn't have thought the sash held a dimensional space.

“Where’s the System stone?”

“You intend to claim . . . of course you do.” She looked at him, her ice-chip eyes staring into his warm gold-brown ones, and when she spoke, he noted the yellowed nature of her teeth. They looked almost like old ivory, and he wondered if she was undead. He supposed it was likely; hadn’t everyone else they’d met from the invading army been undead? “It’s in the great hall beyond the doors here. Lord Victor, if you claim this keep while I’m here, I don’t know what will happen to me.”

Victor turned to see Kethelket standing behind him with three darkly cowled Naghelli. Had they put those cowls on as some sort of protection? As a means to intimidate their charge? Victor didn’t know, but he liked it. “Take her.” He stepped past them, ignoring Victoria’s pleas to speak further, and when he stopped before Sarl, Victor cut his connection to his Iron Berserk, reducing his size to something a little more comfortable for his captain to speak to. “Get your soldiers on the walls. Find out everything you can about this keep’s defenses. We have a horde to kill.”

“Aye, sir!” Sarl turned and began barking orders to his lieutenants.

Victor looked at Valla and Lam. “Let’s get a dialogue going with Borrius. I think our plan has changed, but it might be even better now.” He nodded to a less crowded area of the courtyard, a corner to the left of the steps leading up. He walked over, and they followed. He noted a pensive expression on Valla’s face.

She gripped his arm. “Do you want to try to claim this place first?”

“Let’s talk to Borrius first; it might be wise to time that with his assault. Hector is going to know it when I claim this keep. He’ll surely react. Let’s be certain the main army’s in a position to take advantage of that.”

“Of course.” Valla nodded curtly, and Victor paused to really look at her. She was covered in gore, well, all but her hauberk, which had already cleaned and polished itself. She’d taken her helmet off in the courtyard, and he could see how her hair was soaked with sweat, how thick layers of grime covered her jawline where her sweat had dried with dust and blood over and over again. She’d been through hell while he was on the Spirit Plane.

“I’m sorry I took so long.” He spoke softly, and Lam cleared her throat, moving a few steps away. She waved an arm and called Edeya closer, and they moved off, speaking in low tones.

“You did your best. It sounds like she was quite cunning.” Valla tightened her grip on his forearm, pulling his attention back to her.

“She was, but most of the time I was gone was because I was an idiot and didn’t remember how to move about on the Spirit Plane.”

“An idiot?” Valla raised an eyebrow. “Do you know that no one else in this entire army could have done what you did?” Again, she squeezed his forearm, and he loathed the idea of her ever taking that hand away. At that moment, he wished she could hold his arm forever, however impractical. “Will she aid us, do you think?”

“I think so. Maybe not willingly, but she seems to have a healthy sense of self-preservation. Speaking of that,” Victor turned back to the keep where the Naghelli had taken Victoria, “I think I should speak to her sooner rather than later. She’s dangerous.” Victor realized he was still clutching the Death Caster’s rings and sash in his left hand, so he raised his voice and said, “Hey, Edeya.”

The two Ghelli, one with golden wings and one with blue, turned away from their quiet conversation and walked toward him. “Yes, Legate?”

“Your, uh, wings look cool.”

Edeya’s eyes opened wider, and she smiled. For someone who’d just been embroiled in a massive battle with the undead, Victor thought she looked damn good. She’d gotten taller, filled out a little, and her cheeks were glowing vibrantly. Her wings were broader and much more robust looking. He wondered if she could fly at all. Standing next to Lam, he could see she still had a ways to go to reach her stature, but she was definitely not the frail-looking, wispy girl he’d become friends with. “Cool?”

“Yeah. Now quit trying to think of a way to make fun of me and come take these rings and stuff. Keep them separate from your other things, okay? We need to go through them carefully.”

“Yes, sir!” Edeya winked at him and smartly saluted, then took the bundle of Victoria’s belongings from him. “Lam and I are going to explore the keep a bit. Will that be all right?”

“Yeah. Let me know if you two find anything like that weird map in the other one.”

“That’s the idea.” Lam grinned, and they walked back up the steps and into the open double doors.

Victor continued to stare at the doorway, his mind drifting toward the strange undead woman he had to interrogate. Valla shifted beside him. “I should go with you.”

“Do you want to?”

“I think so.”

Victor knew there was more to her desire than simply wanting to be present or to hear what Victoria had to say. He couldn’t blame her. He’d feel the same in her shoes. “God, so much is happening. I need to slow down and take a beat, get some advice. Shit! When’s the last time I spoke to Kuhl Bach?”



“You spoke to him regularly while we traveled, but I haven’t seen you do so since we came into the Marches. In your defense, you’ve been busy, one fight leading to the next . . .”

“Yeah, I know, but,” Victor shook his head, “it’s just that I always feel like this—like things are running away from me. Like I’m running behind a horse, trying to grab the reins, trying to steer it away from one disaster or another. Remind me to take a minute to talk to him and, shit, to look at the Farscribe book I share with my cousin.”

“I will. For now, though, shall we contact Borrius?” She produced the command book from her storage ring.

“Yeah. Do you mind writing?”

“Not at all.” She smiled at him, and Victor could tell she was trying to help him relax. She was always like that. Always so damn supportive and cool. He remembered the first time he’d come to realize that, back in Coloss, when she’d followed him over to the arena. He remembered how surprised he was when she didn’t try to talk him out of enrolling in the fights. He’d grown so used to others like Thayla, Lam, and Rellia trying to direct his actions. Valla never did that. Did she? He couldn’t think of an instance. As he cleared his mind and tried to think of the best way to voice his intentions to Borrius, Victor resolved to let Valla know how much he appreciated her. He’d said as much recently, but he wanted to show her again. He wanted to make a habit of it.

Book 6: Chapter 25: Ties That No Longer Bind

“What it boils down to,” Victor sighed, closing the “command book,” the Farscribe book he shared with Rellia, Borrius, and Lam, “is that we need more information. I think I need to speak to Victoria.”

“Isn’t it odd? Her name? I’ve never heard one like it before I met you.” Valla and he sat together in his library. Victor had set up his travel home inside the courtyard, much as he had in the first keep they’d conquered. They still hadn’t “conquered” this keep, but, for all intents and purposes, the Ninth and the Naghelli were in control despite the fact that a massive horde of undead surrounded them.

“It’s definitely a name you could hear in my home world, same with Eric and Hector.” He looked at Valla, watching how she pressed her lips together and clenched her fist. She was stressed, and he wasn’t sure he should add any more detail, but he also wanted to be honest with her. “She said our meeting was ‘fated’ when she learned my name. I think she’s full of shit, that she was just

struggling with things to say to keep me from killing her. Still, it's weird that our names are so similar. I want to get some answers from her. Are you ready?"

"Of course." Valla stood, her chair clattering on the hardwoods as it slid back.

"You okay?"

"I think I'd like a little more time between near-death experiences, but other than that, I'm fine."

"Yeah . . ." Victor let his response trail off as she turned to walk toward the front door. He sighed, straightened his clean shirt—they'd taken a few minutes to wash up and change clothes—and ran a hand in front of his wyrm-scale vest, sealing it shut. That done, he followed after her. She was waiting for him in the courtyard, looking up at the walls, watching the activity there. The soldiers were thick on the parapets, and it looked like they were taking shots at the undead outside.

Before they'd gone into his house to communicate with Borrius and Rellia, Victor had watched from the parapets as the undead horde stopped and gathered outside of easy bow-shot range. They were so thick and tightly pressed together that a few zombies would inevitably stumble out of the formation—if you could call it that—and meander a bit closer. The soldiers were making a sport of trying to kill them from range. He didn't mind, and it seemed Sarl didn't either. It kept the troops entertained, and if they killed a few of the undead in the process, well, that meant fewer enemies to deal with down the road.

"Still at it?"

"Yes. I wonder if we shouldn't get more serious about it." Valla reached up, resting one slender-fingered hand at her throat, gently fidgeting with the choker Victor had given her. She was clearly deep in thought, picturing something, but she shook it off and looked up at him. "Should we put together some larger attacks?"

"Yeah. Definitely. Not yet, though. Let's get some information out of Victoria. Come on." Victor turned to the steps leading into the keep, and when he'd reached the top, he looked at the sergeant on duty and asked, "Where are they holding the . . . lady who was here?"

"Inside, sir. Second level—the western tower. Guards are posted outside the door."

"Thanks." Victor stepped inside. He'd only looked around the keep briefly before going into his travel home, but it was a very utilitarian, if impressively designed, structure. The smooth black stones of the exterior continued inside, rising to arched ceilings illuminated by windows and lamps, all glassed with blue and red stained crystal. The tinted lighting made the shadows strange and mysterious

and gave the dark stone more depth. Just beyond the door was a great hall, and at its center was a hovering, slowly rotating stone just like the one in the other keep. Victor figured he'd need to interact with it to officially "claim" the keep.

Borrius and Rellia had agreed that he should wait. They were at odds, though, on what they should be doing in the meantime. Borrius wanted to hold his position. He'd found a valley just south of the other keep where he'd set up a massive ambush, hoping to catch Hector's troops as they rushed to retake the first keep. Rellia thought they should scout out the next territory to the south, get into position, and attack when Victor claimed this place. They'd all agreed to hold off on a decision until Victor had interrogated Victoria.

He climbed the stairs leading to the second level and followed the directions of posted guards to the hallway leading to the tower stairs. Two Naghelli stood outside the doors, darkly cowed, their faces so shadowed that Victor couldn't see their eyes. His earlier curiosity came to the fore, and he asked, "Are those cowls significant?"

"Aye, Lord," said the one on the left in a lilting soprano, startling him with its clarity, "they're heavily warded to protect us against Mind Energy."

"Do you all have them?"

"No, Lord," said the other guard, "a few of us have the Mage Hunter class and, as such, were outfitted with gear to help us in our profession."

"Outfitted by?"

"Belikot, Lord," said the first guard, her voice hushed, likely still nervous about uttering her old master's name aloud. Victor frowned, not pleased to be reminded that some of his best troops were once the bloodthirsty servants of a madman bent on world domination. He contemplated telling the two Naghelli to stop calling him "lord" but decided he had bigger fish to fry. Part of him also, he might admit with some guilt, wanted them to harbor as much respect and deference toward him as possible; he thought it might hinder thoughts of rebellion from forming in their minds.

"The prisoner is above?"

"Aye, Lord, with three guards."

Victor gestured to the door, and the female guard hurried to pull it open for him. It swung silently on hinges that fit into the stonework as though grown from it. He started through but paused and looked at the solid, hardwood door and the hinges again. "Were the doors here already, or did our engineers make them?"

"They were here, Lord."

Victor nodded and started up the narrow steps, winding his way to the top with Valla's boots clicking on the stones behind him. They'd passed a couple of doorways when Valla spoke up, "You didn't stop them calling you lord."

"You noticed?" Victor glanced back at her with a crooked smile. "Can you guess why?"

"You . . . want their respect."

"Yeah, but not for egotistical reasons."

"No, I didn't mean that. Some of our fear, the other commanders, has rubbed off on you. You have doubts about the Naghelli and want them to fear betraying you."

"You can read me like a book, huh?"

"I think I'm learning to know you fairly well." Her voice carried a hint of amusement, and Victor wondered if a double entendre was mixed in there.

He changed the subject. "You noticed this keep seems newer than the other?"

"It seems that way, but it could be just as old with better preservation magic."

"Oh. Good point." Victor stepped onto a broad landing at the top of the stairs, and when he looked to his left, he saw two more cowed Naghelli. He stepped toward them. "Where's your third?"

"Within, Lord. One of us has eyes on the prisoner at all times."

"Good." Victor nodded to the door. "Any problems? I'm going in."

"No problems, Lord. She's not uttered a word." He turned to the tower, twisted a large, silver key in the latch, and then began to open the door.

"The key was here?"

"Aye. In the door."

"Huh." Victor stepped into the room, squinting against the bright light. The room was circular and clearly occupied the entire top of the tower. Pale blue stained-glass panels, bonded with strips of melted silver, filled alcoves in every wall, and the sunlight coming in was, thus, tinted and seemed to draw out hints of blue in the dark stones of the floor and vaulted ceiling. The only furniture in the room was a plush, straight-backed wooden chair at the center where Victoria sat. A Naghelli, who'd been standing in front of the door, turned to bow as Victor and Valla stepped into the room.

"You can wait outside." Victor nodded to the guard.

“Aye, Lord.” The slight figure hurried past him, and Victor caught a whiff of something like cinnamon on the air stirred by her passage. Every time he started to think he was getting to know the peoples of this world along with their customs, he found more unanswered questions. He pushed the thought aside and regarded Victoria. She sat with a straight back, her dark, multi-layered, silky dress and skirts hiding most of her body; only her pale neck, face, and hands were exposed to the light. She tracked his movement with her pale blue eyes, never once glancing at Valla, who also stepped into the room, closing the door with a satisfying, well-oiled click behind her.

“I’m glad you didn’t try to influence my soldiers.” When she didn’t reply but only watched him, unblinking, Victor added, “You may speak.”

“I’m not a fool, nor do I wish my existence to end this day. You brought me to the brink of true death, and I’ll not soon forget the feeling.”

“Hmm.” Victor stood in front of Victoria, rubbing at the rough stubble on his chin, staring at her while Valla walked in a slow circle around the room, looking out the windows, then back at the woman, then up at Victor. She never said anything, but he knew she was thinking, taking things in.

“Hmm?” Victoria dared to echo after a few moments of silence.

“I was thinking about that term—true death. What do you mean, exactly? Are you undead?”

“No sense hiding it, is there? I’m sure you’ve Death Casters in your army who will be able to confirm your suspicions. Where I come from, if you’re not undead, you’re a slave, a meal, or fodder for the army. If we’re honest, even if you’re undead, you’re likely one of those things anyway.”

“Where you come from?” Victor arched an eyebrow, trying to imagine a world like she described. It wasn’t that hard for him; hadn’t he seen movies and played games with similar premises? He supposed it would be horrible in person, but hearing about it was just as abstract as those fictions.

“Dark Ember.” She winced as she spoke, and then, gasping, she said, “If you want me to tell you more, Lord Victor, you’ll need to sever my connection to Prince Hector. I’ll die if I try to tell you anything of consequence.”

Victor looked at Valla and raised an eyebrow. It took her a moment to realize he was waiting for her to say something; she’d been staring at Victoria’s face. “I don’t know.” Her eyes said she wished she could help more, but she had no experience with this sort of magic. Victor had an idea; he’d dealt with a tether tying Belikot to his phylactery and to Thayla. Still, he wasn’t exactly sure how he was supposed to help Victoria.

“What do I need to do?”

“You’ll need . . .” Again, she winced and coughed, and dark flecks of nearly-black blood touched her faded pink lips. She looked up at the ceiling, avoiding Victor’s gaze, and said, through a throat that sounded strained and constricted, “If someone were to attempt to sever a tether of control between a Death Caster and his thrall, he or she would need to open their inner eye to the Energy. When they found the thread stretching away, they’d need to focus their will upon it and break it with a knife of their own Energy.” She squeezed her eyes shut and looked down, trembling, and Victor saw heavy, dark droplets leaking from the corners of her eyes, leaving long red tracks on her chalk-white cheeks. Was she weeping blood?

“Watch me,” he said to Valla, then he turned his mind inward, focusing himself by looking at his Core. His four orbs of Energy pulsed and throbbed, full of power and potential, and he found it easy to calm his breathing and steady himself as he observed them. That done, he followed his pathways out of his body, taking the short route through his lungs and marveling at the smoldering magma in his breath Core as his mind’s eye traveled past. Then his “inner” eye was seeing outward, and he regarded Victoria before him, a thin, wavering, pale-blue ribbon stretching from the top of her head to the north-facing window.

The ribbon fluttered as though caught in a breeze. Every so often, he could see a flash of brighter blue Energy traversing it, and he wondered what that was—just a bit of Energy that refreshed the spell from time to time? Information from Prince Hector to his thrall? The other way around? Could he see what Victor was doing? Victor didn’t like that idea. He took two strides to close the distance, and then he reached out with his hand, cupping the ethereal ribbon. He couldn’t feel it with his flesh, but he felt the tingle of the cold Energy as it penetrated it, touching the pathways beneath.

Without a second thought, Victor yanked a heavy tendril of inspiration-attuned Energy out of his Core and pulled it through his pathways to his hand. He wasn’t sure how to form the flowing Energy into a knife, but he had another idea. Focusing his will, he bent the bright, pulsing rope of his Energy around the pale, shimmering blue ribbon of the tether, and then he drew it tight. Victoria gasped and began to seize, shaking and shuddering. “Hold her,” he growled as he focused his will, tightening his inspiration-attuned Energy, aiming to strangle and sever the tether.

“She’s frothing at the mouth!” Valla cried, but Victor couldn’t look down to see her struggles. He was too focused, straining with everything he had to constrict his rope of Energy around the tether. He grew frustrated and angry as it resisted him, and he released his nearly ever-present hold on his aura, growling with his frustration as he bore down on his efforts. Still, the tether resisted him, and Victor, worried that his captive would die or be damaged beyond healing, reached into his Core and pulled out thick bands of his other three Energy types, stretching them out through his pathways where he wound them around the tether next to his original strand.

The baleful red rope of rage, the dread-inducing coil of fear, and the glimmering, sparking ribbon of glory joined his inspiration-attuned Energy, and Victor pulled them all tight with a grunt and a headache-inducing effort of will. A keening wail burst from Victoria, and Valla cried out as she fought to hold the undead woman still. Victor focused on his task, watching as the tether went from pale to dark blue to black and then crumbled into motes of ash, utterly destroyed. He sighed heavily and let his Core retract his Energy. When he opened his eyes, he found Valla sitting on the polished black stone flooring with Victoria lying, insensate, in her lap.

“Is she . . .”

“Not dead. Well, not totally dead.” Valla frowned, and Victor could tell she wanted to drop the woman, to stand up and maybe wash her hands. Victoria’s chin and throat were drenched in dark blood, as were her cheeks and ears; she’d been bleeding profusely, it seemed.

“Do healing potions work on undead?”

“I don’t know . . .” Valla gingerly laid her palm over Victoria’s brow, one of the few places unstained by her blood. “She’s cold, but I can feel her breathing. Why do the undead breathe?”

“Good question.”

With a soft groan and a wheezing cough, Victoria opened her bloodshot eyes and struggled to sit on her own. Valla helped her, pushing her off her lap so she sat, legs sprawled out with her dark dress covering them in front of her. After a few minutes of wheezing breathing, she cleared her throat and said, “There are undead, and then there are undead, Lord Victor. My body still breathes and flows with blood, though more sluggishly than yours.”

“Did I free you?”

“Yes, but far more slowly and torturously than I’d hoped. Why didn’t you simply sever the tether? You strangled it to death! All the while, Hector tried to pull my spirit through it.”

“Be grateful, witch!” Valla growled, and Victoria jerked to look over her shoulder at her.

“My apologies, Lady.” She put a hand on the cushioned chair, struggling to stand up, but her arm was too shaky, and she fell back to the ground. “I should, indeed, be grateful. Not I nor any of Prince Hector’s Barons could have severed that tether.”

“Here.” Victor held out a hand, and when she took it in her cold fingers, he pulled her to her feet. “Sit down.” He nodded to the chair. Valla hopped up before Victor could offer her a hand. “Well? Can you answer all of my questions now?”

“All that I know the answers to, aye.” She wiped at the blood around her mouth with the back of her long, black sleeve. “Would a bath be possible? Perhaps when you’re done with my questions?”

“If we don’t decide to execute you.” Valla stood behind Victoria, and for the first time in a while, Victor noticed her cat-like canines as she growled the threat. She’d leaned close and spoke into Victoria’s right ear.

“Ah . . .” Victoria’s eyes widened, and she looked from Victor toward Valla, but the Sword Dancer had noiselessly stepped back and was on her other side. Victoria looked back to Victor and nodded. “Of course. I might say, I do hope you’ll find mercy in your hearts . . .”

“Let’s not get bogged down with emotion right now.” Victor squatted before the undead woman and began his questioning, “Tell me what these lands were like when Prince Hector’s army arrived. Were there any defenders? Natives, I mean? People living in these keeps?”

Book 6: Chapter 26: Information

“There were beasts and monsters; at least, that’s how Prince Hector characterized them. I wasn’t with his vanguard—I didn’t see the initial settlement. I was allowed through the portal nearly six months after his conquest began. That’s why I’m here, on the edge of his territory and not in Heart Sorrow.”

“Heart Sorrow?” Valla asked from behind the pale woman.

“His capital in the new world. The city, well, town, really, beneath the veil star.”

“Veil star?” This time, it was Victor who prodded.

“The green light in the sky?” Victoria widened her bloodshot eyes, surprised, it seemed, by her captors’ ignorance. “It’s a ritual creation of death-attuned Energy. Prince Hector uses it to weaken the veil, the barrier between the Spirit Plane and a number of other planes where the undead thrive.”

“And that has the effect of . . .?” Valla leaned close to Victoria from behind, speaking into her ear.

“It makes Death Casters’ spells more effective and easier. It allows Prince Hector to bolster his forces with beings he pulls through the veil. It, well, it weakens the living, supplanting the natural Energy that suffuses an area with death-attuned Energy. Many such stars hang in the skies of Dark Ember.”

“Are all undead Death Casters?” Victor dug around in his ring for a chair and produced a plain, wooden one with wicker slats. When he set it down and slowly lowered his frame atop it, the slats creaked with the strain.



“All undead have some death affinity. Some have stronger affinities that they focus on, though.”

“Like blood?” Valla asked, still pacing behind their prisoner.

“Exactly.” Once again, Victoria tried to twist her head to look at Valla as she answered, but, like a cat, Valla had silently stepped away. “Will you kill me?” She turned back to Victor.

“I’m not in the habit of killing in cold blood, but there are some crimes we’ll need you to answer for. The more helpful you are now, the more it might aid your case.” He surprised himself with the answer. He wasn’t sure where it came from but supposed it was true. She had killed the two Naghelli who’d flown into the keep, but it could be argued that they were in the wrong—invading her territory, attacking the ghost. Still, she didn’t have to hang them from the walls. That was going to be hard to get the troops to forget.

On a more personal level, she’d tried to . . . do something to Victor on the Spirit Plane. Again, though, they’d been at war. Could he forgive it? He’d given her worse than he’d gotten in their little scuffle. The truth was, he wasn’t sure what he’d do with the undead woman. Was her very nature a large enough crime to warrant destruction? Were undead ever peaceful? He had too many questions, but at the moment, he needed answers to more pressing concerns. “What tier are you? What about Prince Hector?”

“Tier?”

“If the word confuses you, then tell us your level, witch.” Valla, Victor thought, was doing a fantastic job of playing bad cop. Every time she spoke, Victoria flinched.

“I . . .” She licked at her dry, pink lips, and Victor was almost surprised to see her tongue provide some moisture. Did undead create saliva? Apparently, this one did. “Forgive my hesitation. It’s not something one speaks of on Dark Ember. Still,” she held up a hand when Victor scowled, “you have me at a disadvantage. I am level fifty-nine, and Prince Hector is significantly stronger than I.”

“You don’t know his level?” Victor’s scowl deepened.

“I do not, though many have speculated that he’s above seventy.” At her words, Victor looked past Victoria’s shoulder to Valla, and she raised her eyebrows but shrugged. He knew what she was thinking—Victor had faced worse on Zaafor.

“You’re doing well, Victoria.” Victor shifted, leaning back slightly, and his chair creaked in protest. “Do you want something to drink? Do you? Drink, I mean.”

“I . . . yes, I do. Might I have a touch of wine? I’m exceedingly nervous, and my mouth is dry. The ordeal of severing the tether has . . .” She stopped speaking

as Valla stepped around to face her, producing a silver cup and a dark bottle of wine. She held the cup out, Victoria took it, and then Valla carefully poured it full of the wine. "Thank you." Valla didn't smile or respond. She put the bottle away, sending it into one of her rings, and then she walked behind Victoria again.

Victor watched as his prisoner carefully sipped at the dark liquid. "How many troops does Hector have? I was surprised to hear that there are fifty thousand undead around this keep."

Victoria swallowed and exhaled softly, closing her eyes as though savoring the beverage. "That wine is exquisite, Lady . . ." she trailed off, perhaps hoping Valla would respond. When she didn't, she answered Victor's question, "The undead in the forest around this keep are mindless chaff. They are the bulk of the lesser undead that Hector commands, though there are some thousands here and there, adding to the numbers of his more potent forces. As I'm sure you know by now, there are five perimeter keeps like this one. A baron or baroness holds each," she gestured to herself, "and each has an army, though some, like myself, have only a few loyal guards. Well, had."

"And past the perimeter keeps toward Hector?" Valla leaned close again, startling Victoria with her words.

"The Gateway Citadels. They guard the causeway leading to Hector's fortress under the veil star."

"And we can't just go around the citadels?"

"It would be difficult. Hector's foothold sits atop a mountain. Well, a dormant volcano, really. As I told you, I wasn't here when he first arrived, so I don't know if he built it into what it is or if the System deliberately placed his portal there, but sheer cliffs protect him on all sides. The citadels guard the only road leading up."

"So, why is the undead horde here?" Victor was trying not to get bogged down in details that wouldn't be pertinent for a while; they'd deal with the citadels when the time was right. It was enough for him to know they were there for now; he'd let his subconscious stew on the issue for a while.

"This forest and the lands to the east, which you just took from the reavers, are the northernmost border of Hector's new domain. I believe he was gathering forces to push through the mountains."

"You believe?"

"Hector does not confide in me. The only person who might know his full plans is his consort, Catalina."

"Catalina?" Victor sat up, grunted, and rubbed at his head. Each question this woman answered led to five more in his head. "Are you guys from Earth?"

“Earth . . .” Victoria’s eyes grew wide, and she stared into nothing for a moment, then she refocused, looking directly at Victor. “Not we, but those who settled Dark Ember.”

Victor lifted his focus over Victoria’s head, meeting Valla’s gaze. She looked surprised, but she nodded, encouraging him to continue that line of questioning. “How long? How long ago did they ‘settle’ Dark Ember?”

“The Ebon Circle came to and conquered Dark Ember twelve hundred years ago.” She sipped her wine as Victor stared at her, silently doing math in his head, trying to imagine some powerful Death Casters leaving Earth in the eighth or ninth century. “How do you know of Earth?”

“You don’t think it’s odd that my name is similar to yours?”

“But Earth was dead, devoid of Energy . . . it’s why the founders fled!”

“Well, that might be, but people still live there.”

“You’re not that old?” Valla leaned close as she asked her question, once again startling Victoria.

“Me? I’m no founder. I’ve yet to see my first century. No, the rulers of Dark Ember weren’t invited by the System to this little conquest. The portal repels those beyond a certain threshold of power.”

Valla looked interested but shook her head and stepped back, meeting Victor’s eyes. “We need to focus.” She gestured to the windows, and though it was vague, Victor knew what she meant. They were surrounded by undead, had Borrius and Rellia waiting for information, and needed to make a decision about their next move. He stood from the chair, stretched his back, and paced in a small circle behind the poor, overtaxed piece of furniture.

“Problem is, I’ve got a million questions. How sensitive are Hector’s forces to light? Is it just my banner? Certain types of Energy? Are the other barons any stronger than Eric was? Are . . .”

“Was? Eric is dead?”

Victor held up his hand and continued his train of thought, “How many more invaders are coming? How many undead can Hector create, pulling them through the ‘veil?’ Doesn’t he need bodies for them?” He saw Victoria inhale, saw her preparing to speak, but he cut her off, “Don’t answer yet. I’ve got a dozen more questions, but we really need to focus on one thing: What will Hector do if I claim this keep?”

“He’ll assume I’m dead now that you’ve cut the tether—dead or being tortured.” She licked her lips, noticeably stained by the wine. “He may be acting already. He knows his horde is alive—he can feel his thralls, all of them, to one degree or another. He’ll assume they’re holding your army here in the keep, preventing you

from marching forth. Even without you claiming this keep, I would wager that he's already sent forces to reclaim the one meant for Eric. He's likely sending one of his stronger Barons here, as well. He knows his horde, the mindless undead outside these walls, cannot breach these walls. He'll send someone with siege units. Someone like Karl the Crimson."

"Valla, come with me for a minute." Victor walked to the door and opened it. He looked at the trio of cowled Naghelli standing on the landing outside. "Watch her. I'll be right back." Then he walked down the stairs a ways, putting some distance between himself and the tower. When he turned, he found Valla right behind him, still moving with near-silent steps. "We need to make some preparations here, but, more importantly, we need Borrius to hold fast in his ambush position. I hadn't thought about Hector knowing we were trapped here."

"Are we?" Valla frowned.

"Trapped? I mean, not you and me. Not the Naghelli, but the Ninth? I think so, Valla; there are fifty thousand undead surrounding this place by now. We have to think of a way to destroy them, or the Ninth won't be able to leave."

Valla nodded and pulled the Command book out of her storage. "What should I tell them?"

"Tell them to hold their position, to crush the army on its way to the keep." Victor shook his head and rubbed his chin. "We need to think of different names for these keeps. I'm not feeling particularly creative, but we'll call the first one Old Keep and this one Black Keep for now."

Valla raised an eyebrow, and her mouth twisted into a half smile. Victor knew she wanted to tease him, but she didn't, and he was grateful. "Very well. They're to destroy the army coming to reclaim Old Keep and then come to help us?"

"No. Then they're to push south and take whatever keep those forces came from."

That got a reaction out of Valla. She lowered the book, still unopened, and looked at him with something like alarm. "We're going to take on fifty thousand enemies? Plus, whatever monstrosities this Karl the Crimson is bringing?"

"We can't risk getting our whole army bogged down with this horde. We need to deal with it. As long as we're holding this keep and fighting them, then it's like we've tied one of Hector's hands behind his back. We've already beaten three of his armies. If Borrius and Rellia can kill the army coming to take back Old Keep, then take the next . . . he's going to get desperate. Desperate enemies make mistakes."

Valla nodded, and her expression told Victor she was trusting him, and it stressed him out more than if she'd argued. What if he was wrong? What if Karl the Crimson came here and smashed the walls, allowing that enormous army to swarm into the keep? The best he could hope for in such a scenario was for a small percentage of them to flee. Victor forced his face to remain neutral, to project confidence as he said, "I'm going to get some more answers from her." He jerked his head up the steps. "Can you communicate with the other commanders? Can you fill Lam, Sarl, and Kethelket in on what we've learned? Get Edeya to help you if you want."

"I will . . ." She paused, her mouth slightly open, and glanced up the steps. When she looked back at him, she smiled and continued, "I want to caution you about her ability to manipulate you, but I don't think she's your type. Something about cold, dead skin doesn't seem like it would attract you . . ."

Victor chuckled and reached out, pulling Valla into a hug. He was three steps down from her, so she pressed nicely into his chest as he said, "She's definitely not going to manipulate me that way, don't worry. It wouldn't matter if she were fully alive and beautiful; she doesn't hold a candle to you."

Valla pushed out of his hug, her hands on his chest, and then she reached up and grabbed the sides of his neck, tugging. Her fingers always felt cool to him, probably because he had a Core of magma inside his chest. He leaned into her pull, and she kissed him softly and briefly. Then, without another word, she was gone, slipping silently down the steps, not even her wyrm-scale armor betraying her passage. Victor turned and trudged back up to the tower door.

Inside, after the guard had left and closed the door, Victor carefully sat down in the chair again. Victoria stared at him, eyes full of concern. They were very expressive, those eyes. Her flesh was pale, but dark rings circled their hollows, and the pale irises had layers and depths that Victor could look into for a long while, guessing at the thoughts inside her head. He didn't have time for that, though, so he asked, "Why shouldn't I kill you?"

"I can see the oceans of blood you've shed in your gaze, Lord. I can see that my death would be just a feather atop a pile of lead. Still, I think it would come to weigh on you—I mean you no harm. I'm free of my bond to Prince Hector, and I want to live. Trust that, if nothing else. I will not act in a way that will make me a threat to you simply because I know you will then have a reason to slay me. Keep me bound in this tower if you like. When you win this war, you can banish me."

"And if I lose?"

"Then Prince Hector will likely kill me. He won't trust that I didn't aid you. I have aided you, have I not?"

"I've dealt with undead and Death Casters in the past, but it was always with an axe in my hand." Victor rested a hand on Lifedrinker's haft in illustration. "Tell me, can the undead live peacefully among the living?"

Victoria chewed at the dry flesh of her lower lip nervously, and her eyes darted up to Lifedrinker's haft and then back to Victor's face. "In truth? Not easily, Lord. We must cultivate death-attuned

Energy. It's difficult to do so in a thriving environment among living things. In worlds where the undead don't dominate, we keep to ourselves in places of death. Of course, Prince Hector has other ideas for this realm; that veil star is the first of many he intends to call into being. He means to turn this world into one much like Dark Ember—a place where the living are held in pens or kept as pets and used . . .”

“I get it. You don't have to sell me on the idea that I need to stop Hector. Tell me how you're going to avoid his fate. Won't you wither away in this tower if I claim these lands and we don't bring you near any sources of death Energy?”

“I have many reserves, Lord. I will be fine if I stay here and don't use my Energy. It will sustain me for years. As I said, you can decide where to send me when you've won. I have suggestions . . .”

“Tell me about this Karl, guy.” Again, Victor interrupted her. He wasn't sure if he was impatient, angry, or just trying to keep her off-balance. Whatever the reason, it seemed to be working; for a woman who was at least partially dead, she seemed incredibly stressed.

“Karl is a brute! He's a colossus of a man with gargantuan constructs of flesh and bone for soldiers.”

“Big like Eric or big like me?”

“More like you, Lord. He's worked for centuries modifying his mortal vessel. He's a Carnemancer—a certain type of Death Caster who uses death Energy to control and mold the undead. He, himself, is undead, and he's done much work on his form.” Her lips twisted in distaste, and Victor chuckled at her double standard.

“You think you're better?”

“I am! My phantoms serve me in their natural forms, growing more powerful through their cooperation with me. I don't enslave them and warp them and . . .”

“Enough.” Victor shook his head and stood up, depositing his chair into storage. “Same rules as before—no talking unless it's to me. I'll be back to speak to you soon enough.” She nodded, and Victor stepped out of the room and, after reiterating his expectations to the guards, he started down toward the courtyard. He had to meet with Sarl and the others; they had a siege to prepare for.

Book 6: Chapter 27: - Old Friends and More Plans

“A fire?” Edeya frowned, peering beyond the parapet, over the rough ground to the distant milling throng of the undead.

“Yeah, a real horror of a forest fire. Something you'd never wish to see happen, except for maybe if your forest was full of zombies and shit.” Victor leaned

against the smooth black stones on one elbow and looked at Edeya with a wry smile. “What do you think?” He’d been standing on the ramparts, watching the undead for hours. Valla had gone off to write in the Command book, hoping for an update from Rellia or Borrius. Sarl was busy with his lieutenants, Kethelket was scouting with a few of his Naghelli, and Lam was sleeping—catching up on a few nights of inadequate sleep, as she’d put it. Edeya, though, had been keeping him company.

“I . . . I think it sounds too easy. Do you think they’ll burn?”

“I don’t know, but I’m betting if we send the Naghelli south, over the horde to the edge of the forest, then have them light it up, fan it with some magical winds . . .” Victor pantomimed flames burning with his fingers wriggling in the air and then blew on them. “Whoosh! I bet we can cut down the number of undead outside our walls.”

“But the forest . . .”

“I mean, fires happen, right? It sucks, but the forest will recover. Don’t some trees need fires to make their seeds sprout?”

Edeya’s blue dragonfly wings vibrated rapidly for a second, shedding thousands of little motes of light, and she blushed. “Sorry! I’m still getting used to how expressive my wings have become!” Victor just grinned at her, and she continued speaking rapidly, “It’s true; a forest will recover from a fire. A normal fire. I hope whatever flames the Naghelli Pyromancers can summon won’t prove too destructive.”

“Let’s put it this way—that forest is never going to recover if Prince Hector wins. It’ll become a dreary, dying, horrible place.”

“A fair point, Legate.” Edeya smiled, and Victor marveled at how good she looked. He’d never have recognized her if she had shown up looking like this back in the mines—her wings were twice the size of the runty things she’d had before. She was a good deal taller and far more filled out; her forearms, protruding from her rolled-up uniform sleeves, were wiry with muscle.

“Have you had a chance to practice with Kethelket?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. I guess he’s been pretty busy, and so have you. I asked him to work on your spear skills with you.”

“You asked . . .” Edeya’s eyebrows turned down, and her newly blue eyes turned stormy. “You asked a Naghelli to teach me to use the spear?”

“Not teach you to use . . .”

“Do you know how insulting that is to a Ghelli?” Her voice had grown shrill with outrage.

“No, I guess . . .”

“I will not take lessons from Prince Kethelket!” Her eyes sparked with blue Energy, and Edeya turned on her heel and stomped away.

“What the hell?” The abrupt display of fury completely took Victor aback. Hadn’t Edeya been one of the more reasonable ones when it came to accepting the Naghelli? What was the deal with her eyes flashing with Energy? Was it something to do with her new bloodline? The more Victor thought about it, the more he felt that was the answer to the puzzling outburst. He considered how his Quinametzin bloodline sometimes rose up in him and made him say something or act a certain way. Maybe some Cobalt Wing ancestor of Edeya’s had a real problem with Naghelli, and she was unconsciously channeling her. “Or him.” Victor shrugged.

He looked out over the clearing toward the forest again, watching the shifting, aimless, uncountable thousands of undead. How long did they have before some baron of Hector’s showed up and took charge of the horde? How long before these undead were pouring through a shattered wall, flooding the keep with their bodies, overwhelming the Ninth? They needed to do something. He had half a mind to jump out there and start going to town with Lifedrinker, killing as many as he could before his Energy ran low, and he had to retreat. Wouldn’t that work? If he killed a few hundred or even thousands of them at a time? The answer was that it depended on how much time they had.

“Yeah,” he grunted, starting for the stairs, nodding to the soldiers he walked past, “time to quit wasting time.” A young woman with bright yellow hair saluted him with wide eyes, clearly having heard what he said. Victor winked at her and hopped down the steps, five at a time. “Sarl!” he yelled.

“Sir!” Sarl replied, startling him; he’d been standing near the base of the stairs.

“Can you get ahold of Kethelket? It’s time to do something about this horde.”

“He’s within the keep, sir. Something about updating the maps in the Command book.”

“Can you grab him and Valla? Also, get Lam—wake her if you need to. We’ll meet in my house in fifteen minutes.”

Sarl didn’t waste time with words. He slammed his fist to his chest and then hurried to the keep. The two lieutenants he’d been speaking to looked around with blank expressions, clearly wondering what to do now that Victor had interrupted whatever they’d been up to with Sarl. He nodded to them. “Go on, then. Practice with your weapons if you don’t know what else to do.” He strode across the courtyard and into his house, only to almost smash face-first into Edeya. She’d been heading for the exit when he stepped in.



“Victor, I . . .”

“You okay?”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know what came over me! I got filled with such anger when you mentioned the . . . you know.”

“You can’t say it?”

“I don’t want to! Something in me really, really doesn’t like them.”

“It’s your bloodline, I’m guessing. Did you have a vision when you advanced?”

“Yes! An amazing experience! I walked in the Blue Deep when the world was new. I . . .”

“Hold up!” Victor held up a hand, chuckling. “I want to hear about your vision but come sit with me. The others will be here soon, and we might be interrupted, but I want you to know that I get it. My bloodline changed me a little, too.” He laughed and walked past her to the long table, where he pulled out the chair at the right end and sat down. “Sit down.”

“Thank you.” Edeya was stiffly formal as she pulled out the chair and folded her hands before her on the tabletop. Victor knew she was trying to make up for her outburst.

“Relax, all right? I’m not upset. Sometimes, my Quinametzin ancestry influences how I respond to certain things, especially when I feel like someone is challenging me. I’m sure your Cobalt Wing ancestor has a good reason to hate the Naghelli, but you can take control of those emotions. They don’t have to control you. It’s a matter of practice and, well, I guess will.”

“My will is one of my lower attributes, but Lam thinks I should start to focus on it now that I have a new affinity.”

“Yeah, I agree with Lam. Everyone could benefit from more will. You know it comes in handy in many ways, right? It helps you to resist mental influences, it helps you to affect others with your magic, it helps your Energy pool to grow, but even more, it helps it to recover more quickly. I could go on, but did you know will is my primary attribute? It’s higher than my strength and even my vitality.”

“No.” Edeya’s eyes were wide, and she leaned forward with genuine interest. “I never would have guessed that, but looking back, it makes a kind of sense. You never broke, no matter the hell you went through. When you disappeared into the depths with Thayla, I thought I’d seen the last of you.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m trying to make the point that you don’t have to let your bloodline dictate your actions or feelings. You can push back if you want to, and I think in

the case of Kethelket, you should try. He has a lot to teach someone like you, hell, anyone, really. He's very skilled with weapons. You know he was alive before the joining, right?"

"Yes, I knew that." She frowned, and he saw her fingers tightening where she held them clasped. "I guess I never really thought about the implications, though. I didn't know he was a spear fighter."

"He learned the spear before the sword."

"I will try to hold my feelings in check, Victor." She nodded curtly, and Victor knew she was struggling to maintain her composure. He decided to let the matter drop for the moment.

"All right. I don't want to keep bugging you, so I'll drop it. You know, Edeya, I'm still Victor—the one you met in the mines. I have nice armor and gained a bunch of levels, but I'm not really much older or wiser or anything. I'm still screwing up constantly. Don't worry about yelling at me, okay?"

Edeya smiled, and it was the same expression he remembered despite the many changes that had occurred in her. "You've changed more than you think. You're a hero—a literal hero. You've saved so many people and performed some feats that people all over the Empire are talking about. You might feel the same in here," she rapped her knuckles on his armored chest, "but you're not. You've learned a lot."

"Well," Victor coughed into the back of his hand, hiding a brief surge of emotion, "I appreciate you saying that. I'm glad I still have you to talk to. You know, of all the people in this army, even Thayla, only one person has known me longer than you have."

"That's kind of sad. Who? Lam?"

"Uh, well, I guess, technically, Lam has known about me at least as long as you, but you knew me first. Right? Anyway, I was talking about Sarl. I met him when I was new in the world."

"So . . ."

"So, you're important to me. Remember that! Now, have you had a chance to look at Victoria's things?"

"You're important to me too, Victor. Don't worry, I won't forget what a strange, idiotic boy you used to be." She laughed and punched him on the shoulder.

"About the undead lady's things, only briefly. I was afraid to do more than a cursory examination. The containers are still bonded to her, and I didn't know if you intended to return any of the objects."

“What kinds of things did she have?”

“Two storage rings. That lacy sash was also a storage device. Let’s see, a mundane if pretty bracelet, three other magical rings, and a very Energy-dense amulet that frightened me. I didn’t try to investigate it.”

“Let me see it.”

Edeya opened a large leather satchel she wore attached to her belt and dug around for a moment, and then she deposited a silver pendant attached to a long, fine-linked silver chain on the table. She placed it face up, and Victor could see it was carved with the likeness of a youthful woman, complete with fine details like individual strands of hair looping down over the sharp jawline. Her eyes were just as detailed, and the irises were tiny, perfectly cut red gemstones. “Damn.” He picked it up and ran his thumb over the carving, marveling at the craftsmanship and wanting to confirm that it wasn’t some trick of the light, that it wasn’t, in fact, a portrait.

“Do you feel it?”

“Nothing in particular. I mean, other than the tiny, carved details.”

“I felt something stir within. It almost seemed alive when I touched it.”

“Well.” Victor frowned. “Do you want me to take it? I can ask her about it.”

“I can keep it with the other things.” Edeya held out her hand, and Victor handed the amulet over. He was about to ask her to let him see one of the storage rings when he heard footsteps approaching from the foyer.

“Tell you what,” he said, standing up to greet the others, “I’ll bring you with me when I go talk to her later. We can give her the plain bracelet and try to go over some of that stuff. Cool?”

Edeya smirked. “Cool.”

“Now you’re getting it!”

“You have a plan?” Lam’s voice rang out as she strode into the room. “I was looking for you, Edeya.”

“Oh . . .”

“She was helping me with the plan.”

“A plan?” This time, it was Kethelket who spoke up as he entered the room. Right on his heels were Valla and Sarl.

“You’re all here, good. Sit down, everyone.” Victor gestured to the empty seats, then he led by example, pulling his chair up, grinding the feet over the wooden floor.

“Please tell me you aren’t going to try to fight the whole horde all alone.” Valla ran her fingertips over the nape of his neck as she passed, sending an electric shiver down his spine. She grinned at him as she sat in the chair to his right.

“Not exactly.” Victor waited for everyone to sit down and give him their attention. “We’re going to start a forest fire, a real motherfucking inferno of one.”

“Mother . . .” Kethelket shook his head, eyes wide with disgust.

“Not literally! Relax, listen. Kethelket, how many Pyromancers are among your people here?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but at least,” he looked up at the ceiling, and Victor could see his fingers moving as he silently counted, “thirty. At least thirty of my two hundred have fire affinities. Some much stronger than others.”

“And you have a similar amount with air affinities?”

“I’d say so, yes.” Victor could see him connecting the dots in his head, putting together what Victor was going to ask of him. “There may be some problems with this plan.”

“Yeah, I figured I might not have thought of everything.”

“You want the Naghelli to fly past the undead and light the forest afire?” Sarl nodded enthusiastically. “I like it. They seem to burn well, the undead.”

“The mist is thick in the woods, and it seems to hinder flames. My casters were mentioning it after the battles the other day, but . . .” Kethelket stood and paced about while Victor watched, waiting for him to finish his statement. “We may be able to mix some potent alchemical accelerants. Yes. I believe Vussa and Holn have what we’d need. May I speak to my people?”

“I have an alchemist with four assistants in my cohort. I’m sure they can help.” Sarl also stood.

“Well, shit, I didn’t have to explain much at all. Okay, go try to make a plan—keep one thing in mind for your logistics: When you’re ready, I’m going to ride out and try to get the undead to chase me on Guapo. I’ll lead them deeper into the woods.” At his words, Lam, Valla, and Edeya all groaned. “What?”

“I was simply waiting to see how this plan would involve you risking your life. When you mentioned the Naghelli, I was hopeful that you’d decided to let some others carry part of the burden for a while.” Valla sighed heavily after speaking, and Victor saw Lam nodding along with her.

“You don’t think I should do that? They can’t catch Guapo . . .”

“Can Guapo truly charge through tens of thousands of undead?” Edeya held her face straight, but Victor could hear the laughter in her words.

“Well, I’m sure he could get through a lot, and then I can leap and hack, and, well, you guys know I’m pretty resistant to fire, right?”

“Forgive my dissension,” Kethelket had been nearly out of the room when Victor spoke up, but now he walked back to the table, “but I feel you should be at the keep in case this other baron you mentioned shows up. He may already be en route, and the fire may not deter him, not if he’s as strong as your prisoner indicated.”

“Well, I guess . . .”

“Additionally,” Kethelket continued, “I have some plans to lure the undead further into the woods. My people are quite adept at baiting foes.”

“All right, all right.” Victor waved a hand toward the door. “Don’t let me slow you down. Let’s make this happen.” He turned back to the table as they left. “Any word from Borrius?”

“They’re lying in wait, but the scouts Kethelket left with them report an army approaching. They only counted two thousand, and Borrius is frothing at the mouth with anticipation.”

“That’s what I’d hoped. I bet Hector thinks the main army is here. He either split his forces or sent the only nearby army he had to try to take Old Keep. I bet it’s option number two. I think Borrius and Rellia will be able to push south and claim another territory with hardly any resistance.”

“You really think this forest fire idea is going to work?” Victor could always trust Lam to speak her mind.

“I feel confident that it will at least partially work. We’ll still have fighting to do here, especially if this Karl the Crimson asshole is on his way. Which,” he paused and summoned a bloody rag from his dimensional container, “brings me to my next question. Do you guys think I should eat this now or save it?”

“Oh, roots! Is that a heart?” Edeya recoiled; she knew about Victor’s strange ancestral habit, but she’d never seen him in the act.

“I’m not gonna eat it here, relax.” Victor sent the organ back into his ring. “I like to be in my titan form first anyway.”

“Will it leave you insensate? Is it like a racial advancement?” Lam didn’t seem bothered at all.

“I’ve eaten a couple of potent hearts, and both times, I lost myself to some kind of vision, but only briefly.”

“Is that heart more or less potent?” Lam looked from Victor to Valla as though she’d keep him honest.

“I think it’s less potent. A lot of tough pendejos had to work to bring the wyrm down, and our very strong friend killed the Night Brute Prince.”

“I’ve never heard . . .” Edeya started to say, but Lam interrupted her.

“Then eat it. You might as well have every advantage.”

“I agree, Victor.” Valla reached over and put her cool, soft palm atop his knuckles. Edeya’s eyes nearly shot out of her head as she looked from Valla to Victor and back again. She opened her mouth, but Lam punched her in the shoulder, and she closed it.

Victor stood up, accidentally knocking his chair over behind him, and nodded to the three women. “Right. It’s settled, then. I’ll eat this thing right away. That corpse-crafting dude could be here at any moment.”

#### Book 6: Chapter 28: Wrong Place

Victor was alone in his travel home, sitting on the floor of one of the empty rooms in the basement. He had several tasks to accomplish, and for the first time in a while, he’d told everyone to get on without him. He’d given Kethelket his objective, and the Naghelli prince was working with the alchemists to create fire bombs that would, hopefully, significantly reduce the number of undead lurking in the forest. Valla, Lam, and Sarl were coordinating the defensive preparations in the keep while Edeya kept a close eye on the command book. If Victor planned to get anything done before things started to boil over, now was probably that moment.

“Let’s see what you’ve got to say, old man.” Victor touched the pink gemstone on his bracer and sent some Energy into it. He was used to the weird aspect of the Ancestor Crystal’s realm now, but it still took his attention enough, with its sharp, angular planes and lights, odd refractions and shadows, that when Khul Bach spoke, it startled him.

“I see much has changed since you last visited. That nascent Core in your chest has ignited into a smolder.”

“Hello, sir.” Victor shifted so that he was more directly facing the giant Degh spirit. “Yes, I had a breakthrough with some Energy gifted to me by my Quinametzin ancestor.”

“Excellent! So, you’ve learned to cultivate the Core?”

“I think so. I had to create a pathway opening into my lungs, and when I pull Energy into them, I can harvest it into my breath Core. I haven’t had much time to experiment, but it seems to work.”

“Good! This will increase your power, young titan! Imagine your strength with two powerful Cores to draw upon! I’ve known the great wyrms had a second Core; the learned among the Degh have studied them for millennia, though we never thought we could claim one for ourselves. A shame that you cannot share with us your ability to grow stronger from the consumption of your foes! I wonder if it’s something that can come about naturally. If my kin were taught to consume the hearts of the vanquished . . .”

“I don’t know, Khul Bach. Maybe? I understand my gift and know how it works, but not its origin. If I ever learn more in a vision of my ancestors or through communion with them, I’ll let you know.” Victor didn’t see the harm in the promise—he doubted he’d ever learn the secret of how the Quinametzin got their uncanny ability to gain strength from eating hearts. He didn’t know, but it could be a matter of belief or faith. It could be a matter of DNA. Whatever the reason, the Quinametzin were strong and grew stronger with each enemy they vanquished. The same could be said about any cultivator, but the Quinametzin, with their heart-eating, took it to another level.

“That is good. The more you learn, the stronger you become, the better it will go for my people when you return to Zaafor. Do you come to me for advice or simply to visit?”

“I was wondering if you knew anything about paragons. I, apparently, manifested the Paragon of the Axe recently.” Victor rested his hand on Lifedrinker’s haft while he spoke, and she vibrated eagerly against his flesh.

“Excellent! This is something that many of those who break through to the higher tiers of weapon skill are able to do. Not all, but many. It’s a matter of talent, focus, and will. Not all warriors can exhibit all three, at least not so early as you. In the legendary tier, it becomes more commonplace.”

“Are many on Zaafor at that level?” Victor was surprised by how the giant took the news in stride. He’d fought some talented people on Zaafor and never seen evidence of a paragon. If anyone in Coloss would have been able, he’d have thought it would have been Karnice. Had he? Victor tried to remember the times when Karnice grew annoyed with him in the arena and beat him down. Had he displayed the Paragon of the Spear, and Victor hadn’t noticed? Had he assumed it was some kind of Energy ability? He remembered Karnice manifesting a great red doppelganger that wielded spears in all four arms . . .

“Not many, but enough that the phenomenon is well known.”

“Does it do anything?”

“Hah!” Khul Bach slapped his knee. “Of course! A paragon manifests in a reflection of your spirit. It can make your weapon larger, faster, and sharper. It can mirror your weapon and give you two cutting edges—assuming we’re talking about the axe. I’ve heard stories of an archer manifesting the Paragon of the Arrow, and when she took her shot, nine mirrored arrows would join hers to devastate her target.”

“Where do they come from?”

“The paragons?” Victor nodded, and Khul Bach rubbed his chin. “I believe they’re like spirits, great spirits that move on a different plane. They gather Energy from the dedication and focus of those who practice their craft. When they feel a practitioner reaches a certain level of art, they visit them with boons.”

“You believe?” Victor frowned.

“Aye, young titan. I don’t know. I wasn’t given a secret manual of the universe with all of its secrets laid bare. No, I must learn from experience and make my own hypotheses about such matters. Are my answers not wise enough for you?”

“No, I didn’t mean that . . .”

Khul Bach waved Victor’s objection away. “How goes your conquest of these young, fertile lands?”

“I think well, so far. We caught the invaders with their pants down. We’ve slain a few thousand of their troops, but I’m currently surrounded by a massive army. I’m not too stressed yet, though, because our main force is free and wreaking havoc while my smaller army keeps Hector’s attention.”

“Clever. A stiff thorn in his heel to distract him from the blade coming toward his neck? Is Hector the name of the enemy commander?”

“Yeah.” Victor shook his head. Had it really been since before the Granite Gates that he’d spoken to Khul Bach? “He’s some kind of powerful Death Caster. We’re fighting a lot of undead.”

“Ah. Death Casters are anathema to the living. Be wary of their wiles.”

“I will. Hey, speaking of that, I captured one of his ‘barons,’ and she’s giving me intel. Do you think it’s safe to bargain with her? I mean, all I intend to offer her is her life—I’ll let her flee after we’ve won. In exchange, she’s giving me information about Hector and his armies.”

“So long as you guard your will when you’re with her. Death Casters are dangerous in their own right, but many, for whatever reason, also have an affinity for mind Energy. Still, they suffer from the same primary desire most mortals do—the urge to keep living. If she’ll trade information about this enemy



army in exchange for her continued existence, it seems a triumph to me.” He paused and frowned. “I doubt this enemy lord is eager for her to share all of her secrets with you. Be sure to guard her well . . .”

“Shit.” Victor stood, suddenly stressed. How safe was Victoria in that tower? He’d placed three guards to watch her, but were they strong enough to protect her? Victor hadn’t claimed the keep yet—would it even be difficult for some winged assailant to enter that tower? “Thank you, Khul Bach. I think I should check on her.”

“Until we speak again.” Khul Bach’s words faded to a soft echo as Victor severed the connection of Energy to the bracer on his wrist, and the natural world snapped into focus. Despite knowing that he was probably overreacting, Victor stood up and jogged all the way out of his house, into the keep, and up the steps to the tower where Victoria was being held.

He was relieved to see the two Naghelli guards outside the door. “Any problems?”

“No, Lord,” the woman on the left replied, and Victor thought her voice was familiar.

“Have you been on duty here since I first spoke to the prisoner?”

“Aye.” Instead of calling him lord this time, she snapped a salute with her answer.

“Don’t you need a break? Some sleep?”

“Of course, Lord. We take turns resting out here. I hope it’s not against protocol . . .”

“No, only that I think it’s a shitty duty. I could understand it for a short time, but there’s no reason you three should give up your freedom to watch this woman. It could be months before I move her. I’ll mention it to Kethelket and see that you have some guards to switch off with so you can get time to yourselves each day.”

“Thank you, Lord. Going in?” She reached for the key in the door. Victor nodded, and she turned the key, pulling the door open. He braced himself; some small part of him was convinced that Victoria and the guard inside the room had been slain. His fears were unfounded, however. The guard stood by the windows watching Victoria from the side, and she sat with her hands folded in her lap. Victor wondered how uncomfortable she must be after hours and hours in that chair. Did the guards let her walk around to stretch? He stepped into the room, and the inside guard moved out, closing the door quietly behind him.

“Am I mistaken, or do you look relieved, Lord Victor?”

“I . . . had a sudden thought that it wouldn’t be so hard for a talented assassin to reach you here.”

“That may be, but you have not hobbled me. I’m far from defenseless. The guards you’ve placed with me seem quite capable as well.” She smiled, exposing her strange teeth, more fit for an old skull than a youthful woman’s face.

“Well, that’s good. Still, I’m wondering if this is the best place for you. I think my travel home might serve better. It’s, um, a kind of dimensional container. I think it might be harder for Hector or assassins to find you there.”

“An extra-planar dwelling? Yes, Hector would not be able to sense my presence there easily.”

“If I move the home, I’ll have to take you out, but, for now . . .” Victor nodded and called out, “Guards!”

The door crashed open, and the three Naghelli suddenly stood around Victoria with naked swords inches from her flesh. Victor had nearly forgotten how fast they could move with that strange shadow magic they all seemed to share. “Lord?” the slight guard he’d spoken to earlier asked.

“Sorry! Nothing’s wrong, but we need to move her. We’ll hold her in my travel home, but you’ll still guard her, just as before. I’ll lead the way. Follow me, Victoria, and please don’t make eye contact with anyone we pass by.”

“As you say, Lord Victor.” Victoria waited until the Naghelli stepped back and sheathed their shining blades, then she stood and nodded her readiness. Victor turned and led the way back to his home, Victoria right behind him and the Naghelli keeping pace, shadowing them from various angles. They drew many stares from the soldiers in the keep, but Victor didn’t say anything. He figured the sooner they passed by, the sooner the soldiers would get back to their duties.

He knew better than to expect to make it through the courtyard without drawing attention from Valla and Lam, so he wasn’t surprised when they both, leaving Sarl to continue a meeting with his lieutenants, walked toward him from the gatehouse. “You’re taking her somewhere?” Lam asked, frowning, but Valla just folded her arms, waiting for Victor’s response.

“Just into my travel home. I suddenly grew concerned about an assassin. My home is warded and,” Victor glanced at Victoria, “extra-planar. We’ll continue to guard her there.”

“Ah!” Lam nodded, looking up to the top of the round tower where Victoria had previously been held. “Not a bad idea—if Hector has killers who can fly . . .”

“Not only fly but teleport short distances.” Victoria spread her lips in that uncanny smile again. “I can, for instance.” Victor whirled on her, Lifedrinker suddenly in his fist, but she held up a pale hand. “I am not keen on seeing true death anytime soon, Lord. I know you can track me down, so I will not flee. I’ve already promised you as much.”

“Right,” Victor grumbled. “Come on, then.” A few minutes later, Victoria was seated in the same cushioned chair—one of the guards had brought it along in a storage device—in the center of one of the empty rooms in the home’s lower level. “Comfortable?”

“The tower had better lighting . . .”

“Really? Banter already?”

“I’m sorry, Lord.” Victoria looked down, and Victor suddenly felt like a bully. She was undead, probably three or four times his age, likely responsible for all kinds of atrocities back in her world, but she’d been cooperative with him.

“Just remember that we’re not friends, all right? What else do you need? A better light? A bed? You can’t be comfortable in that chair all the time.”

“I have some things in one of my rings that would make this room much more tolerable for me.” She looked up at him with a hopeful expression.

“We’ll go over your belongings a bit later. I have to take care of something first, and, as you know, we’re in the middle of a war. Your things are safe, though, and we’ll do it soon. Understood?”

“Thank you!”

“All right.” Victor turned and stepped outside, holding the door open for one of the guards to take his place. Once he’d closed it, he pointed to another empty room across the hall. “I’ll be in there.”

“As you say, Lord.”

Victor sighed, stepped into the empty room, and was about to close its door when Valla appeared, silently descending from the stairs. He waited so she could step inside with him, then he pulled the door shut. “I was just about to, you know, eat that heart.”

“I’m sorry! I came down because it seemed you’d become distracted with your prisoner, and I was curious what she might be saying. Should I leave?”

“Depends. You want to see me munch down on a raw heart?” Victor chuckled, then moved to the center of the room and sat down in a cross-legged position.

“It’s not something I haven’t seen before.” Valla shrugged and sat down on the bare wooden floor beside the door. “Nothing dangerous will happen?”

“Uh.” Victor frowned, looking at her. Hadn’t he burst into flames when he ate the elder wyrm’s heart? When ate the Night Brute Prince’s heart, hadn’t the room filled with tendrils of terror-attuned Energy? “That’s not a sure thing. I don’t really know how strong this heart is, compared to . . . other hearts. I think maybe you should wait outside.”

“I think I’ll be fine.” She looked him in the eyes and smiled. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”

“No. It’s not that, Valla. Sometimes, the Energy I’m absorbing does things outside my body. When I ate the wyrm heart, I torched a huge area of the battlefield.”

Valla sighed and stood up. With a scowl of scrutiny, she looked around the room, studying the close walls and low ceiling. “Is this a safe place, then? If you do too much damage in here, you could cause the home to collapse.”

“Shit! Seriously?”

“I think it would take a lot—this home is designed to self-repair, and the material is very strong and dense. The . . . jade; I’ve forgotten the name.”

“Hah, me too. Anyway, I guess I shouldn’t risk it. I’ll go back to the tower where we were holding Victoria. That way, if I explode, it will be above the rest of the keep.” He laughed, but Valla wasn’t smiling. “Do you want to come? I mean, it should be safe to wait a few steps down.” Victor stood up and walked through the door as Valla opened it.

“I think I’ll return to work with Lam and Sarl on the siege preparations. Sorry if I’ve disturbed your plans.”

Victor put an arm over her shoulders—he was in a reduced size—and led her to the stairs. “Not at all, Valla. You might have just saved all of our lives!” He winked at the two Naghelli guards as they walked by.

“Perhaps!” She shook her head, and Victor couldn’t tell if she was amused or dismayed. When they returned to the courtyard, she shrugged out from under his arm and said, “Please be careful, will you?”

“I will.” He leaned down, and she kissed him softly, and then he hurried back into the keep, up the stairs, and into the now-empty room at the top. He closed the door and sat in the center, looking around at the stained-glass windows, admiring the play of colored light on the shiny black stones. “Well, she was right—the lighting in here is a lot better.”

Victor severed the connection to his Shape Self spell, groaning with relief as his full power and potential returned, and his mass rapidly increased. “Right. Let’s see here,” he muttered as he formed the Iron Berserk pattern and cast the spell. His vision tinted red, his muscles and bones filled with roiling, hot Energy, and he expanded again. Victor lifted his arms, a grunt that turned into a roar escaping his throat as he stretched, and his muscles erupted with power. Cords like iron stood out on his forearms and around his neck, and his wyrm-scale shirt grew to its natural size—Tes had crafted it for a true titan.

“Yes!” he grunted, enjoying the surge of power. Victor reached into his storage ring and pulled out the Ridonne Heart. He unfolded the bloody cloth and tossed it aside, feasting his eyes on the still-warm, bloody organ. His mouth began to salivate, and Victor took a bite, ripping a third of the flesh off and chomping on it. The rich, coppery juices sluiced around in his throat, and when he swallowed them, Victor groaned with pleasure. He felt the power of the flesh almost immediately. It was hot and rich and began to roil in his gut as his Quinametzin body and soul began to consume it, the Energy, and, Victor suddenly realized, the shard of spirit still clinging to the heart.

He felt the spirit, the bit of the Ridonne ancestor recoiling, fighting him, and suddenly Victor made another connection—that bastard was still alive somewhere. He growled and took another chomp of the heart, then focused his will on that spirit, squeezing it in his gut, holding tight. “You’re not getting away, pendejo,” he growled, droplets of hot blood running down his chin and onto his chest as he ground the meat of the heart in his mighty molars and swallowed down the chunks. He was reaching up with the last bite when the window before him shimmered brightly and exploded into colorful yellow and orange motes. A moment later, in a burst of crackling red electricity, a black-robed and cowed individual took shape before him.

“Wrong place,” Victor grunted, then stuffed the last bit of the Ridonne’s heart into his mouth.

#### Book 6: Chapter 29: What You Wish For

Victor tried to focus on the strange, hooded intruder, but he had a fiery battle taking place in his gut and with his spirit. He grunted as he sat there, crunching down on the remains of the heart, smashing the meat between his teeth, and then swallowing it. The being who’d appeared before him took a step back, brushing against the stone sill of the window. The hooded head glanced rapidly left and right, taking in the strange scene at the top of the tower. “Who are you?” The voice that echoed oddly out of the hood was definitively masculine, and as that dark cowl shifted to look more directly into Victor’s eyes, some of the light coming through the windows penetrated those shadows to reveal smoldering orange eyes set within deep, black sockets.

Victor didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure he could. He’d swallowed the last of the heart, and now he was truly battling the fragment of spirit the Ridonne had left behind. The only explanation Victor could muster was that it must have been tied to the heart’s flesh. Now that he’d consumed it, the fragment

of spirit was trying to flee this plane of existence, to rip through the fabric of time and space and rejoin the greater whole, which, apparently, was alive and well elsewhere in the universe. He growled and bore down with his will, surrounding the fragment with his Energy, calling on the instincts of his primogenitors to handle this strange situation.

This bit of spirit, this remnant of his foe, was what his bloodline would use to garner strength from the defeated Ridonne. Victor was too busy to think about it, but some part of him realized that this must be what happened when he pulled the hearts from his foes. Some instinctual magic in that ritual bound a bit of the departing spirit to the flesh, and when he pulled it forth and consumed it, the Energy or essence or some other intangible quality of the defeated enemy became his. He was determined to take his due from the Ridonne.

“I asked who you are, giant!” the hooded figure repeated, stepping closer, perhaps noting Victor’s internal struggle and growing bolder, seeing his preoccupation. Again, Victor ignored him, and the hooded figure stepped closer still. He would be a tall man with broad shoulders, but next to Victor’s hulking form, he looked tiny. Victor sat, legs crossed, but still, the hooded man had to look up to meet his gaze. He stared into Victor’s eyes, but Victor was gazing inward, and it was evident he wasn’t giving the hooded intruder any attention. “What goes on in there, giant? I can feel the Energies roiling within you. Have you consumed a racial advancement? Are you insensate? What a fortuitous occasion!”

Crackling red Energy began to spark around the intruder’s black-gloved fingers, dancing and buzzing along those long digits and then arcing between his two hands. The energy created a red lattice of electricity that sparked and ignited something in the air, sending puffs of black smoke up to the domed ceiling of the tower. Just as a corner of Victor’s mind became aware of the intruder’s words and the bright, red sparks flashing in his eyes, he finally managed to fully surround the Ridonne’s spirit fragment with layers of his Energy, bearing down on it, smashing it, letting his bloodline work its mysterious magic, ripping it to shreds and pulling it into himself on a cellular level.

A weird, disembodied howl of agony broke through the fabric of reality and reverberated through the air, echoing through Victor’s mind and, apparently, that of the intruder. His red, sparking magic faded as he stumbled back and grasped his head, pushing his cowl back in the process. Victor had been fighting the battle of wills; he’d been prepared for the burst of Energy and whatever might come with it, so the howl didn’t bother him much. He surged to his feet and inhaled deeply, swelling with the power of the heart now that he’d broken apart the Ridonne’s still-living spirit fragment. Even large as he was, the tower’s domed ceiling was spacious, and he lifted his arms wide and roared his triumph.

His outburst was so loud that, had one of the windows not been broken to serve as an outlet, he likely would have shattered more of the stained glass. The intruder was still staggering, gripping his ebon, hairless head, but Victor didn’t have attention to spare him. He was preoccupied with the rivers of hot red Energy surging through his pathways and into his Core, where he converted it to affinities that suited him. As the power pulsed through him, he began to notice a subtle change in his essence. He felt it tickling his bones and pulsing out through him into the weird, extra dimension

where he always observed his Core, his pathways, and his aura. Along with the sensation, an otherworldly scene took shape in his mind's eye.

*Stazzo-dak stood tall under the red glower of the Vizashath sun. He cut an impressive figure—the height of two grown Shadeni, one standing atop the other, burnished red-gold flesh, crimson-feathered wings that shimmered with the ruby light of his Energy, and a crown of ebon horns that were the envy of his peers. He shouldn't feel nervous, he reminded himself. He was a proud archon of his people. Steeling himself, he looked out over the assembled forces. Before him stretched rank upon rank of gold and crimson-clad soldiers. They stood on the field that spanned from the orange grass before his podium to the extent of his vision. As he turned left to right, letting his gaze glide over their burnished helms, he saw that their ranks extended to every horizon.*

*Half a million soldiers, half a million natives and Ridonne stood before him, ready to march against the Thivaan at his bidding. Stazzo-dak relaxed his will and allowed his Aura of Command to roll out, touching the soldiers nearest his platform, perhaps ten thousand of them, a drop in the great sea of conscripts, but enough to spread his influence. He felt their attention focus. He felt his aura bending them to his state of mind. When he lifted his voice to address them, it mattered not what he'd say; his aura had done most of his work for him.*

*“Listen well, soldiers!” he began . . .*

Victor blinked rapidly, the weird vision fading from his mind to be replaced by his reality. He immediately became aware of a deep, burning pain in his leg, and when he looked down, he saw the robed intruder standing there, stabbing a spear of crackling red Energy into his thigh. He grunted and brought his fist, larger than the intruder's head, down to swat him away. As his knuckles cracked into the man's shoulder and neck, he felt bones break. The intruder tumbled back to smash into the stone wall, his head shattering a pane of blue-stained glass. The spear of Energy winked out of existence, and Victor felt immediate relief as his Berserk healing closed the wound.

The intruder groaned, and Victor stepped toward him, but the man burst into crackling red lightning and disappeared with a zwap. Nothing but black smoke hung in the space where he'd been, and Victor whirled, scanning the room. No sign of the intruder remained. He stepped over to the window the strange, cowed man had come through and peered out. Shouts echoed up to him from the courtyard below, and Victor saw a flurry of activity. The window was too small for him to fit through, or he might have flung himself out when he saw what was happening.

The intruder was on the ground, each hand clutching a long, red-lightning whip that snaked out to snap and rip at the soldiers surrounding him. Victor vacillated for a couple of seconds on what he should do. Should he drop his Berserk and jump out the window in his natural state? Would he survive the fall without injuries? No, he decided, he'd run for the courtyard. He'd just begun to turn when he saw Valla step forward into the square, Midnight in her hands, blue lightning and wind wrapping her like a crackling miniature tornado as she streaked toward the assassin.

Victor turned and ran for the door, yanking so hard on the little knob that he wrenched it from its hinges. He leaped down the steps, a flight at a time, and reached the bottom in seconds. Soldiers ran

for the main doors of the keep, cries of alarm in their throats. To them, it must seem the keep was under attack. Maybe it was, Victor reasoned; just because he'd only seen the one invader didn't mean there weren't more. He leaped from the balcony to the front entry hall and stormed for the door, trying not to stomp or knock down any of his soldiers.

When he burst out, he found hundreds of soldiers standing in a circle, crowding the courtyard and lining the parapets. At their center, Valla and the whip-wielding invader were fighting. Victor wanted to scream at the soldiers to get in there and help her, but then he saw how they held their weapons and shields up, making a circle, and he wondered if this was Valla's wish. Had she warned them off, wanting to do battle with the invader alone? His suspicion solidified as he saw Kethelket and Lam standing near the gatehouse, on the inner ring of observing soldiers, watching Valla's struggle with intent, worried expressions. They wouldn't hold back unless she'd told them to.

Victor stood at the top of the steps outside the keep, and he did battle with himself, turning the full force of his will against his urge to leap over the assembled fighters and interfere, smashing the intruder to a pulp. Instead, he let his rage simmer in his pathways, and he watched the woman he'd professed his love for, truly watched her in a way he hadn't in a long time.

Valla's style with her sword differed significantly from Kethelket's. She wielded midnight in an alternating two-handed and one-handed grip. She moved with speed and fluidity, which made her fight look more like a dance. Kethelket knew a million counters, combinations, and gambits, but Valla's grace made you forget you were watching someone in a fight. It made you want to drop everything and learn to move like her. Despite the invisibly fast cracks of the invader's red-lightning whips, she always seemed to be elsewhere when they snapped on empty air. She surged with the speed of the wind, her sword like a moonbeam arcing out of a gusting breeze.

At first, the intruder matched her, winking out of existence in quick bursts of bright, crackling red lightning, only to appear behind or to the side of her. From his new position, he'd snap his long, buzzing whips, but Valla was too quick, too aware, too graceful to be caught. Midnight might parry a whip, or she might flash away in a burst of speed before it snapped. In either case, she was unscathed, and Victor could see she was taking a toll on the intruder. Each time he teleported, he covered less distance. Each time he snapped that whip, his smoldering orange eyes telegraphed the strain.

Victor found himself clutching his fists, his knuckles white with the effort as he watched, every part of him trembling to interfere, but he knew how that would look to the soldiers and how it would infuriate Valla. She was winning, and he needed to bide his time and watch, much as he had during her duel in Coloss. At least here, she wasn't fighting a rigged match. "She's kicking his ass!"

"Aye, Lord!" a nearby Naghelli said.

"What a fighter!" another soldier cried, making Victor glance away from the fight to look at the watching troops. They were riveted by the contest, eyes tracking every move, mouths opening and closing in silent reactions, clearly stunned and impressed by the prowess of their Tribune Primus. More than ever, Victor realized he couldn't interfere. This invader's assassination attempt had turned into a duel, whether he liked it or not, and the soldiers would be demoralized if he involved himself.



The more he watched, though, the less Victor worried. Valla still seemed fresh and graceful, unscathed, while the intruder's face continued to betray his strain. His lightning whips were shorter, and he swung them less frequently. He'd stopped teleporting and was fighting in a constant, circular backpedal, using the reach of his whips to keep Valla at bay. After several seconds of that, his whips disappeared with a crackling sizzle, and suddenly, a single, six-foot spear of lightning appeared in his hands. It was obvious, to Victor at least, that he'd summoned a less Energy-intensive weapon.

Valla smiled and paused, whipping Midnight in an elaborate flourish as she bowed. Was she signaling something? Victor decided he really needed to read up on dueling etiquette. The stranger only scowled at her gesture and hefted his big, crackling spear. Valla streaked forward and, in a series of feints and slashes that Victor struggled to follow, she knocked the spear aside, hacked the assassin's left leg off at the knee, and glided past him. Midnight arced up, and Valla pivoted, bringing the sword down on the back of the intruder's neck. In the silence that followed the brilliant attack, the intruder's bald, ebon head struck the stones of the courtyard with a hollow thunk that brought to mind a melon rolling off a kitchen counter.

"Jesus," Victor invoked, for once sincere in his holy appeal. He snatched Lifedrinker from her harness and lifted her high, screaming, "Valla!"

The soldiers were quick to take up the cry, and soon, they were chanting and stomping their feet, "Valla! Valla! Valla!"

Valla whipped Midnight in another flourish, sending droplets of black blood spattering to disappear against the equally dark courtyard stones, and then she sheathed the magical blade. She turned a slow circle, and when her eyes fell on Victor, her lips twitched in a small smile as she bowed. Suddenly, motes of purple Energy began to bubble up from the intruder's corpse. When hundreds of them had burst into existence, they flowed together and surged into Valla, lifting her into the air, arms wide, face lost in the ecstasy of Energy euphoria. The soldiers' cheers grew louder as though they were lifting her up, and Victor's heart pounded as the warmth of pride poured through him.

It was a different sensation, that pride. He wasn't proud of himself; he wasn't stoking the flames of his glory affinity. He was proud of Valla, and if he hadn't already been so fond of her, he would have found himself smitten at that moment. He wondered how many soldiers were silently proclaiming their love for his girlfriend. He chuckled as that term entered his mind. Girlfriend. Victor shook his head at the notion; it seemed too juvenile for what he felt. Watching Valla absorb her Energy, Victor finally noticed a System message in the corner of his vision. He'd been so intent on catching the intruder and watching Valla that he'd completely disregarded it. With a brief concentration, he brought it to the fore:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have gained a new Feat: Aura of Command.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Aura of Command: The right to rule runs in your blood. Those exposed to your aura become aware of your nature and, should their will prove weaker than yours, they will be more amenable to your commands.\*\*\***

Victor frowned as he read the description. Was that the secret of the Ridonne? Had they gained their power by pushing their will upon the people of Fanwath? He didn't like the sound of it and was a little disturbed to know it was now a part of him. Was it something he could control? Would he be forced to keep his aura in check now if he didn't want to influence the people around him unfairly? Victor's frown deepened as he remembered his conversation with Valla about gaining something he didn't want from the Ridonne. He'd scoffed at her, and now he found he very well may have done just that.

Victor let his Iron Berserk drop, and as his size came more in line with the people around him, he sat down on the step. He watched as Valla came back to herself, listened to her celebrate with the soldiers around her, and he hated that he wasn't able to stop stewing about the feat he'd gained from the Ridonne heart. He was dimly aware of the soldiers' excited chatter, of the slaps on his shoulders and back as the bolder ones congratulated him on Valla's success as though he had something to do with it. He heard Sarl shouting for order, Kethelket calling his Naghelli to him, and then he felt Valla's cool hand on his wrist as she sat beside him.

"Thank you for letting me have that fight." Her voice was soft, and despite her victory, she sounded trepidatious. When Victor realized that, he was able to snap out of his funk long enough to look at her and see the concern in her eyes.

"Hey," he forced a smile, "I was so proud of you. What a fighter you've become!"

"But you seem upset."

"It's not about you, though. I loved watching you fight, and . . ." He sighed and let his words fade. "Don't worry about me, Valla. I ate that Ridonne's heart and it wasn't the experience I'd hoped, that's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?" She added her other hand to the one on his wrist and squeezed gently with them both. Victor loved her touch; he loved her attention, but he felt gross and dirty, and something in him didn't want anyone to be kind to him just then. He cleared his throat and stood up.

"Not right now. I think Kethelket's getting ready to try to burn the forest down. Let's see how things are going." He paused a moment, then added, "And we should check out that guy you killed." He didn't look her in the eyes, and he forced a hollow smile to his lips as he started down the steps. He'd have to come to grips with the new feat somehow, but he didn't want to dwell on it at the moment; shit was about to get crazy around the Black Keep.

Book 6: Chapter 30: Correspondence

Victor hefted the lead-stoppered, blue jar in his hand, watching the thick liquid sluggishly slosh around inside. "It just starts burning when broken?"

"That's right." Kethelket grinned as Victor handed it back. "Once the containment runes are broken, the alchemical mixture will ignite. We have ten for each of my

Naghelli. As you'd planned, we'll try to lure the undead further into the forest, and then we'll fly past them, into the thicker trees, and start bombarding."

"Good." Victor did the math as he looked over Kethelket's winged troops massing on the battlement, lining up to receive their bombs. He had two hundred here at the Black Keep, having left some back at the pass and still more with Borrius and Rellia. "Two thousand firebombs ought to do the trick!"

Sarl spoke up, "I'd have my doubts, considering this mist, but the alchemical agent is meant to cling to surfaces and burns very hotly. We tested it on a section of grass, and the mist retreated before the heat."

"That's great. Be sure to award your alchemists with an extra campaign token." Victor turned back to Kethelket. "No sign of giant mutant undead monstrosities coming this way?"

"My scouts have not reported back yet for this hour, but, as of the last, no."

"Right. Well, let's get this show on the road." Victor watched as the alchemists and their assistants continued to make their way down the line of waiting Naghelli, handing out their explosive jars. After a minute, he cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Naghelli! I'd like to speak to you briefly before you depart!" The conversations died down, and soon, the only sound was the clink of glass as the crates of bombs were slowly emptied.

Victor continued, "When you joined the conquest expedition, there were many among us who had their doubts about your intentions. In my mind, you've already proven yourselves, but after your heroics in the last few days, none can doubt the sincerity of your bravery! Here we are, asking you to risk your lives again, flying into this shitty, clinging, death-stinking mist to confront a monstrous host, and it's not without risk! If you somehow get knocked out of the sky, you'll face a thousand times your number of undead out there. If that happens, I want you to retreat and try to regroup. If it's chaos and you can't find your brothers and sisters, then make your way north, out of the mist."

Everyone had grown even more quiet and still at his words, and Victor didn't want them to feel demoralized by his doom-laced words. "Listen! That's a worst-case scenario. If all goes well, you'll fly out, throw your bombs, and then fly back. We appreciate the risk you're taking, and we know that each of you represents one of the very last of your kind. Don't sell your lives cheaply!" Victor didn't know where some of the phrasing of his words was coming from; it wasn't the way he usually spoke, but he supposed he'd heard people speak that way before, and his brain was just better at pulling stuff out of the recesses of his memory than it used to be. That said, he didn't want to end on a dour note, so he lifted Lifedrinker and screamed, "Now get out there and torch some pinché undead!"

His words brought a cheer out of the darkly clad flyers, and many of them lifted a firebomb in their hand as they cheered, which made Victor more than a little nervous. Still, he laughed and cheered and then watched as Kethelket took command of his troops, ordering them into the air. They split in

the misty, twilit sky into two lines of flying shadows, each circling the keep in opposite directions. Victor knew they were planning to use ranged attacks to draw the undead into a chase, trying to lure the ones in the open clearing around the keep into the forest before flying further out and lighting their fires.

They'd only been at the Black Keep for a little over a day, but he was both nervous and optimistic about the timing of their attack. On the one hand, he worried the invaders' heavy reinforcements they'd been anticipating would arrive at any moment, and on the other, he hoped they were close—maybe they'd be caught in the fire, too.

"They'll be all right," Valla said, though Victor felt her words were meant to reassure herself just as much as him.

"Yeah, I mean, the undead out there don't have ranged attacks to speak of . . ."

"Unless something worse lurks further into the woods." Edeya shrugged, and Victor nodded, pleased to see that she was speaking up more and more, even with other commanders present. If it were up to him, she'd see a promotion soon.

Valla leaned forward, peering into the dim light, and then turned to Lam. "Wouldn't the scouts have seen them? We've had Naghelli flying out there all day."

Lam nodded. "I think so. I've also flown out a couple of times and seen no sign of anything other than this mindless horde." She pointed. "Look! They've started to draw them." Victor followed her gesture to see sparks and flashes in the darkness, and he knew the Naghelli were throwing spells down at the horde.

"Can't really see much through the fog." The flickers and flashes grew in intensity and number, and then they seemed to fade, and Victor knew the Naghelli were moving further into the woods. He'd been tempted to claim the keep, hoping it would cause the obscuring haze of death magic to withdraw as it had around Old Keep, but they'd been afraid it would tip their hand to Prince Hector. So much had been happening, and things were going well, so he'd decided to hold that card for later. Thinking of things going well, he turned to Edeya. "Any further word from Borrius and Rellia?" The main army had earlier reported a decisive victory over yet another of Hector's undead armies; their ambush had gone off flawlessly.

Edeya pulled out her Command book and skimmed the most recent entries. "They've burned the corpses on pyres and are marching on a keep that their Naghelli scouts have located six leagues to the south. Borrius says it's similar in size and fortifications to Old Keep, though it's clearly of different origin."

Victor cracked his knuckles and clenched his jaw, trying to think of something he should be doing. Valla must have read his mind because she said, "I know it's hard to leave matters in the hands of others, but right now, you're doing what you must. We're still likely to be attacked here, so we must wait a while to see how this fire gambit will play out."

“Yeah, I know.” Victor glanced at Valla and met her eyes, noting some dirt or ash or something smudged on her chin. His instinct was to reach out and brush it off, but he knew that would probably irritate her, especially with Lam and the others standing nearby. Instead, he said, “You’ve all been working hard with no rest. Let’s grab a minute while we can. If the firebombs work, we’ll know soon enough.”

“Victor? Um, Legate?” Edeya said, holding up a different Farscribe book, a thinner, narrower one. “You asked me to keep an eye on this, and I noticed a new message from your, uh, cousin, is it?”

“Seriously?” Victor had only given the book to Edeya the day before and hadn’t had any new correspondence from Olivia then.

“Yes! I checked before coming up here to watch the send-off, and there it was.”

“Right. Well, I’m off to check on the troops.” Sarl saluted and marched away, but Lam and Valla didn’t seem to have any such intention. Victor sighed and held out his hand, resigned to having an audience watch him read the message. Edeya handed him the book, and he flipped to the last written-in page:

Victor,

*I hope this message finds you in good health and that your military campaign is having some success. I’d be dishonest if I didn’t say I know you’ve already had a run-in with the Imperial forces. Word has traveled, even all the way out here, to the “frontier,” as the Ridonne citizens call our corner of the wilds. I know you’ve been hoping for an update about ap’Gravin and the magic he used to summon you, but I’ll rip the bandage off and let you know that I haven’t learned anything. Ap’Gravin has fled, and though I intend to track him down, I’ve been preoccupied with matters closer to home.*

*First Landing has gone through a bit of a political upheaval recently, and I’ve been needed here to help maintain some stability as power has shifted away from some of the original council members. You see, there was a bit of a scandal, but I won’t bore you with all the details. Suffice it to say that things are looking better, and I think the human colony is in good hands. We’re going to be moving away from the simple council leadership model, and as we expand, we will be establishing a parliamentary system with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This is important because we’re looking to set First Landing up as a free city outside the control of the Ridonne Empire.*

*I don’t want to get lost in the details here; I know you’re probably busy, but I wanted you to know that I’ve made contact with a member of Rellia ap’Yensha’s clan through Fainhallow Academy and that I’ll be able to use one of her family portals to visit when you get things settled. Once I’m there, I’ll give you a portal stone that will link First Landing to your settlement if that’s still amenable to you. The link will be purely for travel and convenience; we are not trying to lay claim to your lands in any way, though should you desire it, I’m sure the argument could be made for adding whatever settlement you establish as a member state.*

*I’ve been using your story as an example to the people here, trying to educate them on the dangers of complacency. Even after the troubles we’ve encountered, many of the citizens of First Landing*

*aren't convinced that the pursuit of personal strength is all that important. Many live as though they're still on Earth, seeking to establish themselves financially or politically or, worse, to live a simple, peaceful life raising their children. As much as I admire such an idyllic pursuit, I don't think the human species is yet in a position to stop and smell the roses, so to speak. There are great powers out there, and I don't mean just the Ridonne Empire.*

*o that end, I was hoping there might come a time when you could visit and give a talk or lead a public square discussion or something of the sort. You could talk about your time in other worlds, highlighting the ease of travel between planets for the powerful and also the dangers those powerful beings represent. As I said, I know you're busy, but perhaps you'd consider this request when things have settled down. I think it would be good for you to set your eyes on the human colony here, in any case; I know you have people in this world you care about, but won't it be good to eat some familiar foods, hear some familiar music, and perhaps make some connections here among people who share so much heritage with you?*

*I'm sorry this letter brought you no answers but only requests. I'm sorry that ap'Gravin is a cowardly worm who fled, perhaps completely off-world, when he caught wind of his son's transgressions. I'm determined to find answers for you, though, and I'm a woman who has a way of making things happen. I'll check this book daily in hopes of hearing from you. I look forward to getting to know you better, cousin.*

*In much anticipation,*

*Olivia Bennet*

"Huh," Victor said, reverting back to his old vernacular.

"Well?" To his surprise, it was Edeya who prompted him, though Lam and Valla also watched his face intently.

"Oh, well, nothing much. She didn't get any answers for me, and she wants me to visit." He shrugged. "I wasn't expecting much, anyway." He snapped the book closed and handed it to Edeya.

"Aren't you going to write back?" Valla reached for the book.

"Maybe, but I'm kind of busy. You know, in the middle of a war." He gestured into the disturbingly quiet, fog-filled night.

"You seem upset," Edeya said, handing the book to Valla. "Are you sure there wasn't anything . . ."

"I'm fine," Victor growled, then he snatched the book from Valla. "I'll be in my house. Come and get me if something happens." He turned and walked, not waiting for an answer, and anyone looking at his face would see that he knew he was being a jerk. He almost stopped and apologized, but he didn't. He stomped down the steps, over the courtyard, and into his house. He pointedly didn't think about anything until he'd gone into his library and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs. Sitting there, staring at the bookcases, only about ten

percent full of books, he frowned and tried to figure out why he was feeling pissed off.

He supposed it would be easy to say he was mad that ap'Gravin was in the wind and, along with him, any further answers about how Victor had been summoned, if he'd been brought through time intentionally, by accident, or at all. What if he was from a different universe? The stupid idea had been tickling the back of his mind lately, but he had no idea if such a thing was possible. He'd heard people use "universes" in the plural sense, but he didn't know if they were using the term generically to mean the vastness of the current universe combined with different planes of existence and all the things in between.

Still, he'd found himself fantasizing that his abuela was alive and well in a different universe with a slightly different timeline than this one. At other times, he was at peace with the idea that his abuela had moved on and even thought of her living among his other ancestors. The truth was, Victor had no idea how such things worked, and he knew it. Sitting there, alone, stewing in his bad mood, he began to realize that a part of him had believed his new "cousin" would come through with some answers. He'd offloaded some of the weight of his worries and, worse, his hopes on her, and now he was pissed off that she'd failed. He knew it was irrational. He knew she'd said she wasn't giving up, but he couldn't help how he felt. Could he?

"Yeah, I can," he sighed. He could do better; he knew what was bothering him, and he knew it wasn't something he or, more importantly, Olivia could control. With an audible groan, he summoned a pen from his ring and opened the book:

*Olivia,*

*I don't blame you for not being able to get answers. I also don't expect you to. Don't do anything foolish or dangerous trying to figure out something that likely was an accident. Ap'Gravin isn't some kind of mysterious magical genius. He hired Boaeagh to try to build up his own power and probably didn't pay any attention to what that evil bastard was doing. I'll get my answers someday, but I doubt they'll come from that little prick.*

*You're right about the worlds being full of dangerous things and people, but they're also full of wonder and mystery. It's good that you're trying to get the people from Earth to accept their new reality and see beyond whatever little lives they're building there in First Landing, but you should also know that plenty of natives do just that. I'm sure you've seen the simple people living in the village around Fainhallow. Not everyone is suited for adventure and power, and if someone doesn't feel the drive or calling, you can't force it.*

I wouldn't wish my experiences on anyone, to be honest. It's a miracle of lucky coincidences that I'm even alive to write this. Well, that's not true—you mentioned that I've met people I care about, but that's a massive understatement. I wouldn't be alive if I didn't have these people to care about and to care about me. Olivia, personal connections are essential, especially for someone who's an emotional wreck like me. You know, we really don't know a lot about each other, having only

met once, so why don't I write a little about myself? Maybe you can do the same, and next time we meet, we might feel like real cousins who actually know each other.

*You see, an important thing I learned right away when I got summoned to this world was that I'm a very emotional person. I am so emotional that my Core and the affinities I have are based on emotions. They call it a spirit Core, but what I've learned is that our spirits are built up of our aspects, our virtues and vices, our experiences, and our feelings about those experiences. I had a lot of rage in my heart when I first got here, and I might have become something a lot worse if I hadn't been shown compassion and love by some of the first people I met . . .*

Victor wrote for a long time, losing himself in his story and finding some genuine therapy in the act of writing about his experiences in the Wagon Wheel. He finished writing about how Yund had betrayed him, selling him to ap'Horrin, and decided to call it good for the time being. He signed the letter, asking Olivia to get back to him soon, and snapped the book closed, feeling like he'd dropped a heavy weight, one which had sat on his shoulder for a long, long time. Was that all it took to feel better about something, to write about it?

He was still sitting in that comfortable chair in his library when he heard the front door open and close, and then Valla quietly stepped into the room. She had a funny expression, and Victor figured it had something to do with her being mad at him, mixed with feeling sorry for him, mixed with not knowing if she should interrupt him. He headed things off by saying, "I'm really sorry I was an asshole earlier. I wrote a bunch of stuff to Olivia, and I hope you'll read it, too. It's stuff I never talk about."

Her expression brightened, and she said, "Really? I think I'd like that. Can I see it later, though? I think your plan is working, Victor. The darkness is gone, and the night is aglow with orange light bleeding through the fog. I think the forest is truly burning."

Victor stood up, something unwinding in his chest. At some level, he'd been afraid his forest fire plan would fail. "Yes!" He started toward her, slipping his Farscribe book into a storage ring. He'd just pulled her into a hug when the door opened and slammed again. A moment later, Lam stormed into the room.

"Valla, check your Farscribe book! The legion's under attack! Also, Kethelket is here; some of his people are missing. He's enraged, Victor. He's raving about betrayal!"