

Victor BK6: Ch31

Book 6: Chapter 31: Allies in Need

Victor sprang out of the chair and started for the foyer at Lam's words, brushing past her. His mind raced, trying to make sense of what she'd said. As he hurried toward the front door, he gave voice to his questions, "What do you mean? What betrayal?"

Lam and Valla were right behind him, and Lam said, "Not sure! I came to get you immediately. He's talking to Sarl." Victor's mind continued to spin, dark scenarios playing out—had Kethelket's people betrayed him? Had he failed to root out all of Belikot's loyalists? Was Prince Hector about to gain some new followers with intimate knowledge of Victor's military structure, positions, and capabilities?

Victor stepped out of his house, planning to jog up to the ramparts, but found himself face-to-face with Kethelket. "I need to speak to her!" He growled by way of greeting. His face was streaked with blood, soot, and grime, and his dark, depthless eyes looked unusually strained.

"Who?"

"The undead witch. She lied, and my people die as a result!" Victor noticed one of his longswords was naked in his hand, blade pointed down beside his leg. "I need answers!"

"Woah! Tell me what happened first, Captain." Victor hoped the use of his honorary title would ground the man, but Kethelket only scowled further.

"There were no giant abominations, no heavy reinforcements coming this way. Instead, we faced great winged monstrosities in their hundreds. Thousands! They came upon us from the south as we lit our flames. We saw the moon and the green star fade from view as their wings darkened the night sky, and then they were upon us. My people, Victor! The last of our kind! Less than half of us won free!" While he spoke, Victor gazed upward, scanning the parapets, wondering where this horde of flying monstrosities was; why weren't they attacking the keep?

"Where are they?"

"That's your question? My people die, we become extinct before your eyes, and you seek to verify my tale?"

"No, Kethelket!" Victor growled, the man's fury sparking a similar emotion to life in Victor's heart. "I'm trying to determine if we need to brace for an attack!"

"As we broke free, those of us who could, they fell back, flying south, away from the burning forest. They clutched my kin, paralyzed, in their talons!"

"Valla, Lam, get in touch with Borrius and Rellia. I'll need an update when I come out. Kethelket, come with me." Victor waited a moment to lock eyes with Valla, to

see her nod in understanding, and then he stepped into his house. With Kethelket striding beside him, he hurried downstairs to the room where Victoria was being held.

“Stand aside,” Kethelket growled as they approached the door to her room, and his men hurried out of their way. Victor pulled the door open and stepped inside. He’d been half expecting Victoria to be gone, dead, or something equally vexing, but he found her sitting on her chair, a look of surprise evident as he and Kethelket strode into the room. He saw Kethelket lift his sword, blue flickers of Energy dancing over the dark metal, but Victor held out an arm, barring the man from pressing too close to his prisoner.

“Victoria,” he said, hoping to get ahead of Kethelket’s burgeoning outburst. “Tell us about Hector’s flying troops.”

“His flying . . .”

“Gray, hairless, yellow eyes, wings that make Victor’s arm span seem small!” Kethelket growled, lifting the point of his sword and gesticulating with it as though to punctuate his words. Victor had never seen the man, usually so calm and cool with his advice, agitated like that.

To her credit, Victoria didn’t flinch before Kethelket’s rage. She didn’t shrink back from his sword point. She looked Victor in the eye and said, “You describe creatures belonging to Baron Dunstan. He’s a creature similar to Eric Gore Lust. A type of vampyr, though he dubs his creatures, his followers, wampyr—in their monstrous form, they have wings and can fly. He holds the keep south of here, south of this forest on the shores of the Silver Sea.”

“Silver Sea?” Suddenly, Victor felt stupid. Why hadn’t he made Victoria draw a map depicting what she could of the Marches?

“A great body of water that borders the western edge of these lands.” She turned to Kethelket and said, “You’d be able to see it, flying out over the forest, if not for the fog Hector has summoned to obscure and poison his lands.”

“Why did you not warn us of these flying fiends? Why did you spin tales of hulking monstrosities bound to the ground?” A note of desperation hung in Kethelket’s words, and Victor knew the man was strained to the breaking point. What must it be like to know that you were in charge of the remnants of an entire species? What must it be like to know that each time you flew out to do the bidding of a giant stranger, you risked extinction? As he examined his use of the Naghelli in that light, Victor felt shame, even though Kethelket and his kin had insisted they wanted to help.

“I wasn’t trying to hide anything! I answered the questions Victor asked of me! I thought it most likely Hector would send his heavy champion, Karl the Crimson, to face his might.” Though she answered Kethelket’s question, her pale blue eyes locked with Victor’s.

“Why did he take my people alive? Are they doomed?” Kethelket had lowered his sword, and his voice had lost much of its angry edge, though a note of desperation still clung to his words.

“He’s a fiend, sir.” Victoria looked Kethelket in the eyes, and Victor saw his rage continue to cool as the ancient Naghelli saw the genuine sympathy in her expression. “He will torment and torture them. He’ll turn as many as he can into followers and feed upon the rest.”

“How many of these ‘wampyrs’ are there?” Victor growled.

“I’m not sure. I’m sorry, but I never set foot in Dunstan’s lands, not here and not back on Dark Ember. Hundreds? I doubt it can be much more than a thousand; otherwise, he’d be too hard for Hector to control. He’s a very powerful creature. Much stronger than Eric or me. He holds the largest of the outer keeps, a great, double-walled castle that backs up to a cliff beside the sea. He bragged at great length the last time Hector called us to a council, describing great winding tunnels and sea caverns that open up in its depths.”

“Then I must go.” Kethelket turned, sliding his sword into its sheath and moving toward the door.

“Hold, Kethelket.” Victor put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m coming with you.”

Victoria peered at Victor, narrowing her eyes. “If he took your people, there’s a chance they may yet live, though for how long, I don’t know. Do you have time to march an army to his keep? It’s thirty leagues or more from here, and the terrain isn’t easy—forests and hills before you can descend toward the sea.”

“I can make it fast. The army will remain here.” Victor had never told Victoria about his strategies before. She didn’t know that he only commanded a small part of their overall army here in the Black Keep. She didn’t know that Borrius and Rellia were elsewhere, hopefully winning another conflict with the bulk of the legion. He didn’t intend to change that, just on the off chance that she might have some way of communicating with Hector or his people, just in case she might yet betray him.

“I can help you! I have magic tailored for such a challenge, Victor! Let me prove myself to you!” She saw his eyes narrow with doubt, saw that he was about to shut her down, and desperately pressed on. “I can hide you from his wampyrs. I

can get you past his wards without alarming him! We can get to your people without his entire army learning of your presence and putting themselves in your way or, worse, slaughtering the prisoners before you can reach them.”

The last point struck a note, and Victor glanced at Kethelket, hoping the older man would have an opinion. He frowned and nodded, “I have confidence in my ability to win past his guards, but I’m not sure I could find my people without raising an alarm. If she can do as she claims, perhaps . . .”

“I can move quickly, too! I can take on an incorporeal form and fly beside your friend here.”

“You can?”

“Yes! Please, Victor, let me help you! Let me earn some bit of trust from you and your people. I do you no service languishing, imprisoned. Let me help you against Prince Hector with more than simple information. I’m doomed if he wins this war, so let me aid in his destruction!”

Victor frowned and rubbed at his chin. He could feel Kethelket’s agitation; the man wanted to be moving, and he couldn’t blame him. His people were in grave danger, and every second they lingered here, deliberating, put them at further risk. If he trusted this woman, this undead creature, to help him, then he was risking her betrayal. And so what if she betrayed him? Was he so worried about her that he’d refuse a chance to save a hundred or more of Kethelket’s people? “All right. Walk with us, and do not use your Energy until you’ve cleared it with me. Every time.” He stared at her until she nodded.

“Understood.”

Victor left the room, glanced at the guards, and said, “You can return to normal duty for now.” With Kethelket and the Death Caster in tow, he walked out of his home, only to find Edeya, Valla, Lam, and Sarl waiting for him right outside. The sky was aglow with orange light, the fog in the air strangely illuminated, amplifying the glow of the fires raging through the forest surrounding the keep. When Valla laid eyes on Victoria, she hissed and drew Midnight. “Easy.” Victor jerked a thumb at Victoria in her layered, gauzy black dress and robes. “She’s going to help me and Kethelket rescue his people and, I suppose, kill another of Hector’s barons.”

“What?” Victoria and Valla both asked. Valla frowned and glared at the undead woman, and Victor turned to her with a raised eyebrow. Victoria stammered, “You didn’t mention killing Dunstan!”

“Yeah. We’ll capture the keep once we get Kethelket’s people free.” Victor shrugged as though it made perfect sense. Kethelket nodded, locking his dark eyes on Victor’s; he was in agreement.

“Why infiltrate an enemy keep if you don’t intend to do the most damage possible?” Kethelket grinned savagely, perhaps savoring the idea of some payback.

“He’s very strong, Victor.” Victoria clenched her pale, long-fingered hands before her, clearly feeling some regrets.

“I’ll come as well,” Valla said, surprising no one.

“I have to get through those flames, Valla.” Victor gestured to the orange sky. “I’ll probably have to dismount and do some leaping; you know I’m not as sensitive to heat and fire as . . . others are.” She knew he meant her, and she opened her mouth, prepared to argue, but he could see she was struggling to find the words to convince him.

“Perhaps I could cloak myself in winds and hurry through . . .”

“Those forests blaze with a terrible fury,” Kethelket said, “not just a narrow band of flame, but miles of inferno. I could try to carry you past them.” He folded his arms and looked past Valla into the courtyard where some of his people sat, drinking water and recovering from their ordeal. “I could order a pair of my people to transport you via a harness . . .”

“No. No, it’s fine. I must accept that I can’t always rush into battle with Victor. What shall the rest of us do while you’re gone?”

“I can probably fly past the flames,” Lam interjected.

“So could I,” Edeya was quick to add.

Lam frowned at her. “I think not, Edeya! Your new wings are strong, but you’ve never flown more than a few hundred yards.”

“Relax, you guys!” Victor growled, his agitation rising with every second he delayed his departure. “I need you all to stay with the army. There’s a chance that not all the undead will die in this fire. There’s a chance yet another army is coming to attack this keep. I want you to hold it, but don’t claim it yet. Hector has to be wondering why we don’t; he may assume we don’t have enough people here to do so and send others to take control, in which case we’ll need strong people here to help the Ninth battle them off. They may have a champion or two, hell they might send that big asshole Victoria already warned us about. Valla, Lam, it’ll be on you guys to defeat or hold him off until we finish our mission.”

He looked at Kethelket, saw the agreement in his eyes, and continued, “We need to go. Every second we stand around, the captured Naghelli are more at risk.” He looked at Victoria and then Kethelket. “You two fly. Now. I’ll meet you due south of here, beyond the forest. I think you’ll see me coming.” Kethelket didn’t wait for further instruction. He leaped into the air with a blur of black wings, flickering with the ochre light of his Energy.

Victoria said, “Cover your ears. For your protection.” When Victor and the others did so, she took a deep breath and then shrieked in a weird, horrible, multi-voiced cry that echoed off the courtyard

walls, and then white, misty Energy burst out of her, washing the color out of her flesh and giving it a strange translucent nature. She looked like a ghost. Without moving her lips, she spoke in a strange, disembodied, echoing voice, “I will await you beyond the flames. Thank you for your trust.” Then she streaked into the air, quickly catching Kethelket and matching his pace.

“Roots!” Edeya said, watching her luminous, black-clothed form streak into the glowing orange sky.

“I hope you didn’t make a mistake . . .” Lam said softly, but Victor didn’t feel like justifying himself. He turned to Sarl.

“Command your soldiers well, Captain. Don’t lose this keep.” Sarl saluted without a word, his expression serious and dour. Victor turned to Lam, Valla, and Edeya. “I’m counting on you three. Keep in touch with Borrius and Rellia . . . Shit! Any word from them?”

Edeya brightened, and she spoke excitedly, “Yes! They had just captured the fortress south of Old Keep when another army arrived, perhaps meaning to add to the garrison there. The forces he described sounded a lot like the army we first met when you were scouting—shamblers, ghouls, giant skeleton drummers. They hurled themselves mindlessly at the walls, and the legion destroyed them.”

“Borrius wants to keep pushing. He’s sent scouts out looking for the next objective,” Valla added.

“Okay. Okay, you guys. I’m sorry I have to leave right now, but I think this might pay off. I think we’ll be in a great position if I can keep this Dunstan guy busy or kill him. That’ll mean we have control of four of the five perimeter keeps, and a lot of Hector’s troops will be dead, or, I guess, more dead. Destroyed. After the fire’s gone and you’ve assessed things here, go ahead and claim the keep, Valla.”

“I’ll record any awards.” Edeya held up her logbook. Victor had almost forgotten about that. The System would give them another chest when they claimed the Black Keep. “Did Rellia claim the other keep? The one they just took?”

“Yes. They’re calling it Rust Keep on account of it having an outer wall made from some kind of iron alloy. The bottom half of it is stained orange with rust.” Lam shrugged. “Not a very pretty or creative name, but it’s in keeping with the names you’ve chosen so far.”

“They aren’t permanent! Just for keeping track . . .” Victor shook his head, dismissing the topic. “I need to get going.” He began to reach into himself, preparing to sever his connection to the Alter Self spell, allowing himself to expand to normal proportions and power, but Valla rushed forward and grabbed him into a hug. Victor hugged her back and winked over her head at Edeya and Lam, who both smiled and turned away, leaning close to whisper. Sarl saluted

again and walked across the courtyard, calling for his lieutenants. Victor appreciated the courtesy, but he didn't care. He wasn't trying to hide his feelings for Valla anymore.

"Hush," he said, despite her silence. He put his hands on the sides of her face and tilted her head away from his chest so he could look into her eyes. "We'll be back together soon. As much as you might worry about me, you know I'm worried about you, all right? Stay safe, and don't do anything crazy. This is just a keep. Hold it if you can, but don't give your life for it."

Her brows creased, her eyes narrowed, and she said, voice firm, "I won't abandon any soldiers here. You know that."

"Yeah, I know." Victor hugged her again, happy she hadn't asked him to promise anything. "I've gotta go." He let go and kissed her softly once, then he opened the floodgates of his Core and cast Iron Berserk. As he surged in size and power, he summoned Guapo. The glorious Mustang burst out of a pool of shimmering golden Energy, whinnied loudly, and rose up on his hind legs, pawing the air with his front hooves. "That's my boy," Victor laughed.

"He's something," Valla chuckled, and though she tried to make it nonchalant, Victor saw her wipe the back of her hand at the corner of her eye. He reached down with his gigantic hand and gently took her tiny palm between his thumb and fingertips, giving it a soft squeeze. She sniffed, nodded, and smiled at him, and then he turned and sprang atop his stallion. As Guapo's hooves thundered over the black stones, he roared, "Open the gate!"

Book 6: Chapter 32: From Fire to Sea

As Victor and Guapo tore through the smoke-filled forest surrounding the keep, he truly began to appreciate how much his body had changed since he'd left Earth. It was one thing to say he was stronger or bigger or that he was sturdier and healed faster, but some of the more subtle changes weren't so glaring. They weren't things he noticed every day. Sure, he'd accepted the fact that the more he evolved, the more his body became dependent on Energy and the less sustenance it required from other sources, but he hadn't realized just how little he needed to breathe. That night, charging through dense, rolling waves of hot smoke, he came to realize that he could take a deep breath and not think about breathing again for a very long time, indeed.

He leaned forward, hugging close to Guapo's neck, and let the Mustang do what he did best—run. With Guapo doing most of the work, even navigating through the forest, Victor's mind began to wander toward the changes that had occurred in his body as he'd advanced his race. Could he even call himself human anymore? He shook his head; he'd been down that road before. He was Victor,

and that was the important thing. If his abuela saw him today, she'd know him. Thinking of the changes he'd gone through, he began to wonder what was in store. His race was at the seventh stage of "advanced." What would happen when he broke into epic? Was there something beyond epic? Did the System categorize "race" in the same way it did Classes?

The undead were everywhere in the forest, but they wandered in the smoke, listless, only lashing out at Guapo if he came close. Even then, they seemed disoriented, and Guapo was huge and fast and, more often than not, knocked the undead down before they could make contact with claws or rusty weapons. Victor was no expert on fires or the undead, but he had a feeling most of these slow, dumb zombies, shamblers, and even the ghouls would burn that night.

Guapo leaped over a fallen tree, crashing through smoldering underbrush, and Victor noticed that the smoke had a different quality now. It was hot and bitter, thick to the point that it burned even his advanced eyes. The air itself was stifling, and though it wasn't much of a concern for him, he began to wonder how resilient Guapo was. The Mustang was a creature of spirit, of his spirit, and he'd seen him trample hundreds of undead, suffering many gashes and stabs, certainly more than a normal horse could handle. Would he be able to keep charging through these smoldering woods? What about when they came to the fire itself?

The thought of Guapo running into the flames, bravely pushing forward while he slowly burned, turned Victor's stomach, and he decided that when they got to the worst part of the fire, he'd send Guapo home to the Spirit Plane and make his own way through. That time came sooner than he'd expected. The orange glow in the sky had steadily grown brighter, the smoke had steadily grown thicker and hotter, and now Victor could hear it, a great roar that brought forth images of ancient locomotives or landslides or something equally massive and destructive. He'd never been in the proximity of a fire like this, and he found himself awestruck by its size and power.

He climbed off Guapo as they crested a slight rise in the forest. Down the slope, he saw the advancing line of fire, like a living, hungry monster, surging through the woods. A ravenous orange wave that consumed the trees, the undead, and anything else that hadn't fled; it was insatiable, relentless. Victor couldn't see what was beyond the wall of flames or tell how deep the furnace extended. All he saw was smoke and ash and embers. "See you soon, Guapito." He hopped off the Mustang's back and sent him home in a cloud of sparkling Energy motes. Then, perhaps to bolster his confidence, he summoned his Banner of the Champion and charged toward those flames.

Victor's massive legs ate the slope in just a few bounds, and then he was careening into the face of the towering inferno. Fire didn't evoke fear in him the way it might most people, not since his ordeal with Boaegh, not since he'd nearly died from his magical fireballs and been burned from the inside out by the cleansing, scalding, final breath of the fire drake. More than that, Victor had a magma Core in his chest and an affinity for fire-based Energies. Combined with his titanic

constitution and berserk healing ability, those things made him quite confident that he could pass through this fire largely unharmed.

As he ran into the whipping, furious flames, smashing past staggering, smoldering undead, Victor bunched his great thighs and, using his Titanic Leap ability, launched himself upward and forward. He exploded through the smoky, roaring fire, smashed tree branches that had yet to ignite, and then he was over the bulk of the smoke, and he could see and breathe clearly for a few seconds until he began to descend. He fell back down into the whirling, cinder-filled clouds, squinting his eyes against the sting, and landed with a crash that shook the ground. He slid through hot ash, blackened tree branches, and the still-smoldering corpses of the undead by the hundreds.

Victor smashed his way forward, bunched his legs, and did it again. It took him five leaps to make it through the worst of the forest fire, and then he was running through a smoky, blackened wasteland. Trees still stood in the forest, though they were bare of leaves and soot-covered. The undergrowth was gone, and nothing remained of the undead who'd been in the area save smoldering corpses. Victor summoned Guapo again and swung himself onto his back. The two of them continued their mad dash to the south.

While they raced through the burned forest, Victor took stock of himself. His skin was soot-stained, and his eyes stung from the smoke, but he was otherwise unmarred by the flames he'd passed through. Even his leather pants had survived, and he supposed the material, being resilient in itself and enchanted for self-repair, had been the right choice for this endeavor. Lifedrinker was, of course, fine. She'd drained an ancient magma wyrm of his Energy and had a strong molten heart; he could probably toss her in a volcano, and she'd come out all right.

With Guapo's speed and the forest clear of many obstacles thanks to the fire, it didn't take too long to break free of the trees, and soon Victor found himself charging over moonlit, grassy plains, the fire just an orange glow on the northern horizon, almost like a false sunrise. He'd been streaking over the grassland, Guapo's hooves leaving a bright trail of sparkling Energy, for a few minutes when he felt a presence nearby and slowed. He looked up to see Kethelket's orange and black wings blurring with effort as he streaked toward him. Keeping pace with the Naghelli prince was Victoria, a faintly luminous, spectral figure that effortlessly flowed on the breeze.

When they landed next to Guapo, two tiny figures compared to the enormous titan-sized Mustang, Victor could see that Kethelket was exhausted. He held down a hand and said, "Come on. Ride with me on Guapo for now. Recover your strength."

"Aye." Kethelket took his hand and pulled himself up, surprising Victor with his lightness; even Valla was heavier than the tall, thin Naghelli. "It's for the best."

"Victoria," Victor turned to the spectral woman, "you lead the way." And so they ran, racing over the plains and hills, Victoria setting a pace that strained even Guapo's significant reserves of speed. If they passed within sight of enemy patrols or other creatures that might have been a threat, Victor never knew it. Enlarged as he was, riding a gigantic Mustang faster than any creature native to Fanwath could run, they didn't linger in any area long enough to warrant caution.

Besides, in Victor's mind, they didn't have time for caution; Kethelket's people could be dying or suffering with each second they delayed.

Even considering all that, Victoria had other ideas, and she led Victor ever downslope, into ravines and gullies, alongside rivers and streams that no doubt wended their way toward the Silver Sea she'd spoken of. Using those hillsides and narrow canyons as cover and as a means of descent, there was little chance anyone could see them from a distance, even with Guapo's showy, sparkling progress in the night.

Guapo had no trouble racing through shallow waters, running on the uneven stones of the streambeds that would have tripped or broken the legs of a natural horse. His uncanny ability to balance and run over the ground without disturbing the soil seemed to know few limits, and so they made incredible time as the Death Caster flew ahead with Victor and Kethelket close behind on the spirit steed's steady back. The moons were still out, and the sun had yet to brighten the eastern horizon when they charged out of a tree-choked gulley onto gravel-strewn sand that stretched for half a mile to the shores of a beautiful, placid body of water.

The invaders must have named it the Silver Sea because they'd first found it at night, for it reflected the light of the Sisters with a pale, shining luminescence that truly brought to mind the luster of the precious metal. "Is there something in the water to make it shine so?" Kethelket asked, echoing Victor's curiosity.

"No idea, but it's something else, isn't it?" Victor scanned the water, wondering if he could see the far shore, but no hint of it touched the horizon. Looking from right to left, along the sandy shoreline, he saw hills and copses, inlets and rocky outcroppings, and, far to his left, backing up to a steep, stony cliffside, a great, looming keep with a massive curtain wall surrounding a smaller, closer inner wall. "Shit! We're here."

"We are," Victoria said, gliding down to the sand and looking up at Victor and Kethelket. "We should walk now, and I will work my magic to hide you from the eyes of Dunstan's watchers."

"All right." Victor and Kethelket slid from Guapo's back, and then Victor sent the steed back to the Spirit Plane. During their mad run toward the sea, Victor had let his Berserk drop, not wanting to arrive without any rage in his Core. Now, he considered casting it again but decided to wait; they would rely on stealth for the time being. When the sparkling lights from Guapo's dismissal had faded, he saw that Victoria had taken on her more corporeal form, and her black gowns blended into the night so thoroughly that her hands and face looked almost bodiless, floating in the night.

"May I work my magics, Victor?"

He stared into her pale eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Go ahead." Suddenly, the air felt ten degrees colder, and he saw his breath begin to plume forth as pale mist seemed to pour out of

Victoria's hands. It hung in a cloud around her, then expanded to wrap around him and Kethelket. Victor thought he'd be blinded by the dense mist, but as soon as it engulfed him, he found he could see through it, and the world was tinted with a strange, pale-yellow luminescence.

"My mist will hide us; those who look upon it will see a thin haze in the air, nothing more." Victoria's voice was clear and echoed strangely as she continued, "It will also enhance your senses; you should be able to see and hear more clearly within it."

"A clever working," Kethelket said, nodding his approval.

"Come on," Victor gestured toward the keep, "we need to hurry."

"Of course." Victoria started forward, gliding gracefully over the rocky beach toward the keep. "Dunstan is powerful, but his abilities are more inclined toward destruction than subterfuge. I don't believe he'll have defenses against my magic. We may be able to walk right through the gate."

"Nah." Victor shook his head. "Don't risk it. Find a quiet place on the wall, and we'll scale it. Well, I'll scale it; you two can fly."

"I'll lower a rope." Kethelket clapped a hand on Victor's shoulder.

"I cannot maintain my mist and my banshee form."

"Then I'll carry you up." Victor jerked a thumb toward his back. "I won't even feel your weight."

"As you say." She didn't look happy, perhaps feeling Victor was being overly cautious and not trusting her magic to hide them as they walked through the gate, but Victor didn't care. He wasn't here to win Victoria's approval; he had people to rescue, and he'd avoid the guards until he couldn't, and then he'd start killing. With those thoughts in his mind, he turned to Kethelket.

"If we get caught, and shit starts to go sideways, I want you and Victoria to find your people. I'll keep these vampyrs busy."

Kethelket looked at him gravely, then nodded. "Once I free them, we'll come to your aid."

"How many of your kin were taken?" Victoria glanced over her shoulder, almost flinching, as she looked toward Victor, perhaps afraid she'd overstepped.

"More than a hundred."

"With so many, they're likely being held together. I don't know Dunstan's policies when it comes to dealing with prisoners, but he'll likely want to choose several for his own . . . needs. These creatures are nocturnal, and though they are strong flyers, I can't imagine they got here much ahead of us, considering they

had to carry prisoners. With dawn nearing, I'm hopeful your people will be held until night falls again."

"I thank you for the added hope." Kethelket's words were calm, but Victor could see his right hand gripping the hilt of one of his swords. His knuckles were strained, and Victor could hear the leather of the hilt squeaking under the pressure. He was angry or stressed or both. Of course he was, Victor silently chided himself.

"If you get your people free and I'm fighting, just get the fuck out of there, Kethelket. I can get away if I have to, but there's no sense getting more of your people killed. They have us ten to one."

"Dunstan is a powerful man, Victor. He has several underlings who rivaled Eric Gore Lust." Victoria glanced at him again, perhaps gauging her odds of escaping the keep alive.

Victor kept walking, staring at the fast-approaching curtain wall, and thought about her words, about Kethelket and his people, and then about the greater campaign. What was he hoping to achieve in there? A rescue? No, he decided, it was more than that. "I'm not planning to leave that place until this Dunstan guy is dead."

Kethelket jerked his head to stare at him, locking his dark eyes on Victor's for a moment, but he didn't say anything. He didn't object, but he didn't encourage him either. Victoria kept walking, and Victor could feel the tension thickening the air as she fought back some kind of retort or objection; she knew it wasn't her place. Was she afraid he'd keep her with him until he was satisfied with his slaughter, or, worse, was overwhelmed and killed? That made him wonder what his intentions for her were. Did he expect her to fight against such wildly lopsided odds?

"Relax, Victoria. You'll stay with Kethelket and go with him as he fights free of the keep with his people."

"I . . ." She started, perhaps, to object, but Kethelket spoke before she could formulate her response.

"If I leave you to battle this keep full of monsters, Valla will slay me herself."

"Well," Victor sighed, "you need to make her understand; I'm not trying to kill myself. This is a keep with tunnels and caves under it. It's not a battlefield where hundreds of enemies can face me at once; I intend to move and kill as I go, never allowing myself to be surrounded. Besides, listen: We'll use stealth as much as possible and hopefully free your people before any fighting starts. Then I'm going to blitz my way to this Dunstan asshole and deal with him. Before you object, think about how you're going to get your people out. You'll need the distraction."

"Dunstan's people will suffer greatly with his demise. If you have a hope of winning, that's how you must do it: Slay him early to weaken his many thralls."

“Victor.” Kethelket stopped walking and turned to him. “I yield to your leadership, but I must argue this point. There are more than a hundred of my people in there. If we free them, that means odds of only ten to one, as you said earlier. If you slay their leader and weaken the other vampyrs, shouldn’t we stay and try to kill them all? Shouldn’t we capture this keep? You hinted as much before you left Black Keep.”

“Well, yeah, but as I traveled here with you two, I started to think about how precious the few remaining Naghelli lives are. Even if we win, but you lose half of your people, is it worth it?” Before Kethelket could respond or object, he shook his head and said, “No. It’s not. Listen, Kethelket. You will get your people out of that keep, and after I’ve killed Dunstan and you see the effect it has on his people, we can reassess. You can reassess.” Victor looked at Victoria. “Do you know how much it will affect his ‘thralls’ when he dies?”

“I do not. I know he has a stronger connection to them than Eric did to his. They’re, as I said, a different bloodline of vampyr. I don’t know their origin or history or anything that might be of use, only that Dunstan calls his thralls wampyr and refers to them as his children.”

“Okay.” Victor looked at the high, curved, gray-stone curtain wall and cracked his knuckles. He knew what he was going to do, and it didn’t matter what anyone said. Even if Valla were standing right there, his plan would be the same. He had a goal in mind, and there wasn’t going to be any turning him away from it. “It’s settled then. Stealth by any means until the Naghelli are free, then I’ll make my way to where Dunstan is and kill him. You guys will get free and wait to see what happens between me and the wampyr lord.” He couldn’t help the grin that exposed his teeth, shining in the moonlight. Had he really just announced that he was going into a big, dark castle to kill a vampire lord? Who was he, Van Helsing?

Book 6: Chapter 33: Rescue

Victor carefully descended the inner courtyard steps, warily avoiding clomping or scuffing his boots on the stones. Victoria’s obscuring mist had worked like a charm so far, clinging to the three of them, hiding them from the watchful eyes of Dunstan’s posted guards. Kethelket had fluttered up to the top of each wall, lowering a rope for Victor to climb while Victoria clung to his back, a process Victor hadn’t much enjoyed.

Victoria’s flesh was cold, and despite the heat his body radiated, it never warmed. She’d held on to him, chilly, oddly rigid arms around his neck, and not made a sound as he climbed, but he’d savored the moment she let go, allowing the cleansing air to touch his skin where she’d held him. If he’d had doubts about her status as an undead creature, they were banished after that.

The courtyard was enormous and filled with barrels, wagons, coaches, and myriad odds and ends. It was a trivial matter to walk carefully around the clutter, avoiding the handful of guards walking

about, and make their way to a side passage that led into an area that once must have been kitchens. The ovens were cold, the pantries bare, and Victor was reminded that Dunstan and his people, his thralls or “children,” didn’t take sustenance like normal, fully alive people. It was probably to their advantage; not a soul lingered in those big, dusty kitchens and dining halls, and they found an easily accessible stairway leading down.

None of them knew where they were going, but Victoria knew Dunstan and his people had discovered hidden depths to the keep. She’d heard him boasting about their expansive darkness, hidden away from the sun, the ideal place for people of his ilk to rest during the day. Victor didn’t know much, but one thing he knew was that when you were searching for “hidden depths,” it was probably best to go down. So, they descended every stairway they could find, and soon, they were walking through damp, dripping stone tunnels. Those tunnels were constructed of rough-hewn blocks, but the mortar was looser and patchy, with occasional stretches of natural stone lining one side or the other.

Once they’d passed beyond the courtyard and descended their first flight of steps, they hadn’t encountered any of Dunstan’s people, no vampyrs or wampyrs or whatever they wanted to be called, no people whatsoever. Victor was beginning to wonder if they’d entered some unused portion of the underground, a set of tunnels and rooms to which the invaders hadn’t yet spread. That doubt nagged at him for a while but was banished when they passed through a dripping, ancient stone arch into a massive, vaulted cavern, and Victoria softly hissed, “There!” and pointed to the ceiling.

Sure enough, straight out of a horror movie, Victor saw dozens of naked, gray-skinned, monstrous humanoids hanging from the great, calcified wooden beams that held up the vaulted ceiling. They were large, probably nine feet tall, and hung upside down with leathery, vein-filled wings folded about their forms. Their hairless gray heads protruded with long, pointed ears and ugly, noseless faces lost in slumber. Victor scanned the chamber and saw another high arch on the other side. He motioned toward it, and Victoria nodded, leading the way.

She and Kethelket were noiseless and probably would be even without her obscuring mist, but Victor had to concentrate, watching where he set his large, booted feet, careful to step lightly. Even so, with her magic aiding them, they passed through the room without disturbing the sleeping creatures, and when they’d progressed into the next damp tunnel a short distance, Victor asked in a rough whisper, “Are they always like that? They don’t change shape like Eric’s vampyrs?”

“His oldest thralls, aye. The younger ones need to exert Energy to transform.”

Victor considered Victoria’s words and then nodded. “I guess we’re on the right track. Hold here for a moment.” Victor concentrated, and, channeling some fear-attuned Energy, he summoned his coyotes. Being a part of him, they knew he was hunting, stalking something, so they emerged from the cloud of roiling shadows silently, padding around the trio with noses lowered, sniffing, silently circling them. “We’ll wait here a minute and let my hermanos prowl around and see if they can find Kethelket’s people. No reason to spend all day going down the wrong tunnels.”

Without direction, responding to Victor's will, the coyotes drew near Kethelket, sniffing him carefully, then darting away down the tunnel, silent, black, cloaked in shadows, and invisible to Victor's eye after just a few steps into the darkness, even with Victoria's magical mist enhancing his vision. "You don't fear they'll alert Dunstan's thralls?" Kethelket stared into the darkness of the tunnel intently, perhaps readying himself to react to an alarm or outcry.

"They're sneakier than we are." Victor grinned at Kethelket. "Even you." He could sense his spirit companions, as usual, and though he couldn't see through their eyes, he knew he'd feel it when they found something. Confident in that knowledge, he leaned his armored shoulder against the damp stone wall and waited.

"Your companions, are they a spirit shaping?" Victoria stepped close, speaking softly.

"Yeah."

"As a Death Caster, I've always found spirit Cores fascinating. Few Spirit Casters I've met, though, had much power at all. There's some prejudice among my kind about them; at least on Dark Ember, they're looked at as primitive." She hurriedly held up her hands and continued, "I know how that sounds, but I'm not casting aspersions; I'm simply noting that we were clearly misinformed."

"Speaking of casting," Victor replied, choosing to ignore her fishing expedition, "if we come upon Kethelket's people and have to kill some guards, can you use this mist of yours to keep the noise down?"

"I can, but Dunstan will feel it when his thralls die."

Kethelket frowned, locking eyes with Victor. "I suppose there's a limit to the stealthy part of this endeavor."

"Unless you two know a way to silence and incapacitate the guards without killing them."

"Were they not undead, I could." Victoria's words were almost a sigh.

"Can undead be rendered unconscious from a blow to the head?" Kethelket directed his question to Victoria.

"Not easily, not these wampyrs. Perhaps with the sunlight from Victor's banner, though I fear it will also banish my mist, which would thwart my ability to mute the sounds of conflict." As she spoke, Victor got a sense of excited success from one of his coyotes, and he knew they'd found the missing Naghelli. Rather than tell Kethelket and Victoria, he concentrated his will upon his companions and tried to impress upon them what he wanted. He pictured the hanging wampyrs, then tried to direct the coyotes to find the biggest, greatest creature like that.

When he felt like they understood and sensed that they were on the hunt once again, he turned to Kethelket.

“It doesn’t matter. When we break your people out, I’ll head for Dunstan, and I’ll make a pretty big scene about it. You all should be able to fight free; I’ll leave one of my coyotes to guide you.”

Kethelket looked him in the eye, saw his conviction, and slowly nodded. “Once we’re out, we’ll make an assessment. I won’t risk all of my people, but if we can aid you, we will.”

“That’s all I could ask for.”

“Assuming we find your people alive . . .” Victoria said, perhaps before she could consider the impact of her words. Kethelket growled and whirled to face her, reaching a hand toward the blade at his belt. Victor forestalled his angry retort, though, by putting a hand on his shoulder and speaking.

“My coyotes found them. I’m not sure how many, but definitely your people.”

“Why are we standing here?”

“Patience. They’re learning the layout of these tunnels so they can guide us where we need to go.”

Kethelket nodded. “You mean after we rescue them.”

“Exactly.” They stood in silence a few minutes longer, and then Victor felt a wave of excitement from his dark coyotes; they’d found his quarry. He could feel them struggling to remain quiet, to remember to sneak back to him rather than yipping and howling, surrounding their prey, and calling him to them. He couldn’t have blamed them if they’d done it; they were smart, clever helpers, but they had a nature of their own, and he was asking them to behave very much outside of it. Still, he exerted his will, calling them back to him, reminding them of their need to be silent, and they contained themselves, gliding through the dark, damp tunnels and caves, clinging to the shadows as though they were a part of them.

A few minutes later, Victoria gasped softly and pointed into the darkness; several sets of dark, smoky, purple eyes were bobbing toward them up out of the recesses. “It’s time,” Victor said, loosening Lifedrinker from her harness, grinning savagely as she hummed in his hands. He stalked into the darkness, and his coyotes turned to lead the way. They silently descended, turning at junction after junction, and he congratulated himself a few times on having the forethought to send them out hunting; he might have been hours exploring all of the branching passages, and each minute they spent down there was another minute they might be exposed too soon.

They passed half a dozen vaulted chambers like the one where they’d first seen the wampyrs hanging from the supports, sleeping away the day, and, all told, probably passed by another hundred of the creatures. Knowing that the ones perpetually in that monstrous form were Dunstan’s oldest, strongest thralls, he had to wonder where the more junior members of his army were. Did they sleep up in the keep in regular barracks? If so, it might make his job easier. He reasoned it would take

them more time to get down to join the fight against him than it would take him to get to wherever his coyotes had found Dunstan.

As he contemplated, planning in his mind how he'd fight his way to Dunstan, visualizing his moves, the abilities he'd use, and picturing how he'd most quickly dispatch any wampyrs that got in his way, his coyotes stopped before a narrow, tall opening with arched, curved blocks holding up the boulder-like lintel. They paced in a small circle, and Victor knew they wanted to yip and cry, wanted to signal that the object of the hunt was there. He stepped forward, holding out his left palm reassuringly. He looked to Victoria and Kethelket and nodded. Approaching the archway, he realized it was much wider than it had seemed; it was just so tall that it seemed narrow.

He couldn't see any light in the space beyond, but within Victoria's magical mist, he could see rows of iron cages lining the far wall of an enormous natural cavern. High, stone-block arches held up a rough, cavernous ceiling from which water fell in steady drips down to pools dotting the uneven cavern floor. Victor could see the huddled forms of dozens of Naghelli within the cages, and he breathed out a sigh, releasing some pent-up stress; it looked like most of Kethelket's people still lived.

At first, he thought they might be unguarded. He couldn't see any wampyrs hanging from the ceiling, and the lack of light or furniture made him wonder if any non-monstrous guard would be present, but then he saw a faint flicker of silvery light from the left side of the cavern. Peering that way, he could just make out a small archway. He pointed, and Kethelket nodded, whispering, "A guard room?"

Victor nodded again, then gestured for his two companions to follow him. He crept into the cavern, stealthy and silent within Victoria's mist, and when they rounded a heap of broken crates and stood only a dozen feet or so from the first of the iron cages, Victor could see into the distant archway. Two men sat at a small table with a tiny silvery orb of light hanging above their heads. They were playing some sort of board game that looked almost like chess. Victor looked at Kethelket and Victoria and pointed at the cages, then he pointed at himself and then to the guards. When Kethelket nodded, Victor stalked forward.

He was still a dozen feet from the archway when he cast Iron Berserk. He strained to contain his usual roar as he surged in size and power, and his vision tinted red. He must have succeeded, or Victoria's mist was still working to hide and silence him because the guards never looked up. When he was just five feet from the archway, Victor channeled fear-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, imparting her with dark, roiling, shadowy power. Then, almost simultaneously, Victor summoned his Banner of the Champion and cast Energy Charge, streaking toward the two guards and hacking Lifedrinker in a broad, forward cleave.

The two guards might have been able to put up a bit of a fight had they seen Victor coming, but he took them entirely by surprise. If Lifedrinker's razor-sharp, gleaming edge hadn't separated their heads from their bodies, Victor's impact would surely have rendered them insensate. When he struck the guard on the left, such a concussion resulted that both men's bodies crunched into the far wall with wet, bone-grinding impacts, leaving little doubt that they were destroyed. Victor whirled, red fury tinting his gaze, and stomped back into the large chamber with the cages.

He saw Kethelket breaking locks with a gleaming chisel and hammer, saw the Naghelli silently crowding the doors, and then he took in Victoria; she was standing near the archway, weaving a cloud of writhing mist that filled the opening, perhaps hoping to buy them some time by damping

down the noise of their activities. Victor whistled for his coyotes, and they slunk out of the shadows, crowding close. He stared at one of them, letting his will be known, and it yipped and whined but hurried over to Kethelket's side.

"That one will guide you out." He looked from Kethelket to the men and women in the cages. "I'm glad you all are alive! Follow my coyote and listen to your captain." They answered him with muted cheers and thanks, and when he turned his hulking form and started for the exit, he heard some of them asking Kethelket where he was going. He didn't linger to hear the answer. As he stepped into Victoria's mist, he said, "Don't betray me. Listen to Kethelket. He'll honor our bargain if something happens to me."

"As you say." She ducked her head, refusing to meet his gaze. Was he so terrifying in his berserk state? Perhaps it brought back memories of the ordeal she'd faced on the Spirit Plane with him. When he saw her mist burning away, he realized it wasn't fear that made her look away; it was the burning heat of his banner's bloody sun. With a rumbling growl in his throat, he strode into the dark passageway, banishing the shadows as he progressed. His coyotes yipped and barked as they followed him, somehow knowing the time for stealth was past. No, it was time for Victor to make some noise. He gestured ahead with his left hand, letting his pack know he wanted to find the big wampyr leader, and they surged past him, trotting up the sloping tunnel.

He'd barely followed them to the next junction when he felt their alarm, and then he saw the roiling, hulking shadows of a pack of wampyrs. Had they felt their lesser compatriots' deaths? Victor had been expecting as much, so he didn't react with alarm. Instead, he lifted Lifedrinker and ran forward, letting loose a terrible roar that shook the dripping water loose from the stones, showering everyone in the tunnel with a fine mist. He laughed as the light of his banner refracted in the damp haze, making an incongruous rainbow in the middle of the corridor between Victor and the wampyrs.

He felt like he'd been stuck in traffic, forced to drive five miles an hour, stopping and starting for the last hour, and now he had an open freeway ahead. He stomped the accelerator. Roaring and laughing, he charged among the big, leathery-skinned, gray figures. He hacked Lifedrinker left and right, and as soon as she sliced the first wing, she burst into molten, white-hot glory, adding her screams of battle lust to his grunts and roars. The wampyrs weren't silent either, hissing, screeching, crying out as their claws raked his arms or slid off his armor. They yowled in pain and tried to retreat as he delivered vicious, mortal wounds, hacking into them like a butcher making scraps.

"You're not going anywhere!" he roared, using his bulk to keep them from surrounding him, forcing them to face him one or two at a time and utterly dominating them. These wampyrs were probably as tough as the monstrous wampyrs he'd fought out on the plains, but he was fresh, and he wasn't facing them in the hundreds, surrounded, bloodied, and beleaguered. He worked his way through the pack like a terrier let loose in a rat den, and in minutes, he was

standing at the far end of a bloody, corpse-littered stretch of corridor, heaving and panting, blood dripping from every inch of his person.

His coyotes came out of the shadows, hazy purple eyes focused on him, yipping in a way that almost sounded like laughter as he urged them to continue on, to find the object of their hunt. He chased after them, winding through the tunnels, howling, laughing, and roaring alternately as he progressed. He was mad with battle lust, but only because he'd allowed himself to be. He'd decided early on that he would put on a show, savage his way through these corridors, drawing the wampyrs into a chase that would leave Kethelket and his kin in peace, allowing them to find their way out with as little resistance as possible.

It seemed his plan was working because he could hear the sounds of pursuit, and it didn't sound like a small number. He could hear their claws scrabbling over stone in the gaps between his roars. He could hear their outraged cursing in sibilant hisses, and he knew they were frustrated by his speed and unerring sense of direction, thanks to his coyotes. His companions guided him through the maze and away from the larger packs of enemies. When he came upon one or two wampyrs, Victor's axe fell with bloody, crunching hacks, severing limbs, cleaving bodies, and spraying hot, black blood on the stones. He never lingered long enough for the bulk of his pursuers to catch up and slow him.

Because they helped him avoid the larger packs and because they could tell their quarry was on the move, his coyotes didn't lead him on a direct course to where they'd seen the wampyr lord. They followed their noses, yipping, braying, and howling their way through the subterranean maze. Along the way, Victor probably killed several dozen wampyrs, and he knew he could probably clear the place out if his Energy would hold out that long. As it was, he knew he needed to find Dunstan sooner rather than later, lest his rage run low. He needn't have been concerned; just as he began to allow such worries to find root in his mind, he burst into an enormous cavern and immediately caught sight of his quarry.

Dunstan stood before a massive throne-like stone chair at the far end of the cavern. Perhaps cavern was the wrong word to describe the space, Victor revised, noting the high, massive wooden beams holding up the stone ceiling, the thin, ancient red carpets laid out over the marble-slab flooring, and the furnishings—tables, chairs, benches, and candelabra in their hundreds—scattered about the space.

Victor slowed and took everything in, sauntering forward, his coyotes yapping nervously as they walked around him in a loose circle. Dunstan was a big wampyr, twice the size of the ones Victor had faced thus far, with enormous wings that were more black than gray. Like his brethren, he was naked save for a thick, gleaming obsidian crown that sat atop his ugly, bat-like head. He had baleful red eyes, and as they watched Victor approach, he spoke in a deep, guttural voice, wet with loose consonants and the promise of violence, "So you come into my home bold and full of fury? You dare? I'll bathe in your blood and spend the next hundred years hunting everyone you've ever known. They'll be my playthings for millennia."

Victor continued forward, trying to decide whether he'd break his rule about shit-talking. He'd gotten halfway into the large chamber when he heard his pursuers catch up and start to file in. He'd figured they'd do so, but he had plenty of ideas to deal with the superior numbers, not least of which was charging back into the tunnel and forcing them to funnel into him in smaller packs. He

just wasn't sure if he'd start the fight with the big bastard first. Dunstan made his decision easier when he growled, "Stand back, children. Watch your lord slay this great buffoon."

Book 6: Chapter 34: A Duel in the Depths

Victor's Quinametzin heart surged with fury at the wampyr's words—a challenge and an insult. Did this ugly, gray monstrosity think it could stand before him so brazenly? Did it believe itself a match for his fury? Victor glared around, Lifedrinker on his shoulder, and, as blood dripped from his armor, from his knuckles, and his elbows, making little pools on the marble, he smiled, a toothy, fierce smile that said more about murder than amusement. His aura was fully untethered, lying heavy around him, sharing space with the smoldering heat of the bloody sun on his banner. The wampyr lord's "children" could feel it; they shrank back from him, hugging the edges of the great chamber in their hundreds.

"Well, then? Come to me, meal." Dunstan's voice was thick with lust as he turned to his enormous throne-like chair and snatched up a great, jagged sword that looked to be carved from rose-colored stone. Despite its strange material, the blade looked sharp and heavy, and the tiny part of Victor's mind that wasn't hot with blood lust didn't relish having it strike him. He took a step toward the monstrous figure, but Dunstan had other ideas, cracking his vast, veiny wings and streaking toward him, sword held high.

Victor was no novice when it came to a brawl and certainly not where the axe was concerned. The great wampyr was fast, but Victor was a match for him, and he sidestepped, ducked a shoulder, put his thick juggernaut helm in the path of that stony sword, and hacked Lifedrinker down in a brutal chop, aimed at where he could predict Dunstan's leg would land. The gambit paid off perfectly, or it would have if Lifedrinker had been able to do more than scratch the wampyr's thick, wrinkled, gray flesh.

The sword rang like a gong as it smashed into the crown of his helm. Lifedrinker rebounded from the creature's knee, and Victor danced behind the monstrosity, ducking under a wide wing. As he passed behind Dunstan, he tried to drag Lifedrinker along the veiny, gray membrane of that wing, and again, she failed to penetrate it. She was fully ablaze, engorged with his dark, fear-attuned Energy, yet she wailed in frustration as she fruitlessly slid along that dense, pliable flesh.

"You bring a toy to fight with me?" Dunstan laughed and whirled, whipping his huge, cleaver-like stone sword in a wide arc. Victor backstepped and brought Lifedrinker up in a parry, aiming to knock the blade away with the flat top of her axe head. He was just a fraction of a second too slow, and though she slid along his sword, he didn't have the right angle or momentum to stop that ripping edge, and it bit into his shoulder. For once, Victor wasn't happy to only have a vest of wyrm-scale armor. The cold, razor edge of that stone sword parted his flesh like a scalpel with an anvil behind it, cutting him to the bone and then some.

Victor stumbled back, pain lancing through his shoulder as his arm went numb, and he nearly lost his grip on Lifedrinker. Growling in frustration, he circled the wampyr, watching as the monster ran a long, pointy tongue over the edge of his sword and chortled wetly. Victor held his axe in two hands, using his left to support most of the weight while he waited for his Berserk healing to knit

his muscles and tendons together. His failure to harm the creature with two good hits combined with the blow to his shoulder had sobered him, turning his feral grin into a frown of concentration.

More than the injury and Lifedrinker's ineffectual cuts, Victor's serious state of mind frustrated him. He inwardly railed at himself—why wasn't he getting pissed? Why was he being so cautious? Just beat the fucker down! Still, despite his harsh self-talk, he circled and listened to the jeers and taunts of the gathered wampyrs. He had half a mind to turn his back on Dunstan, ignoring the giant wampyr while he waded through his "children" and gave Lifedrinker another bath in their blood. He knew better, though; if he took his eyes off that stone cleaver, he'd wind up losing his head.

Dunstan cracked his wings and charged forward again, and Victor met his flurry of blows with parries and dodges, ducking slashes and cleaves, catching them on his helm or knocking them aside. When they separated, he had no new wounds, but neither did Dunstan, and the wampyr didn't look tired. He looked like he was just getting started. As the creature lifted his hacking sword high, preparing another charge, no doubt, Victor beat him to it, launching forward with a rage-attuned Energy Charge. He smashed into the enormous creature's chest, Lifedrinker leading the way.

Victor had crashed into some big creatures before using that spell. Each time, his own magic sustained and protected him while he either sent the enemy sprawling or they somehow shielded themselves. This time was different. Dunstan didn't shield himself, but neither did he fly backward from the concussion. He flapped his wings and stepped back, but that was the extent of the damage. Victor, for once, had met his match in bulk and strength. The wampyr was built like a diesel engine, solid, unyielding, and just as ugly.

While red, rippling Energy clouded the air in the wake of their crash, Dunstan lifted a hook-nailed foot and kicked Victor in the thigh, dragging his toe claws savagely downward. They ripped through his pants and his flesh, leaving burning tracks that instantly began to bubble and turn black with putrescence. The foul creature had used some disease-ridden Energy to corrupt Victor's flesh. Victor stumbled, agony opening his pathways wide, making room for more rage as he compensated for the knot of fear he felt forming in his gut. Had he bitten off more than he could chew?

Lifedrinker bucked and vibrated in his hand, yearning to fly forth and strike the demonic wampyr, but Victor held her tight; she'd only get herself knocked away, out of his reach, unable to help him further. "Help me . . ." the thought struck a match of inspiration alight in his head, and Victor began to chuckle, annoyed and amused at himself for waiting, once again, for near disaster to think of or, worse, remember what he should have done all along.

"You laugh, meat?"

"Yeah." Victor could already feel his robust vitality and Berserk regeneration battling the corruption in his leg. He could feel the dark, putrescence running down his leg as his body pushed it out, the flesh in his muscles knitting. "Did you call her a toy? My axe?"

Dunstan backed off a step, whipping his stone sword in great, whooshing arcs before himself. "That pitiful blade cannot harm me. I wonder, how long can you maintain this state? This berserk nature? I've fought your kind before—simple-minded rage casters. The berserker rage is certainly intoxicating, but it doesn't last. You're a big man, but you're no wampyr. I'll wear you down, and

then we'll sup on that rich blood, me and my kin. Worse, I'll pay your kind back tenfold for the children you've slain tonight. Take those words to heart, fool; do they not bring despair?"

Victor flexed his thigh, feeling it respond without pain, then he lifted Lifedrinker and said, softly, for her alone, "Okay, chica, let's kill this fucker. I'll give you a boost." Then, Victor cast Imbue Spirit, powering the spell with inspiration-attuned Energy. He sent a shard of his spirit into Lifedrinker, and she instantly reacted, flaring with white, heatless flames. Victor swung her left and right, and her cries of fury and hunger rang through the chamber, bodiless but savage and fierce. A wave of nausea and fatigue struck him as his power poured into Lifedrinker, but he quickly compensated, and then he changed his Sovereign Will boost from strength and vitality to dexterity and agility; it was time for Lifedrinker to work, and that meant he needed to land some more hits.

Victor watched as Dunstan observed his axe coated in ghostly flames. Then, as the great wampyr took in a deep breath, perhaps ready to shout something or release a spell, Victor used some of his abundant fear-attuned Energy and cast Energy Charge. This time, he aimed to the side, and as he ripped over the hard marble floor, he swung Lifedrinker with all his enhanced speed and accuracy, aiming for the giant creature's chest. Dunstan was fast, though, and he managed to get his huge stone sword between Lifedrinker and his flesh. It was a move that may have saved him a mortal injury, but it cost him dearly.

Lifedrinker, tempered by Victor's spirit, imbued with his very soul, his power, his potential, rang like a chime as she impacted that enormous, rose-colored blade and she bit clean through the stone, parting it like a chisel through sandstone. Dunstan roared in fury as he fell back, avoiding Victor's follow-through, clutching the stump of his sword, shortened by two-thirds. Victor, as always, knew when to press an advantage, and he darted forward, weaving Lifedrinker through feints, hacks, thrusts, and cleaves like only a true aficionado of the axe might do. Dunstan, meanwhile, was hobbled, unable to use his broken sword effectively. He might have tried to get a new weapon from some storage container, but Victor's incessant pressure wouldn't allow it.

Lifedrinker began to take a toll, carving away his thick gray flesh and exposing the rotten, thick sludge that passed for Dunstan's blood. Victor roared and laughed, reveling in his foe's distress. "That's right, chica! Carve that fucker like a turkey!" He drove the great wampyr back toward his throne, and as he exposed more and more of the meat beneath the creature's flesh, his banner began to take its toll, sizzling the creature's blood, muscle, and bone with the hot, glittering, yellow light of its bloody sun. Dunstan roared in frustration, gnashing his teeth, hissing, and swinging that truncated blade in futile attempts to stop Lifedrinker's graceful, weaving cleaves.

Victor pushed forward, the dance of death upon him. He was in tune with Lifedrinker, aware of her blade, her handle, every hair's breadth of her steel and wood. He could feel her life force, and she could feel his; they were joined in battle, and nothing Dunstan could do, no trick of Energy, no feat of strength or speed could save him from that slashing, weaving, flaming axe. The heat of her molten core was transformed, adding to the ghostly fire of Victor's inspiration Energy. Each cut she

made left a gaping, blackened wound that refused to heal, not only because of Victor's banner but because of the melding of Victor's and Lifedrinker's spirits within the axe.

Defeated, broken, cowering, Dunstan groveled and scurried, trying to avoid Victor's cuts with the bulk of his stone throne. When he finally realized there was no salvation, he cried out, "Slay this fool! Extinguish his light!" The frenzied susurrations of rushing, gray-skinned creatures and flapping hairless wings distracted Victor and made him glance away for just a moment, and that was all Dunstan needed. He depressed some hidden catch on his throne, causing a hidden clockwork mechanism to rotate it, revealing a deep black hole down which the elder wampyr dropped, and then his children, in their hundreds, were upon Victor.

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Kethelket looked at his haggard, bloodied people. They were gathered upon the banks of the Silver Sea, the dark, brooding fortress of Dunstan the Wampyr several miles away. The sun was still high in the sky, else they'd no doubt have been pursued further. The corpses of Dunstan's thralls, the ones who'd chased them this far, littered the rocky beach. Further upslope toward the keep were dozens more of their corpses—the brave fools who'd tried to keep the Naghelli from fleeing forth.

He silently counted his kin, coming up with ninety-three. He turned to Offathi, "Well? What was your count?"

"Ninety-four, Lord."

"Ninety . . . Oh, you counted me?"

"Aye, Lord." She ducked her head, and Kethelket noted the bloody claw marks on her cheeks, the ripped and battered nature of her armor. Most of his people had been stripped of their dimensional containers. Most of them had damaged or missing armor. Most of them were using weapons he'd passed out from his own containers or taken from dead enemies. He wanted to take the fight to the wampyrs and their thralls. He wanted to slay them all and loot the keep, taking the price of his dead kinfolk in dark, tainted blood. Looking at their faces, the bloody wounds, and the abused state of their equipment, he knew it would cost them dearly to do so.

Even with Victor possibly distracting the worst of the wampyrs, perhaps even killing the lord of the keep, hundreds of fresh, well-armed troops were within those walls. He had no doubt that his people could take a heavy toll, perhaps killing them all, but he'd lose too many. No, he couldn't do that, not when these ragged men and women represented nearly a third of all the Naghelli left in the world.

"Will he live?" At her voice, Kethelket whirled to face Victoria. He'd almost forgotten the strange, undead witch was there.

"He's a survivor."

"So, you think he will?"

“I wouldn’t bet against him.” Kethelket frowned, wishing there was some way he could tell how Victor was doing, some way he could sense him.

“I cannot feel him. He’s too deep,” Victoria said, uncannily guessing what he’d been thinking.

“Well, witch, what will you do?”

“I will follow you and await my release.” She smoothed the black lace bodice on her incongruous flowing gown. Her hands were pale as new snow, even more devoid of color than his own flesh. At least his skin flushed with exertion; hers was always the same: flat white, punctuated by dark veins here and there. She was an odd creature, sure, but she’d shown some honor this day, and if things went badly for Victor, Kethelket would uphold her bargain.

He nodded to her then called out, “Fanasti?”

“Aye, Lord?” The tall scout, sporting a new eyepatch, pushed his way through the huddled Naghelli to stand before him.

“Can you still work your Far Sight magic?”

“Aye, even one-eyed, I can see farther than any of you!” He managed a brave smile despite his obvious discomfort.

“Good. Study those thralls on the parapets yonder. Tell me if you see anything amiss with them.”

Fanasti nodded and turned, holding his two hands in front of his face and concentrating. A moment later, the air between his palms shimmered and turned opaque, taking on an almost liquid nature. As he watched through the strange air, he said, “I see a hundred or more on the walls. They patrol with heightened alertness. Many stand atop the gatehouse, watching us as I watch them. They don’t seem upset more than they ought to be, considering our escape and their comrades’ corpses littering the trail of our passage.”

Kethelket turned back to Victoria. “You’re sure they’ll react when Dunstan dies?”

“Aye. I’m not sure how severely it will affect them, but they’ll feel it. I’d be surprised if they didn’t wail with mad hysterics when it happens.”

Kethelket looked to the sun, then back to the keep. His people were tired, and they weren’t as fast as the wampyr on a good day. They needed a head start if he wanted them to find safety back at the Black Keep. Was he betting against Victor if he left now? “No,” he shook his head, “I have to think of my people first.”

“Pardon, Lord?” Offathi asked. She was probably the only person in this group of Naghelli who would question his mutterings, feisty scout that she was.

He put his hand on Fanasti's shoulder. "You can stop watching. Spread the word. We fly soon." Then he turned to Offathi, "I was saying we need to leave."

"What about Lord Victor?" Her frown was profound, and he could see the tremor along her jaw. She wanted to scream or cry or argue, and she was battling with the impulse. To his surprise, it was Victoria who came to his aid.

"Lord Victor fights to give your people a chance at freedom, at life. If you go back to the keep or linger here too long, any sacrifice he makes, any heroic efforts, will have been wasted."

Kethelket nodded. "She speaks true. Victor bade me assess my people and the defense of the keep and decide what to do. I have decided to get you all back to the Black Keep and to rally the Ninth to come here to finish off these ghoulish, blood-sucking batmen." He raised his voice as he spoke, noting that many of his people were gathering close, trying to hear.

"But Victor . . ."

"We cannot flee!"

"No!"

"I will fight until my fingers cannot hold . . ."

The protests took many shapes, and the faces of his people, fierce and fiery, gave him pride, but Kethelket raised his voice and shouted them down, "Silence! We will return to the Black Keep, and the Ninth will venture forth to give Victor aid. If Lord Victor wishes to leave this place, do any of you think some wampyr vermin will stop him?" That brought silence to their lips as the Naghelli survivors looked at one another, waiting to see if anyone had a different answer. Kethelket knew what they all thought, however. "No," he shouted, "If Lord Victor wishes to leave without killing every undead creature in that keep, then he will do so. He will break free and rejoin us. For now, though, we fly. We fly to safety because that's what he's bought for you, for us."

Kethelket turned and nodded to Victoria, and then he spread his wings, and with a surge of primal, shadow-attuned Energy, he launched himself into the air. He didn't look back. He didn't need to; he could hear his people following him. They may be exhausted, but they'd make haste, and, old ancestors willing, the Ninth would be free to march forth and finish the hard work Victor had started in that keep.

Book 6: Chapter 35: Into the Darkness

Victor roared with fury and dove toward the opening at the base of the throne, but it slid closed as he hurtled through the air. He smashed a shoulder into the huge stone seat, and he felt it give, but nearly imperceptibly so. Victor was just contemplating pulling his gigantic hammer from his storage ring when the first of the wampyrs slammed into him, screaming in a strange mixture of fury, fear, and pain as it found the courage to brave his banner's light and strike a blow for its fleeing lord.

Victor whirled, fury incarnate, and hacked Lifedrinker's razor edge through its throat, sending a fountain of hot, black blood spraying forth. Then the horde was upon him, and despite his superior size, strength, and skill, he found himself losing ground, being pushed away from the dais upon which the throne sat. Victor growled curses in fury and pain—he was fast, and Lifedrinker,

enhanced by his spirit, cut the lesser wampyrs like a scythe through grass, but he was overwhelmed as they clawed over each other, pressing him from every angle, like swarming ants upon a grasshopper.

As their clawed hands grasped and grabbed, pulling at his arms, his helmet, his armor, even his legs and ankles, Victor felt a strange panic, almost like claustrophobia, grip him as he found himself unable to swing Lifedrinker. The wampyrs behind him had taken hold of her haft and were using her length for leverage to pull his arm back. They screamed in agony as the ghostly flames burned their evil flesh, but still, they held on, yanking, howling, and gnashing. Victor had had enough; he bunched his legs, instinctually channeling his Energy to break free with a Titanic Leap. He exploded upward, wampyrs clinging to his every limb, and nearly smashed into the high, vaulted ceiling.

His helmet brushed one of the colossal support beams, and then he began to descend. He'd shed many of the clinging creatures, but some still held on tight, not enough, however. Victor found he was able to swing Lifedrinker again, and so he did, smashing her edge through the skull of a wampyr holding tight to his left leg. The creature fell away in a shower of black, steaming blood and brain matter. Victor's feet hit the marble floor, and he charged for the tunnel entrance. A wampyr on his back bit and clawed at his neck and arms, trying to get past the rim of his helmet, finding purchase in the flesh not covered by his wyrm-scale vest.

Victor roared in pain and mad frustration, reaching a hand over his shoulder to grasp the creature's bat-like ear, yanking it hard as he ran. He felt flesh tear, heard the monster scream, and then it was off his back and falling behind him. When he reached the archway leading to the tunnel from which he'd come, Victor whirled and faced the throng of wampyrs chasing after him. He was insane with fury at this point, completely letting go of reason, letting his rage consume him. He had no intention of allowing Dunstan to get away, had no intention to flee these creatures. If a slaughter was what the wampyr lord had ordered, Victor would deliver it.

The first Wampyr to leap into the tunnel with him met Lifedrinker's edge and was split from its right shoulder to its left hip, falling in two bloody, squelching halves at his feet. Victor roared into the mist of blood, and the charging creatures slowed, realizing they couldn't overwhelm him as easily now that they couldn't surround him. Victor didn't pause, didn't think; he squatted down, smashed a fist into the open chest cavity of the wampyr that he'd just split, and yanked out its hot, black heart. In a calm, relaxed setting, Victor might have balked at what his Quinametzin alter ego was doing, but his titanic, rageful self didn't flinch. He'd eaten worse—arachnid hearts, night brute hearts; this was nothing, just a snack.

He tossed the steaming morsel into his mouth and bit down with his strong jaws. The heat of the blood seemed to intensify as he swallowed, and he felt it explode with Energy in his gut as his Quinametzin bloodline did its thing, capturing some essence from the slain wampyr and sending it into him. Victor felt his nearly depleted rage-attuned Energy surge with renewed power as the heart's Energy flowed into his Core. As his vision darkened to deep crimson, tunneling on the edges so his only focus was before him, the creatures keeping him from his prey, Victor let loose.

He cast Energy Charge with fear-attuned Energy, streaking to the front of their pack, punching Lifedrinker's smoking axe head through the central wampyr's chest, and blasting a dozen of the creatures back into each other, breaking bones, cracking skulls, and rupturing flesh with the thunderous impact. Then he began to lay about himself with Lifedrinker, moving like a graceful

executioner among the condemned, hacking limbs, cleaving skulls, and smashing bones. All the while, he continued to roar and scream his fury. Soon the air of that underground hall was thick with a hot, humid mist; blood and piss and fear filled the air.

Whenever the wampyrs began to crowd around him, using their numbers to overwhelm him, Victor would charge or leap away, regrouping in the tunnel and slaughtering those who came after him. When the creatures grew too wary to pursue, he'd charge them instead, starting the cycle anew. Twice more, Victor ate the hearts of his foes, and each time, he felt his Core swell with the Energy, not only refueling him but expanding, pushing toward advancement. The idea of it made him laugh all the more, reveling in the slaughter and the fact that, while he wore the awful creatures down, he grew more powerful.

To their credit, the monstrous wampyrs never gave up, never fled. Perhaps they couldn't—the only exits to the great hall that Victor could see were the tunnel in which he stood and the closed throne. His banner's light kept them from regenerating and likely reduced their strength and potency. Something about the light shed by his bloody sun was too real for them, too like the sun outside, and it burned their exposed wounds, sizzled their blood, and stole the confidence from their movements.

When the attacks stopped coming, and Victor stood in the tunnel mouth surrounded by piles of corpses and pools of blood, it was almost a surprise to him. He'd gotten into a rhythm of death, a dance of destruction, and nearly lost track of his purpose beyond fighting and slaying. He stood, a gore-covered giant, chest heaving, axe dripping and sizzling with the blood of his vanquished enemies. After a moment, when it registered that he'd won, that the fight was over, he strode toward the throne, but not before the System decided the lull in his fighting was enough, that it was time to award him the Energy he'd won.

Gigantic pools of it, gleaming golden in the dark, began to form above the mounds of corpses, and soon, they flowed together and streamed toward Victor, joined by thinner streams from the corridors above where he'd fought his way to face Dunstan. The shimmering purple and gold Energy told Victor these creatures weren't much higher than tier five. Still, altogether, the Energy he'd won from them was enough to lift him into an insensate paroxysm of euphoria. He arched his back and yawped like the titan he was, and his victory sound echoed through the chamber and into the corridors above.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 56 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Core has leveled: Advanced 6.*****

Victor's fury hadn't survived the flood of euphoria, and when he finally fell back to the floor, refreshed and renewed, he was no longer Berserk. He stood and took stock; it seemed the wampyrs who'd been willing to fight were all dead; no sounds of pursuit or reinforcement came from the tunnel. The room was silent save for the occasional drip of blood from one surface or another into puddles on the floor. Victor looked at the throne and frowned. Though his rage had faded, his determination to chase Dunstan had not.

Lifedrinker still smoked with the fire of inspiration, flickering with white flames ignited by the shard of his spirit he'd sent into her. "Are you good, chica?"

The axe didn't answer him with words, but he felt overwhelming confidence and affection as the haft vibrated eagerly in his hand. Victor smiled and then looked at the mounds of dead wampyrs. He could spend some time searching their hairless, naked, mangled corpses for loot, but instead, he figured he could earn some points with his ancestors. He walked around the room, casting Honor the Spirits on each pile. As they burst into ghostly fire, he gathered the lone corpses scattered here and there and sent that pile to the spirits as well. After burning that last mound of bodies, he held Lifedrinker before himself and pronounced, "This fight was for you, Chantico. Thank you for saving me and granting me your flames!"

"Now let's see about this pinché throne." Victor was about to summon his maul from storage, but then he saw the bloody smears near the rear corner of the throne where Dunstan had been scrabbling with his mangled arm. He studied the marks and the stonework and then reached out to press on a loop of stone with a hairline gap around it. It pressed down with a soft grinding click, and then the throne rumbled and slid to the side, revealing the dark hole down which Dunstan had leaped.

"Okay, chica, what am I supposed to do here? Jump in there? That fucker can fly; what if it's a mile deep?" Victor summoned a Globe of Insight, sending the ghostly light down through the hole. All he saw was the orb in a void of blackness. He sent it further and again, only saw the orb, even as it grew small. "That's one big damn hole or cave or something." He looked at Lifedrinker, studying her ghostly flickering flames. "I'm going to take my spirit back for now. Time to change things up a little." Lifedrinker pulsed with emotion, sending it into Victor through his hands, where they held her.

The emotion was so raw and direct that Victor momentarily felt it was his own. He felt like someone he loved was leaving, like his heart was breaking, like he'd be left all alone, and he found himself on one knee before the open hole in the ground, blinking back tears. "Jesus, chica! It's not that bad! I'll be right here, like always."

"Not the same!"

Her words came to his mind in a rushed whisper, tinged with despair. *"I've never felt so close to you before. This is more, Victor! Please don't leave me long."*

"I won't. You know I fight a lot. I'll share my spirit with you again." Reluctant acceptance came to him through the axe, and Victor breathed a long, shaky sigh. He carefully severed the connection of Energy to the spell, and he felt his spirit come back into him, expanding his potential and adding to his attributes

and Energy. He wiped his forehead, breathing a deep, shaky breath, unable to lose the feeling that something about him was different. Had his spirit changed while it was with Lifedrinker? Had he changed from the connection they'd shared?

He found himself cradling the axe, still kneeling by the hole, and shook his head, standing up and growling as he tried to refocus his mind, remembering why he was there. "Time to find this pendejo. Okay, buddy, if you want to hide in a deep, dark hole, maybe I should give you a reason to fear the dark." He knew that Dunstan had fled into the depths, weakened and horribly wounded, but the wampyr had the ability to regenerate. Could he have fully healed in the time Victor was fighting his thralls? Victor could have; he knew that, especially with the aid of healing potions. Surely, the wampyr lord had healing potions . . .

"Oh well. I'll find him. Then, if I need to, I'll beat him down again." Victor reached into his Core, pulled out a thick ribbon of fear-attuned Energy, and cast Aspect of Terror. As the shadows poured forth, cloaking his body in their cold embrace, he groaned and growled, used to, but not loving the feeling of his body changing, stretching, twisting into something terrible. Perhaps it was his mind growing accustomed to the effect, or maybe it had something to do with the strength of his Core and his powerful will, but the metamorphosis seemed faster, less jarring, and, though his sense of himself, of Victor, fled to a corner of his mind, he still felt aware, in control, as the shadows fell away to gather at his taloned feet.

The world had grown colorless, just a field of gray-scale angles and shapes. As he'd changed, his Banner of the Champion had faded, and Victor knew, on a basic level, that his glory-attuned Energy couldn't share his pathways with his fear-attuned Energy; they were incompatible. He thought about that, about how his inspiration Energy was probably the same, as his Aspect of Terror stalked around the hole, turning to glare around, noting the absence of life, of Energy in that big, vaulted chamber. There was nothing there to feed his hunger, nothing there to share his fear. No, what he sought was down below, through that dark opening. Without another thought, he dropped through.

The space he fell into was gargantuan—a vast underground cavern in which a city might be erected. Victor didn't fall; he spread his black-feathered wings and banked, gliding in a wide circle as he scanned the gray expanse. He saw signs of life, little glimmering spirits among the stones and boulders so far below. He saw them in the heights, near tunnel mouths and adjoining caverns. They were pitiful little things, hardly worth the effort to chase down. No, he sought something more; the foe that had fled him was down here, and it had a rich spirit, something worthy of his time.

Ever widening his spiral, he glided, peering into the darkness with his smoky purple-black eyes. No shadow could obscure his quarry; the blooming glow of spirits was the only color in his world, the only brightness. He knew that when he saw the object of his hunt, it would be like a star rising in a black sky. So vast was the cavern that he could only see two sides of it, even from his high, spiraling flight. He began to bank away from the walls, into the darkness, further toward the distant reaches of the enormous space, hoping to find the extremities.

Hunger gripped him, twisting his mind and making him consider desperate ideas. Should he leave this place? Could he fight his way to the surface where he might find more spirits to feast upon? He'd only been wearing the Aspect of Terror for a dozen minutes, yet it was already twisting his intention. Yes, there was a feast for him down here, but it was hiding, and how enriching could one spirit be? Shouldn't he seek more fruitful pastures? Couldn't he find a city nearby? Something like the one he'd glimpsed back when he'd been new to the Aspect? Surely there must be better hunting grounds than . . .

Victor was saved from further debate with his terror-born self by the rushing flap of great leathery wings and Dunstan's savage roar as he tore through the air, driving a yard of steel, the tip of a great pike, through Victor's side, forcing him down, twisting and bleeding, toward the rocky ground. He didn't feel pain, not in that shape, not as a manifestation of terror. What would be the point of that? No, he felt the spear, knew it was piercing his shadowy flesh, but he didn't care. All that mattered was his loss of control. Dunstan was much larger than he, and his wings were powerful. Soon, he'd crash into that ground, and he'd be trapped by that glimmering, dark-metal pike.

In the corner of his mind, Victor reached into his Core and summoned forth a thick rope of rage-attuned Energy, letting it loose in his pathways as he invoked his Iron Berserk. Suddenly, the Aspect of Terror opened its razor-edged beak and screeched with fury, a shriek that elongated and rose in volume as his mass surged, doubling in an instant. He twisted, wrenching the pike sideways, ignoring the pain as he furiously lashed out with his talons, grasping Dunstan's shoulders and squeezing, driving their long, dagger tips into his skin, gridding down into the bones.

The wampyr lord roared in agony, twisting the pike, still piercing Victor's shadowy torso. They tumbled together, falling rapidly, but the Aspect of Terror was in control now, and it cracked open its great wings, taking charge of their descent. Now, it was Dunstan falling backward toward the ground, with Victor's nightmarish form on top, wings spread wide. Still, when they impacted the ground, despite his back and head smashing into the hard, stony surface, Dunstan held onto the pike, and the leverage it afforded him, poking through Victor's body, sent them tumbling apart.

When the dust settled, Victor lay twenty paces from the downed wampyr, the pike still jutting from his guts. He grasped it with a bloody talon and yanked it free, allowing his shadowy flesh to swirl and close over the gaping holes. Dunstan was already on his feet, a tremendous, spiked mace in one hand. "Quite the transformation. A more suitable guise, indeed. I felt the loss of my children, fiend. Trust that your kin will suffer for an eternity to pay the passage of their souls. Come then, you'll not fare so well down here in the shadows of my seat of power."

The Aspect of Terror studied the brilliant, flaring spirit. Such colors! It pulsed from yellow to ochre to crimson, always bright, always alluring. It was speaking, saying some words that didn't register, but it didn't matter—here was a feast worthy of his efforts! He lifted his razored beak and shrieked, sending out a wave of fear-attuned Energy, watching to see how it would affect this spirit. Would it take root and begin the process of converting its Energy into something he could consume?

Dunstan stepped back from the screech, holding the mace high, ready to strike the monstrous nightmare should it leap for him. He reached up to touch the puncture wounds on his shoulder with his free hand. He smiled as his fingers felt his flesh knitting closed. His eyes flashed with crimson light as he began to summon Energy. The creature snapped its wings, leaping for him, claws extended. Dunstan whipped his spiked mace as fast as a thunderbolt, deep red-black Energy

enhancing the weapon. It smashed into the nightmare's side, but the creature completely ignored the attack, falling on him with slashing, stabbing talons and beak.

The Aspect of Terror ripped and clawed, ignoring the crushing, puncturing blows Dunstan delivered to its side, ignoring the blasts of dark, burning Energy that rolled out of the wampyr. Victor's Berserk Energy, his nightmarish form, was durable beyond Dunstan's ability to harm him. For each crushing blow that bent or broke his bones, shadows poured forth, weaving around the damage, knitting him together. His very flesh was shadow, and as Dunstan damaged it, more flowed to fill the gaps.

Meanwhile, he ripped and tore, but that shimmering, glowing spirit never broke, never bled forth, never flowed into him, shaped into fear. Dunstan was resilient, and the Aspect of Terror couldn't rip him enough to pull him apart, couldn't break his will, not in that dark place. Deep in the corner of his mind where he'd retreated, where he'd gone to allow the Aspect to do what it did best, Victor became aware of its frustration. Dunstan healed too quickly and was too strong without the light of his Banner weakening him.

Victor knew he was the one really in control, knew he could banish the Aspect of Terror with a thought, but he also knew he was in a gigantic dark space. If he couldn't fly, Dunstan could flee. If he dropped the Aspect, he feared the wampyr would escape. Instead, he considered an alternative. With a desperately fervent focus of his will, he urged the Aspect to look to his chest, to his lungs, to feel the fire burning there. He urged it to use those roiling flames.

Book 6: Chapter 36: The Voices in Our Minds

Valla stood atop the parapet and watched as the world burned. When Victor had come up with the idea to burn the trees, to start a fire that would hopefully kill the undead hordes hiding in that foggy forest, she'd tried to visualize what it would be like. She'd never seen a forest fire, never seen one of the brush fires that sometimes brought refugees into Gelica from the northern plains. She'd smelled the smoke in the air and seen the sun turn into a hazy, red-orange globe in the sky, but she'd never been close enough to see the flames. She'd never seen the night sky light up with such an evil, amber glow.

"I didn't realize how big it would be . . ." she muttered, mostly to herself, but Edeya heard her.

"It's like we unleashed a monster, something a hundred times worse than the undead lurking in those trees." Apparently, the young Ghelli was also struggling to come to grips with what they'd done. The flames hadn't yet reached the trees directly bordering the extensive clearing around the keep, but they couldn't be far off. Valla could hear the fire, a low, incessant, rumbling roar. If you didn't focus on it, you could almost forget it was there, a testament to the adaptability of the mind, almost like living near a loud river or waterfall.

"Hard to believe that low rumble is the sound of the fire. Imagine! If you broke down those noises, you'd hear crackling flames, cracking and popping wood, falling branches and trees, thrashing, burning undead. Stampeding animals!" She turned to Edeya, looking into her bright, blue eyes, her pale face highlighted

by the beautiful, blue, shimmering lights of her new wings. “The flames will reach us soon. Sarl has his Wind Casters ready to funnel the smoke away while it passes.”

“Good for us, but what of all the creatures that made this forest their home?”

Valla frowned. “As Victor said, if we don’t beat these undead invaders, this forest would soon be dead or twisted, the animals worse off. At least they can flee the flames.”

“True. However, many creatures have perished already. Did you see the stampede a couple of hours ago? I’ve never seen so many woodland animals together!”

“I was corresponding with Rellia, but Sarl told me about it.” Valla gripped the smooth, black stones of the parapet and, still staring out into the glowing orange smoke, quietly asked, “Do you think they’ve made it yet?”

“Victor?” When Valla’s only response was a quick nod, Edeya clasped her slender hand around her wrist. “I’m sure they have. You’ve seen how fast that great spirit mount can run!”

“I hate that he took that woman with him.”

“I know! She . . . gives me a bad feeling. I suppose it’s primarily because she’s one of them.” Edeya gestured toward the forest, and Valla knew she meant the undead. “Still, I worry that she’s taking advantage of Victor’s big, stupid heart.” She laughed to soften the words, and Valla chuckled along with her.

“He certainly suffers from that affliction. Too much heart.” Her smile fell away, and she looked upward, blinking rapidly. “Of course, that’s what I love about him, too.”

“I know. I know!” Edeya squeezed her wrist again, and Valla cleared her throat, glancing up and down the parapet, confirming that the soldiers on watch weren’t staring at her.

“Well, that’s enough misty-eyed nonsense. Those flames will be here soon, and with their passage, we’ll learn how effective they were at culling the undead.”

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At the urging pressure of Victor’s will, his nightmarish alter ego, struggling in a slashing, gnashing, grappling match with the huge wampyr, took note of the warmth in his otherwise cold, hard chest. Now that he was aware, that fire within vied for his attention, almost outshining the brilliant crimson-orange-yellow spirit with which he fought. The heat tickled there, almost like an itch, like a pressure that wanted to release. Yes, that was it; it wanted out. It wanted to vent forth!

Gripping Dunstan with his talons, slashing at him with his razor beak, the Aspect of Terror flapped his wings, fighting against Dunstan's near-equal strength as the huge wampyr gripped and clawed at his shadowy flesh and pushed and pulled with his own wings. The two wrestled and rolled, smashing into stones and sliding over the enormous cavern's floor. They tore through great fungi mounds, slid through brackish, muddy water, and scattered ancient bones left over from some vast predator's meal. They screamed and shrieked and cried out with fury and pain, though the latter came only from the wampyr; the Aspect of Terror felt no pain, only hunger.

As they battered and struggled, Victor's nightmare form exuded fear, pushing it out in cloudy, purple-black waves. His roiling shadows sought to wrap around the wampyr, tried to enter his wounds and twist his spirit. Dunstan was powerful, though, and his will resisted him. The nightmare's frustration mounted, and he continued to ponder the fire in his chest, seeking a way to send it forth. Victor, tiny in that dark corner of his mind, was aware of his hungry nightmare form's frustration, and he tried to guide it. He willed it to breathe, to open its Energy pathway, and exhale.

With a triumphant shriek, the Aspect of Terror finally made the connection. With a minute shift of his will, the Energy pathway to his lungs opened, the roiling flames of its breath Core drained into his lungs, and he opened his mouth to let them pour forth. Dunstan instantly released his hold on Victor's terror-born aspect. His monstrous face twisted in agony and surprise as those hot, liquid flames bathed his chest and neck, pouring down over his torso and splashing onto his arms, face, and legs. He thrashed desperately, trying to get free, but the nightmare held him, claws bone-deep in his shoulders and thighs.

As Dunstan thrashed and his flesh burned away, his magical healing halted by the fire, Victor's monstrous archon of fear began to taste the echo of that dark emotion in Dunstan's heart. Finally, he'd overcome the wampyr's prodigious will. That bright spirit began to bleed out in dark, purple-black waves, and he took it in. Dunstan moaned and writhed, but he grew ever weaker as his spirit dimmed and Victor's Core expanded with his feeding frenzy. Victor felt it, knew what was happening, and let go of any control he'd been fighting to maintain; his alter ego had earned his reward.

Sometime later, he opened his eyes to utter darkness. He lay flat on his back on a hard surface, and the only sounds he could make out were faint drips of water, distant rustles like a paper blown by a breeze, and occasional scrabbling scratches that evoked images of mice or rats in his mind. The last thing he remembered was being a passenger to his Aspect of Terror, watching and helping as it sought to kill Dunstan. He remembered the glorious release of his breath Core and the subsequent feasting on Dunstan's spirit, but then he'd let go, exhausted by his struggles with the Aspect's will.

It was a strange thing to think about. The Aspect was him. The will he'd been struggling against was his own. What part of him was putting up that fight? What part of him was "Victor," and what part was the Aspect? He knew, objectively, that the part of him that was ruled by fear, that hungered for its release, took over when he transformed, but that was just his Energy. No, he corrected himself; it was a part of his spirit, of who he was, and it was strong. He supposed "Victor," when it came to those struggles, was the rest of him, the other facets of his nature.

Shaking his head at his waking musings, Victor pushed himself to a sitting position, immediately noting that he clutched Lifedrinker's haft in one hand. "Como estas, beautiful?" The axe didn't answer him with words, but she vibrated

comfortingly in his hand—she was fine. “Let’s get some light on this subject!” Victor built the pattern for Globe of Insight and pushed a huge amount of Energy into it. Like a flare igniting, a brilliant ball of white-gold light exploded into being above his head. Victor willed it to rise and watched as his surroundings were revealed.

He knew immediately that he was still in the great cavern beneath Dunstan’s castle. He could tell from the hunks of rock, the pools of water, the mounds of fungi. Even in the brilliant light of his orb, he couldn’t see the walls, couldn’t see the distant ceiling. “Where is that pendejo?” Victor frowned, realizing he had no System messages waiting for him. Even so, he’d only recently leveled. There was a good chance he hadn’t gained anything tangible from the death of the wampyr lord—the System wouldn’t tell him if he’d improved skills or levels unless they’d crested the next threshold.

He scanned the ground nearby, saw scattered bones, smears, and smudges of mud and blood, and knew he’d been fighting the wampyr nearby. Had he sacrificed his body to his ancestors? No, the Aspect wouldn’t do that, and Victor would remember if he had. He turned in a slow circle, looking for clues, and then he saw, on the other side of a shallow, brackish pool, smears of silty clay and blood, almost like something had been dragged through the water and out the other side. “Or like something dragged itself,” he grunted, striding forward, willing his globe to follow.

He splashed through the shallow pool, only sinking to his ankles in the thin sediment at the bottom, and when he emerged on the other side, he stood stock still, closed his eyes, and listened. He heard dripping water nearby and in the distance. He heard the soft flutter of tiny wings, the scuttle of little clawed feet, and then, almost too soft to notice, the faint, panting breaths and scuffing rustle of flesh dragging over stone. Victor opened his eyes and walked toward the sound. He rounded a large boulder, skirted a monstrous mushroom, and saw his pitiful quarry.

Dunstan’s body was withered and frail. One wing was gone, burned to a blackened stump; his torso was similarly charred, and both of his arms were more like something you’d see on a rotting corpse than a vital, powerful vampiric creature. Through his blackened, charred flesh, Victor could see the white of bones, and he knew his enemy must be on death’s door. “Leaving?” he asked, striding forward, Lifedrinker in a loose, two-handed grip.

Dunstan grunted and hissed, twisting to peer back at him through a face half burned to the skull. Only one eye reflected the glow of his light as he coughed in a wheezing voice, “Leave me.”

“Is that a request?”

“Mercy, devil!”

“Oh? I’m the devil? Wasn’t it you who threatened everyone I knew, said you’d make their lives an eternity of suffering?” Victor wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. No, he liked to think he only enjoyed fighting and killing when his blood was hot. Nonetheless, he couldn’t find any mercy in his heart for the twisted, ignoble monster crawling before him. He had questions he’d like to ask, information he’d

like to gather from this man, this thing, but he couldn't stomach the idea of bargaining with the fiend. Though he didn't feel any qualms about finishing him off, he couldn't bring himself to embrace the idea of torture, either.

"I'll help you against Hector!"

Just as Victor had surmised, he was bargaining already. Could he take his information with false promises? Say he'd let him live, get what he wanted, and then kill him? He felt that was taking things beyond justice and into territory that might feed the darker parts of his soul. Instead, he tried honesty. "I'm going to end your suffering, Dunstan. I will not allow you to recover and will not bargain with you. Is there anything you'd like to tell me before the end?" As he mentioned allowing Dunstan to recover, Victor wondered what that would entail. Did he need blood like the vampires in the stories on Earth? Did he simply need time? Rather than risk it, he summoned his Banner of the Champion and watched as its glittering yellow light joined that of his globe, and Dunstan cried out, recoiling and curling into a fetal position.

"Devil!" he croaked. "Kill me, then! Know that I'll curse you to hell and back. If I don't kill you in this life, I . . ." His words stopped short as Lifedrinker's smoking edge severed his thick, blackened neck. Victor watched the wampyr's misshapen head roll away, and then he kicked the giant, charred corpse with his boot, flipping it onto its back. He lifted Lifedrinker and chopped at the blackened flesh over the ribs, hacking again and again until she split through those lifeless bones. The corpse was less resilient than in life, and soon, he'd made a large opening.

"Thank you, chica." He carefully wiped Lifedrinker's edge on his sturdy leather pants and slung her into her harness. "Come here, bastard." He grabbed the edges of the wampyr's ribs and pulled, straining to widen the opening. When the dead bones still resisted him, he remembered his Sovereign Will bonus and switched it from dexterity to strength. As his muscles swelled and he felt a surge of vigor, he yanked and pulled on those bones, eliciting wet crunches and cracks as the cartilage and bone cracked and tore. When the hole was big enough, he plunged his fist into the opening and dug until he wrapped his fingers around the huge, stiff muscle of the creature's heart.

Victor tugged and jerked, but the damn thing wouldn't come loose. In frustration, he let his rage loose into his pathways, and as his vision reddened and his anger began to mount, he gave in and cast Iron Berserk. His fist was still closed around the heart, and as he exploded with size, mass, and power, he roared and yanked, ripping the heart out of the creature with a triumphant bellow. Bits of flesh, blood, and bone showered down as he beheld the glistening prize in his fist. His chest heaved with the effort, and his mouth began to salivate at the sight.

A soft crackling sound distracted him enough to look away from the heart. Looking down, he saw that the wampyr's corpse was slowly blackening further, and as the flesh fell off, he saw the bones had become like blackened coals with orange embers burning their way out from the inside. The

creature was burning to ash before his eyes! Even in his rageful state, Victor wasn't dumb, and when he felt the heart growing hot in his hand, he understood what was happening—his trophy would burn up and join the rest of the wampyr as it dissolved. Without a second thought, he opened his titanic jaws and bit the organ in half, choking it down as quickly as he could before stuffing the other half in.

Beneath his rage, Victor felt satisfaction; even in death, Dunstan had tried to cheat him of his due, but he'd acted quickly and decisively. He wanted to laugh, roar, and taunt Dunstan's departing spirit, but his mouth was full, and he could feel the flesh trying to ignite despite his efforts. It was hot, like he'd gulped a ladle of boiling soup, but he didn't care. He was Flame-Touched and a child of the Quinametzin. Hot flesh wouldn't dissuade him. Victor chomped the rest of the meaty, bitter heart and swallowed it down. As it ignited in his belly, he lifted his head and roared into the enormous cavern. Echoes responded—titans roaring back to him, and he smiled at the sound as he fell to his knees, then tilted backward as darkness took him.

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In the light of dawn, Valla looked out again over the castle's ramparts. She saw nothing but a blackened, twisted wasteland that surrounded the keep. She walked the parapets, looking in every direction for signs of the undead, for signs of other enemies, and, most of all, for signs of Victor. The fires had come an hour after sunset and burned with the fury of mythical hells—walls of flame that rose hundreds of feet into the air, higher than the tallest trees surrounding the keep. If there hadn't been half a mile of damp, misty grass between the forest and the keep, she wasn't sure even the Pyromancers and Wind Casters could have saved them. They might have cooked to death inside the stone walls.

As it was, the casters of the Ninth had been taxed, working for hours to funnel the smoke and heat away from the keep while the wall of fire slowly burned its way past them. Valla couldn't see any undead moving on the scorched fields around the keep, and nothing moved in the blackened forest. She wasn't surprised; she didn't know how anything could live through that. Had Victor even made it through? She'd seen him leap and knew he was resistant to fire, but even so, she had a new worry now that she'd seen the fire's ferocity.

She stopped her tour on the north side of the keep, looking to where the fire had gone, wondering if it had reached the edge of the trees. Had it consumed all the fuel, starved itself, and ended its brief, violent reign of terror? That's where she stood, hands gripping the black stone parapet with white knuckles, her tension bleeding into her every move when a soft flutter behind her and a sparkle of blue light told her Edeya had found her. "Did Sarl give you the news?" she asked as she settled onto the stone beside her.

"No! Tell me!"

"They rescued the Naghelli, almost all of them. Kethelket brings them here, but he says Victor stayed. He ordered Kethelket to get the Naghelli out while he created a distraction and tried to kill Dunstan."

"Why are they coming here? We're only hearing this now?" Valla practically shrieked.

“I asked the same. Ronaga, one of Kethelket’s lieutenants, let me read the message. His people were badly injured, missing their armor and weapons. They were fleeing pursuit, and he knew we couldn’t leave until the fire passed anyway, so he didn’t write immediately. He didn’t want to leave, Valla, but Victor told Kethelket not to let his people die trying to help him. He says . . .”

“Damn him!” Valla interrupted and didn’t know if she was angry at Kethelket or Victor. She turned and reached for her sword hilt, trusting in the spirit within the blade to calm her. She’d yet to awaken it, to hear its conscious thoughts, but she swore she could feel things from it. As she’d hoped, the cool, vibrant Energy within the hilt helped to ground her. “Go on.”

“He says that his people need to recover, but he wants to join you and the Ninth in taking Dunstan’s keep. He says that the keep’s defenders are weakened whether Victor wins or not. He says it may not be too late to help Victor.” Edeya stopped speaking and watched Valla’s face, and when Valla’s emotions and thoughts spun out of control, and she struggled to find a response, Edeya said, “Let’s claim this keep right now and march! Leave a hundred soldiers to hold it with Kethelket’s wounded people.”

Edeya’s words were like a slap in the face, snapping her out of it. Of course! They needed to march! Victor might be in trouble, might need her help. Despite her conscious thought, a tiny voice in the back of her mind said, “Or he might be dead.” She scowled, squelching that dissenting fragment of her mind, and started jogging for the nearest stairway. “Let’s go! I’ll meet you by the System stone!”

Book 6: Chapter 37: Out of Darkness

Victor floated in a dark, timeless void, his meandering thoughts the only clue to his continued existence. His physical presence was gone; his inner self, the place where his aura and Cores existed, was gone. He drifted free, weightless, bodiless, a clump of thoughts held together by his conscious perusal of them. He looked at his youth, at his frustrations with identity, at his fear of being abandoned. He studied his teen years, his anger, his violence, and his desperate grasp at control and belonging in competitive sports. He reviewed his time on Fanwath and Zaafor and studied his growth, the relationships he’d made, and the control he’d gained over his raw emotions.

Victor, if he were able to mark time, would have noted the disparate length of time he spent watching, savoring, and rewatching his time with those he held affection for. He remembered Yrella, poor, kind, luckless, Yrella. He watched himself grow close to Edeya, saw himself lose his mind trying to protect her from the vile bastards that ran the mine. He saw himself befriendng Thayla and then growing to love and respect her. Yrella and Edeya had been enough, but when Victor saw Thayla, he felt his heart would burst, and that’s when he remembered who he was and believed he still existed, still lived.

Still, the void lingered, and his mind continued on, reviewing his relationships. He saw Chandri, felt his infatuation with her again, felt a sting and warm glow in his shoulder, and that sensation nearly pulled him out of the void he lingered in; he had a body, he just couldn’t see it, couldn’t feel it. His

heart was fit to burst, but then he relived his time with Oynalla, Old Mother, and a stinging, itching sensation reminded him that he had eyes and that they were weeping. His mind drifted on, and he remembered Valla. He saw her as he'd first met her, standing in the antechamber to Rellia's quarters—prim, polite, stiff as a board. Again, his heart swelled to bursting as he relived his relationship with her.

He remembered getting to know her on the ride to Persi Gables, how she'd gone against Rellia to aid him in his quest for knowledge and vengeance. He watched as they were trapped on Zaafor and how they grew closer and closer, despite Tes or, perhaps, because of their mutual affection for her. Tes! Victor hadn't thought of her in a while, but he did now, and his affection and love-swollen heart panged with a nostalgia his young spirit wasn't used to. What could have been? What might be?

"Gods be good, lad; your tethers pull hard! I almost lost hold of you!" The voice shattered his reminiscence, pulling him back to the dark void, to the nothingness in which he drifted. He recognized it, a gruff, deep, manly voice—Golgothaz. He tried to respond, but, as before, he hadn't the means with which to form words. "Don't fight to speak. Just listen! I took an interest in you and told you I'd give you my mark, and I did. Through that connection, I felt a struggle within you, and now I've pulled you here to provide a warning. Hear me well: the spirit you've consumed and try to integrate into yourself will indeed grant you a boon, but it comes at a great cost. Gain the unnatural resistance to death of your foe at the expense of your vital force. If that isn't something you desire, I suggest you fight it; battle the change, crush the spirit, and absorb only its Energy."

Victor's mind spun. Vital force? Did Golgothaz mean that literally, as in the attribute, vitality? Or did he mean vital as in life? Was Dunstan's heart making him undead as he drifted in the strange, timeless void? Again, he wished he could speak, to question the powerful entity, but his drifting had taken on a different nature; he experienced the sensation of falling despite the lack of gravity or even a body, and Golgothaz's final words came to him as though from a great distance. "You've been warned. Choose as you will."

Suddenly, Victor was back in his body, fully cognizant of his flesh, his heart, his Core, his spirit, and his pathways. He could feel the burning, acidic touch of the heart's strange brand of Energy as it worked to corrupt his cells, to change them into something more resilient, more dense, and capable of holding Energy, but thanks to Golgothaz's warning, he recognized the cost; his body would become more immediately powerful at the expense of his vital, living force. What other costs would he have to bear? Would his unfeeling flesh affect his spirit? His heart? Would he lose the depths of his emotions? How different would a Victor, numb to his passions, be? Would he even be Victor?

These thoughts rushed at him, conclusions he leaped to by following logic that may be faulty but was surely grounded in anecdotal evidence. Victor was a man of passion and warmth, a man who loved deeply and rode raging rivers of anger like a mythical steed. He knew one thing for certain: he would never trade his life, his potential, his current dreams, and his goals for an undead existence, even if it strengthened him in the short term. Hadn't he just beat the shit out of thousands

of undead? Perhaps he'd not met their greatest exemplars, but there was no way he wanted to join that team.

With that conviction, Victor gathered his will. He turned his gaze inward and pulled on his indomitable aura for strength. He reached out beyond his pathways and pulled it in, using it to lead the charge against the foreign Energy he'd consumed, driving it out of his pathways, ripping it from the cells it had invaded, corralling it into his Core where he wound his furious hot rage-attuned Energy around it, then layered his other Energies, one after the other, around that cold, blue-black ball of death-attuned Energy that had exploded out of the heart. Within that ball of Energy, at the very center, a shard of Dunstan's spirit burned like a white-hot coal, pulsing, and flexing, resisting his efforts to break it down.

Victor growled, clenching his teeth as sweat exploded from his pores. His face turned bright red, and the veins in his eyes burst, turning the scleras crimson. He pressed his mountainous will down on the ball of Energies, exerting such a psychic pressure that he felt certain its collapse would cause an implosion that might be his undoing. Still, he focused and squeezed, pouring more and more of his Energy into the ball, and finally, with a release that felt like death, the fragment of Dunstan's spirit broke apart and bled into the death-attuned Energy. Without the wampyr lord's spirit providing resistance, his other Energies crushed the death affinity out of the ball, converting it to roiling, pure golden Energy that he carefully fed into his four affinities.

Victor sighed, releasing his hold on his Core, relaxing his aura, and letting himself breathe. When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing but darkness but, bright against that black landscape, was a System message:

*****Congratulations! Your Core has leveled: Advanced 8.*****

"No 'unnatural resistance to death,' but two Core levels. I'll take it." He sighed heavily, sat up, and cast Globe of Inspiration. He still sat in the depths of the massive cavern beneath Dunstan's castle. Not far away was a vaguely humanoid-shaped pile of ash, and he knew it was the wampyr's remains. The idea that he'd almost joined the ranks of the undead sent an involuntary shiver up the nape of his neck, and he said, "Fucking hell. Thanks, Golgothaz."

Thinking about it, though, he wondered why he hadn't had any trouble consuming the lesser wampyr hearts. Were the shards of their spirits too weak to begin the process? Had they simply collapsed under the weight of his will? One thing was sure: Dunstan's will had been prodigious. He'd fought off his Aspect of Terror for a long, long time, only succumbing when he'd been nearly cooked to death. His shard had put up a hell of a fight, too, not wanting to be broken down to pure Energy. "Note to self: Don't eat powerful undead hearts."

Victor stood up and walked over to the pile of ashes. He dragged his boots through them, sifting for anything the creature might have left behind. He was about to give up, finding nothing but rocks and fungi beneath the remains, but then a tinkling clink of metal caught his ear, and he reached down to snag up a large, silver key with four sets of teeth. It hung from a finely crafted, jewel-studded chain. Victor held the key and its lovely chain up in the bright light of his orb. "I wonder

what you're meant to open." He stored the key away, and then he sent more Energy into his light, growing it to floodlight proportions and sending it as high as he could with his will.

In the brighter light, he could just make out the extremities of the cavern in front of him and on his left. Looking up, he saw the distant ceiling and, scrutinizing it, didn't see the hole he'd fallen through. He turned toward what he thought was the center of the enormous space and started walking, scanning his surroundings for clues and constantly looking up, trying to see the hole that would be his exit back to the keep above. It only took him a few minutes to see it. The opening might be small, a square shadow among other shadows, but Victor had good eyes, and his light touched the ceiling just enough to highlight the contours of the opening.

"How the hell am I supposed to . . ." Victor let his words trail off as he contemplated how he'd get up to that distant opening. It had to be a thousand feet high. Could he leap that far? He didn't think so. He supposed he could summon his Aspect of Terror, but he was loath to. He hated the feeling of being locked away in a corner of his mind while the Aspect did its thing. Worse, he knew the Aspect would be focused on finding spirits it could absorb. Would he be able to steer it up to that hole, into Dunstan's underground throne room where nothing lived?

Victor growled in frustration and, on a whim, extinguished his Globe of Inspiration. In the pitch black that resulted, he slowly turned in a circle, staring into the depths of gloom, wondering if he might have missed something, some clue to navigate the buried recesses of the ancient cavern system. He knew from experience in the Greatbone Mine that the depths of Fanwath could be very deep indeed. He was already a tremendous distance beneath the surface, but if he tried to explore, he could find himself going into places from which egress might become nearly impossible. Still, something in his chest didn't want to allow the Aspect loose, didn't want to fight that battle of wills again so soon.

He was about to give up, a half-baked idea of stacking boulders into a platform from which to leap forming in his mind, when he saw a faint flicker of yellow light. It was well beyond the opening above, high in the cavern wall but not nearly as high as the ceiling. Grunting with surprise and renewed hope, he started toward it. He didn't resummon his globe, fearing it would make his surroundings so bright that he wouldn't be able to navigate to the faint, distant light. Instead, he worked his way through the darkness by feel, walking slowly and carefully, trusting his incredible senses and instincts to help steer him around obstacles.

After a while, he realized he wasn't just "instinctively" walking around boulders, fungi patches, and pools. There might not be any light to speak of, but the shadows where objects existed had a different depth to them. It wasn't something he could readily see, or at least consciously point out, with his eyes, but he felt them. That said, he made good time over the cavern floor, and the tiny spot of light gradually grew more prominent and easier to see. It stretched into a circle, and then, as the minutes dragged on, and he felt he'd been walking more than an hour, he could clearly make out an ovoid tunnel opening, something like a hundred feet up the cavern wall.

He could remember seeing many tunnels in the walls when he'd been a passenger to the Aspect of Terror, but he didn't remember seeing light in any of them. What was this place so deep under the keep's grounds that was illuminated? When he made his way through the wampyr lair, it had been clear that they didn't value light. Why would they illuminate this buried passage?

He might not feel confident about leaping a thousand feet into the air, but he knew he could make it to that tunnel. Rather than cast Iron Berserk, Victor formed the pattern for Titanic Aspect. He didn't feel like getting pissed off again so soon after his ordeals with the wampyr. His body enlarged, he felt his perspective change, and then he squatted low and exploded into the air, hurtling toward that glowing opening in the darkness. The cool air rushed past him, whistling in his ears, and then he landed on hard, dusty stone, sliding several yards into a well-lit passage.

The mystery of the light's source was immediately cleared up. An ancient-looking glow lamp hung from the stone ceiling, and Victor could see in its illumination that the dusty corridor had been crafted, or at least refined; it wasn't a natural tunnel. The floor was solid stone, but gray granite blocks made up the walls. They were thick with rusty-orange mold, and Victor could smell a strange sulfurous odor in the air as he walked, kicking up little clouds of dust with his boots.

Despite his titanic size, the ceiling of the passageway was several feet overhead, and he didn't feel cramped by the walls. Whoever had crafted those stone walls had built something impressive. He didn't feel nervous, didn't feel watched, but he still reached up and loosened Lifedrinker in her harness, pulling her down into his hands. She was a comforting presence, and holding her reminded him of their last interaction, the one where she'd practically begged him to leave a fragment of his spirit with her. How was he going to deal with that? His approach to a T-junction chased the quandary from his mind as he slowly advanced.

When he reached the junction, he looked left and right and contemplated the choice. The tunnels looked identical, save the one on the left seemed to have a very slight downward grade. "What the hell am I doing? Dummy!" He laughed, shook his head at his behavior, and summoned his coyotes with inspiration-attuned Energy. They came into the world from a cloud of white-gold mist, yipping and crying, walking close to him, rubbing his legs as they circled. "All right, muchachos, find me the way out of this place."

As they yipped and barked, charging into the branching tunnels, he sat under the faint, yellow glow of the ancient crystal and brass glow lamp and took a long, deep breath. He didn't want to lean against the weird orange mold or fungi, or whatever it was called, so he sat in the middle of the floor and pulled a still-warm loaf of bread and a tall copper bottle of water from his storage ring. Five minutes later, he was munching on slices of bread spread with butter and jam and taking long, satisfying gulps of water from the bottle. "Damn, that's good. Thirsty work messing up all those vampiros."

He got the impression from the feelings his pack sent his way that they were traversing a lot of ground and not finding much. Sometimes, he'd sense that one of the coyotes was chasing something small, probably a rat, but never that they felt any threat or alarm. It probably took an hour before he finally felt a surge of excitement and a sense of success from one of the pack; the faithful

companion had found a way up and out. Victor stood up and turned right, instinctively knowing the coyote who'd signaled success could be found in that direction.

He only walked up that passage for ten minutes or so before it started to slope upward gradually. He continued, and slowly, one by one, his coyotes found their way back to him. The last one to rejoin the pack was the one he'd been waiting for, and when it saw him, it turned and started trotting ahead. Victor broke into a jog, following it through ancient, dusty tunnels, turning again and again, gradually working his way up and up through the bedrock beneath the mountain on which the wampyrs' keep had been built.

Eventually, he came to an ancient stone stairway and noted the different nature of the mold clinging to the stones and the damp, seeping water that shimmered in the still-present glow lamps. He wondered how old those lamps must be, silently praising the long-gone individual who'd crafted them. With his pack at his heels, he climbed those steps, two at a time; his titanic aspect had long since faded. After a hundred steps or so, he came to the rotten, partially petrified timbers of an ancient, iron-strapped door. He tried to open it, but it was swollen, wedged to the stone by moisture and moldy growths.

Victor smashed a boot into the ancient, rusty latch, and the door broke apart, fragments flying off into the dark room beyond. "No more ancient lamps?" As his coyotes, panting, yipping, and crying, rushed past him into the new area, Victor summoned his Globe of Inspiration. The light revealed an ancient stone room, and Victor could see large gaps in the walls, through which, he was quite certain, stars flickered. He stepped through, turned left, and saw an archway beyond which he could see the light of the Sisters glimmering on silvery waves as they crashed with a distant roar on a beach.

Victor hurried out and stood on the crumbling landing of a long-forgotten stairway. Behind him rose a similarly crumbled tower, and to his right, half a mile along the slopes of a tall, granite cliff face, Dunstan's keep rose against the mountainside. "Huh. Well, chica, let's go see how those wampyrs feel about me killing their padre."

Book 6: Chapter 38: Different Kinds of Freedom

Victor patted Guapo's shoulder as he approached the big curtain wall. He wasn't trying to hide or sneak into the keep this second time. He'd killed anything in there that was a threat to him, and he was tired of skulking around in shadows. He'd cast Iron Berserk, summoned his banner, and now he sat atop a glory-attuned Mustang, the center of a blazing circle of daylight in the middle of the night. He wasn't sure how much time had passed since he first entered the keep with Kethelket and Victoria. It felt like a dozen hours to him, but it could have been longer—he'd lost track of time when in his Aspect of Terror and also when he ate the wampyr's heart.

The strange thing was that he didn't see any defenders atop the wall, nor were there any lights to speak of. Hadn't he noticed lamps when they'd snuck in? Dunstan's non-monstrous followers seemed to require illumination to see. This time, the keep was dark, quiet, and felt utterly deserted. Victor rode straight up to the gate, and when no challenge, no arrows, no magical bolts came his way, he sat there for a moment and watched. The gate was impressive—thirty feet high and twenty wide, constructed of massive, thick planks of some kind of hardwood. He could see the bolts in the wood that must hold the crossbeams on the other side in place.

Given time, Victor figured he could break through that gate, but he wouldn't waste the effort. If he had to force his way into the keep, he'd just leap up to the parapets. After studying the weathered stone of the wall for a while, hoping to catch sight of any movement within, he grew impatient and shouted, "Open the gate!" It was a longshot, he knew, but still, he figured if they weren't actively trying to defend, maybe the soldiers within were broken or fled, and some forgotten servant or thrall might do as he asked. He was just getting ready to dismount and leap up to the ramparts when he heard clacking and creaking as someone turned a windlass in the gatehouse.

The gates shuddered and shook as the bar was slowly lifted. "¿Interesante, verdad, chico?" Victor patted Guapo again as he waited and watched the left-hand gate haltingly swing open. He could hear grunting and muffled curses, and he saw a pale hand gripping the wooden edge, so he knew someone was there, working to grant him entrance. He still didn't feel any threat, so he sat, relaxed, Lifedrinker still in her harness, and waited until the gate was pulled wide and a man stepped out from behind it into the light of his banner. He squinted and shielded his eyes, but his pale flesh didn't burn or smoke.

He wore a black tunic over black leggings and carried a sword sheathed at his waist. When he slowly lowered his hand, exposing his face, Victor was surprised to see a very normal, if pale, human man looking up at him. "Hail, Lord. We beg your mercy."

"We?"

"Us that survived the death of Lord Dunstan."

"Explain." Victor nudged Guapo forward, and the massive Mustang's hooves danced with sparks as he pranced toward the gate, each step a bass drumbeat on the gravel roadway. The man stumbled back but caught himself as Victor slowed, stopping inside the entrance, making it clear that he wasn't going anywhere.

"Some of us were newly taken by Lord . . ." he shook his head, and Victor saw him grimace. "By Dunstan. We hadn't taken much of the wampyr nature from him yet, and so when he died, we reverted to our old selves. Well, our old selves, in addition to memories of a waking nightmare. Most of Dunstan's people burned to ash when he died. There's just a hundred or so of us inside."

"Gather everyone. Bring them to the courtyard. If you deal with me honestly, there will be mercy."

"Thank you, Lord!" The man bowed and turned to hurry through the gate tunnel, but he stopped and turned. "Lord, do you mean the inner courtyard or the baily here between the walls?"

"Inner."

Victor watched him hurry away, running up the slightly sloping cobbled roadway that led from the curtain wall to the inner keep gates. He took his time following, contemplating the man's words. Dunstan's grip on the wampyrs had been so thorough that when he died, so did they? What did they get in that bargain? Eternal "life?" A faster route to power than gaining their own levels and skills? Perhaps it wasn't a gift. If he believed the man who'd just spoken to him, it was more of a curse. It sounded like he hadn't come into Dunstan's service willingly. Whatever the case, it highlighted another difference between the wampyr and vampyr factions of the invading army.

As he allowed Guapo to walk toward the open inner gateway, he looked left and right, taking in the bailey grounds. The whole space between the walls was cobbled, and he saw ballistae and barrels lining the inner parapets. Barricades stood on the bailey ground, and he could imagine archers using them to slow attackers who'd breached the curtain wall. It was a strong keep, and he figured the right defenders could hold off quite an army from within. Scanning around, he tried to see remnants of the defenders who'd supposedly spontaneously combusted at Dunstan's death, but the air was damp with mist, and he could smell rain. So close to the sea, he wouldn't be surprised if they'd been washed away.

Even taking his time, Guapo's steps were huge, and soon he clip-clopped his way through the inner gatehouse and came into the courtyard where, in rows of twenty, more than a hundred men and women, dressed much like the first man he'd seen, knelt on the hard cobbles, heads down, waiting for him. He sat atop Guapo, looking down at them, running his eyes over the rows, staring at each of them for a second or two, wondering what he might see. None looked up to meet his gaze. None gave off any whiff of power or Energy use. He thought he saw several of them trembling; from fear or weakness, he didn't know.

"Who spoke to me at the gate?"

A figure in the front row straightened and looked up, meeting his gaze. "I did, Lord."

"Your name?"

"Smythe, Lord, Perry Smythe." His voice was steady, and he looked earnest, his brown eyes unflinching when Victor gazed into them.

"Perry, what would you have me do with a bunch of one-time enemies? Undead creatures who sought to slay me and mine?"

"Lord, we aren't undead. If we were, well, it's 'cause that bastard took us from the villages on his lands and made us so."

"On Dark Ember?"

"Aye. We were serfs on his lands; the vampiric lords and ladies keep us for food and to fill their armies."

"And entertainment," a woman said from somewhere in the middle of the group.

Victor frowned and contemplated the group. He believed them, but could he trust them? “What happened to the belongings of the ones who burned up?”

“Most of their things burned with ‘em, Lord, but we found some weapons and jewels in the ashes.”

Victor took a deep breath through his nose and sighed heavily. “Listen. I’ll give you all a chance to earn some trust. Bring everything you looted from the dead and from this place and pile it before my horse. Let’s keep this orderly—one by one, left to right, row by row.” Victor watched as they did just as he’d commanded. The one-time wampyr thralls stood and began to deposit knives, swords, maces, axes, spears, and jewelry of all sorts, but mostly rings, in neat piles in front of Guapo. He maintained his banner and watched them as they approached, looking into their eyes, trying to read if any were harboring hidden animosity or faking their tolerance of the fiery sun hanging behind him.

In the end, all he felt was pity for the wan, thin, desperate men and women. The piles of jewelry were impressive, and Victor wondered if these poor survivors had thought themselves rich and free until he’d shown up. When they finished, he asked Perry, “Did you loot the dead in the tunnels beneath the keep?”

“Aye, Lord.”

Victor pulled out the huge silver key from storage and held it up by its chain. “Do you know what this opens?”

“Aye, Lord,” he said again, “that’s the key to the silver door atop yonder tower.” He pointed to the big round tower that rose near the rear of the keep. There weren’t any windows near the top, and its roof was made of some kind of dark, unreflective metal. Lead?

“Okay, Perry, let me ask you again: What would you have me do with you all, undead or not?”

Again, a woman spoke up before Perry could answer, “We want freedom!” Murmurs of agreement vied with shushes and pleas for mercy from the kneeling crowd. Victor frowned and contemplated the people. If what they claimed was true, then they certainly deserved pity and probably the mercy they asked for. They’d taken up arms for Dunstan but hadn’t been part of the winged wampyr horde that had kidnapped Kethelket’s people. Could he blame them, anyway? Apparently, Dunstan had taken them and infected them with his brand of vampirism against their will, and somewhat recently, if he were understanding things correctly. That was why they hadn’t burned to ash.

Even taking all that at face value, their demands for freedom were a bit much. All the men and women in the legion and supporting it were here, fighting for their own lands, their own freedom. Should it just be given to these people? Shouldn’t they help? He thought about it some more, watching the crowd, knowing he held their lives in his hands. “I’ll grant you the mercy of not holding you responsible for the actions of Dunstan and his wampyrs. I’ll also grant you your freedom, but if you’re hoping to settle in these lands, you’ll need to aid our cause. If you don’t want to do that, if you don’t want to fight against Hector’s undead invasion, then you’ll need to march your asses north through the pass, and you can try to find your freedom in the Ridonne Empire.”

As he spoke, many of the kneeling, black-clad former wampyr thralls looked up, their pale faces staring toward him atop his gigantic steed, and Victor saw hope and relief in their eyes. He knew what they were feeling; he'd felt it too when the nobility of Fanwath had enslaved him, sent him into the mines, and then he'd had a glimmer of hope sparked to life in his heart with just a touch of kindness from Captain Lam. "Stand up," he growled. As they complied, rising to stand in ranks before him, he continued, "If you mean to stick with me and put the undead assholes invading this land to the torch, then stay put. If you want to head out and try to make your fortune beyond the mountains to the north, then walk out this gate and wait for me. I'll write you a letter so the people guarding the pass will let you through."

He watched as the people slowly looked around at each other, none speaking, none moving. After a few minutes, when they'd ceased their looking around, and every one of them still stood before him, he said, "You're sure? None of you want to leave?"

The same woman spoke up again, her voice strident, "Lord, there are different kinds of freedom, and my heart won't feel truly free 'til I've seen that green star extinguished and know the portal to Dark Ember is closed." The crowd shouted their agreement, some of them raising fists in the air, and for the first time, Victor saw fire in their eyes, perhaps fanned to life from the hope he'd given them.

"That's how you all feel?" Victor slid off Guapo's back and, with a firm pat to his haunch, sent the mount back to the Spirit Plane. He stood before the assembled defectors, towering over them in his titanic form, his banner blazing behind him. When none of them objected to the woman's words, Victor nodded, loosening Lifedrinker from her harness and holding her before him. "If you want to stay with me, you'll need to swear an oath. I want each of you to stand before me, tell me your name, and swear that you'll stay loyal to our cause. Swear that you'll fight against the invaders from Dark Ember. More, I want you to swear to learn about the customs of this world and work to fit in."

The woman was the first to step to the front, and the man who'd first spoken to him, Perry Smythe, lined up behind her, then everyone else jostled to get into line. The woman was slender but tall, and her long, wavy red hair was pulled back and tied into braids with leather cords. She took a knee before him and looked up, tiny next to his bulk but pale eyes fierce as she said, "Lord, I am Agnes, and I swear to help you and your army to push the invaders out. I swear, on the bones of my mother, Sigrid, that I'll stay loyal to you and learn the ways of this new world."

"Well said, Agnes. I accept you and swear to treat you fairly and fight with you against our mutual enemies." Victor saw tears spring into the woman's eyes as he said the words, and when she stood and moved back into line, they were streaming freely down her cheeks. So began a very emotional experience for Victor and the survivors of Dunstan's vampirism. One after another, the former thralls knelt before him, swore their loyalty, and heard his pledge in return. Many of them wept openly, and Victor struggled to keep his own eyes dry, imagining

the roller coaster of emotions these people were feeling, the struggles they'd gone through.

As he'd thought earlier, he had some common ground with them, had known the feeling of a yoke around his neck. He also knew what it felt like to be free and to feel the bond of loyalty when he'd thought he was alone. He didn't know what these people had planned when their lord died, didn't know if they were expecting to be recaptured, killed, or if they had some hope that they might break free and find a way to live with their newfound freedom. He hoped they didn't see his arrival as that of simply a new lord they had to serve. That was why he'd offered them the chance to leave, to find their way outside these lands. To him, their unanimous decision to stay meant a lot; they could have, just as easily, all decided to leave.

When the last one swore to him, Victor nodded to his newly assembled allies and severed the connection to his Iron Berserk spell, reducing himself down from mythic proportions. "Thank you, everyone. One thing you'll need to know, though, is that I value your word, and I consider you my brothers and sisters in battle now, but the people of Fanwath aren't so quick to trust. They have customs that are hard to shake. Everyone in our army has bound themselves with a System contract, agreeing to pretty much the same thing you all just swore to me. When I assign you to a new captain, you'll need to do the same."

"How long will we be so bound to the captain, Lord?"

"Only until this campaign ends. Once we've driven the invaders out, the contract expires, but I'll always hold you to the oath we just swore to each other. Does anyone have an objection?" Silence met his question, so Victor nodded, swinging Lifedrinker back up and into her harness. "Someone show me the System stone in this keep. I mean to claim it."

Agnes pointed to the keep's open, darkly stained wooden doors and said, "In the great hall, just past those doors and through the next."

Victor strode forward, down the ranks of his new soldiers, and heard them fall into line behind him. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw two single-file lines, remarkable in their orderly formation. He climbed the steps, passed through the door, and saw a faintly illuminated pair of doors straight ahead in the dim, unlit shadows of the grand foyer. He walked toward them and pulled the handle of the one on the right. It swung open with a squeak of unoiled hinges, and then he saw Dunstan's former great hall, or, at least, the one he hadn't used, the one not buried in twisting catacombs full of ugly vampiric monsters.

The hall of the Sea Keep, as Victor was starting to call the place mentally, was vast. It wasn't remarkable for much more than that, however. The ceilings were massively vaulted with at least twenty, two-hundred-foot beams spanning the length of it, holding up the great weight of the stones above. It spread out from left to right, rectangular in shape, with a grand stone fireplace at either end. No furniture adorned the ample space, but floating at the center, directly in front of the door where Victor stood, was another System stone, just like the ones he'd seen in the other keeps.

Victor walked forward, the former thralls at his heels, and placed his hand on the slowly rotating stone. It stopped its movement immediately, and he saw a familiar message before his eyes:

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

“Good,” Victor muttered, glad to see the System had recognized these people as his “forces.” He mentally affirmed his decision to claim the outpost, and, just as before, an Energy-rich breeze began to blow through the keep, seemingly coming out of nowhere or perhaps from the stone itself. It gently blew over his flesh, tickling it with an electric touch, and he heard the people around him sighing and laughing, perhaps feeling Energy untainted by a death affinity for the first time.

Though no lights came to life in the hall, his banner brilliantly lit it, and the stones, the wood, and the very air seemed to feel lighter, less oppressive. He knew that if he went outside, the darkness wouldn’t be so dark, the mist and fog in the air would be gone, and he and his new followers would be able to breathe easier.

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

Cheers broke out around him as the System’s message appeared, and Victor smiled, glad his new allies were sharing in the victory. His hand suddenly fell away from the stone, released as the process of claiming the outpost ended. Smoke began to gather at his feet, and he knew what it was: The chest of conquest was about to take form. Something was different, however. He remembered blue smoke at Old Keep, but this smoke was purple and sparkled with silvery lights.

Book 6: Chapter 39: Treasures and Mysteries

As the chest took form, Victor looked around at the men and women who’d just joined his cause. “Perry, can you take some soldiers and secure the gate?”

“Aye, right away, Lord.” Perry called out several names and led a small group toward the courtyard. Victor nodded, looking around the crowd.

“Agnes, will you put together a list of troops for me? Everyone’s names, their level, and their particular talents? It’ll help me get your people placed with the proper units when the army arrives. Oh, and go ahead and pick out an assistant or two—we’ll need to catalog all the weapons and other loot you found on the dead wampyrs.”

“I can do that.”

Victor noticed her eyes linger on the chest by his feet, and he shook his head. “This one’s for me. I went through quite a bloodbath to earn this chest.” He spoke loudly, looking around the crowd, meeting the eyes of any who would dare. He wasn’t ashamed of claiming this prize, and if anyone objected, he’d love to hear their arguments. None did, however. In fact, most of the one-time thralls nodded enthusiastically to his declaration.

“Lord Victor?” Agnes spoke up, interrupting his perusal of the room and the expressions on the soldiers’ faces.

“Yeah?”

“Do you have an extra bit of paper and a writing utensil?” She looked almost embarrassed, and Victor felt stupid. These people had been little more than slaves before Dunstan had died, and then he’d come along and demanded they give up all the loot they’d scavenged.

He produced a notebook and an enchanted pen from one of his storage rings and handed it over. “Of course.” He almost asked her if she knew how to read and write, trying to imagine the kind of village she’d come from, a place where normal humans were allowed to live and have families but were treated as livestock to the wampyrs. He caught himself, though, deciding to trust that she’d say so if she couldn’t. Even so, he couldn’t help asking a tangential question, “You all had access to Energy, to cultivation and whatnot back on Dark Ember, right? I mean, back in your villages before Dunstan took you.”

“We did, to a degree, though Dunstan’s sheriffs saw to it that none of us grew powerful enough to pose a threat.”

“Well, that’s over now. At least for you all.”

“It is, but the thirst for vengeance burns in my throat. I hope you won’t send us far from the front, into some training camp or on garrison duty.” Victor could hear the ferocity in her words, saw the spark in her eyes, and knew she spoke the truth. It resonated in his chest, echoed the fury he’d once felt when he’d wanted to rip the arms off every baton-wielding mine employee.

“Don’t worry about that. If I have my way, you’ll be joining up with the Glorious Ninth—my army’s best cohort, and you’ll see plenty of action with them.”

Agnes nodded and smashed a fist to her chest before turning and calling out the names of her chosen helpers, striding out of the hall. Many of the others had already left, returning to the courtyard, perhaps to go up on the walls and witness the withdrawal of the sickly fog. The ones who’d remained were likely hoping to see something of the treasure he would pull from the chest, and Victor, too, was interested to see what he’d earned. He’d briefly considered setting aside whatever he got for the “campaign store,” but he’d decided he’d been selfless enough; it was time to take his due. He’d claim what he wanted and give the rest to the quartermaster for the store.

He bent to lift the hinged lid of the dark, metallic chest, watching as more sparkling, purple smoke escaped from the interior. It was odorless, that smoke, and when Victor waved it away, not a hint of it remained. It had simply dispersed into nothingness, much like the smoke left behind by his spirit fire did when it consumed the sacrifices he made to his ancestors. Peering into the open container, Victor saw only four items. An ornately carved silver spyglass sat beside a shimmering opalescent potion bottle, and next to that were two gold-foil-wrapped, apple-shaped objects.

“Hmm,” Victor said, reaching into the chest to retrieve the spyglass. It was small in his hand, only six inches long, but every square millimeter was delicately carved in whorls and tiny images, from flowers to stars to weird angular runes that, despite his System Language Integration skill, meant nothing to Victor. It was heavy for its size, and even from a distance, Victor could see the weird flickers of Energy and color within the lens.

He held the small end to his eye and pointed it at one of the former thralls at the other end of the great hall. The blurry image clarified almost instantly as the magical lens focused, and then the close-up view of the soldier changed slightly as a pale green halo took shape around her head.

“Huh.” Victor pulled the spyglass away from his eye and then chose a new target, aiming his view at a burly man near the exit. Just as before, the glass focused quickly, and a soft, pale green halo appeared around his head. Victor pocketed the little scope, intent on experimenting with it further, then turned back to the chest.

He picked up the opalescent potion and, to his relief, found a handwritten label stuck to the bottom of the little bottle. “Vanderstahl’s Regenerative Tonic,” he softly read, raising an eyebrow. He’d, of course, learned about potions that could regenerate lost limbs and worse while he’d been in Coloss, and he wondered if this was just such an item. He nodded, pleased to have something like that to fall back on, and tucked it away in a storage ring. Next, he reached down and plucked up one of the foil-covered fruits.

The feel and heft served to confirm his theory; it felt just like an apple. He needn’t have wondered, however. Just as with the potion, he found a label affixed to the gold foil on the bottom of the fruit, reading, “Apple of Evolution.” The fruit had no odor, and he couldn’t sense any Energy within it, though he reasoned that could be because of the foil—it might be magical, designed to keep the fruit’s potency intact. He tucked them both into his ring, already making plans for what he’d do with them; he might have decided this chest’s rewards were his to claim, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t share.

While he’d been studying the final contents, he’d expected the chest to disappear, but it was still there when he glanced down. Wondering what he’d missed, he peered back inside to see the lining at the bottom hadn’t been just part of the container—it was another banner. When he lifted it out, the chest broke apart into purple, shimmering smoke and was gone. Victor hung the banner, exactly like the one he’d gotten at Old Keep, over his shoulder and walked outside. It wasn’t lost on him that he had an entourage of a dozen or so soldiers who seemed intent on following him around.

In the courtyard, he found Agnes and three others sitting around the pile of weapons and other loot, sorting them by type and apparent quality. Looking up on the ramparts, he saw Perry and a dozen or more other soldiers walking about, keeping watch. The skies were cloudy, though brighter, the unnatural fog having fled the keep’s environs. Victor took a good, long, deep breath and nodded. He held out the banner in one big fist and said, “Someone take this and put it over the outer gates so my allies don’t mistakenly attack us.”

“Aye, Lord!” one of his hangers-on said, stepping forward to grab the big, silky cloth. Victor watched him hurry out of the courtyard, running through the baily toward the curtain wall, and then he let his gaze drift up to the big tower. “All right, let’s go see what this key will reveal.” He was talking to himself, mostly, or

maybe Lifedrinker, but he realized the soldiers following him around thought he was speaking to them—several muttered their agreement, and they turned to the keep, hurrying to open the door for him.

Victor paused to look over the group of men and women. There were nine of them gathered near the door, watching, waiting for him to move or say something. He wasn't sure how he felt about having an entourage escorting him around the new keep, but he didn't know if he should even make a big deal about it. Maybe they were just bored. There wasn't a lot going on while they waited for word from, well, anyone.

He'd hoped to find Kethelket outside when he emerged, but he hadn't been surprised not to. He must have taken his people to rejoin the rest of their forces. Still, he'd hoped for some sign or signal from him, Valla, or even Rellia and Borrius. "Should have kept one of the command books for myself." He looked up, noting the puzzled looks on those nearby, and asked, "How many days ago did I kill Dunstan?"

"Five days, Lord."

"Five, sir!"

"Five days and nights have passed . . ." the third to answer trailed off as they all hurried to be the one to give him the news. Five days was a lot more than he'd thought, but he wasn't too surprised. How many times had he passed out, had visions, and lost days or even weeks as his mind and body processed whatever weird thing he'd done to it? The news made Kethelket's absence even more understandable.

"Right. I'll be surprised if my people aren't nearby, perhaps already watching the keep. Hopefully, we'll get word when they see my banner on display. For now, I need you folks to help keep watch for them. Be sure to explain that I'm in the keep and that I'll come to speak to them if any appear. Be aware that some can fly and may approach from the air. Don't respond with violence! Spread the word." Several of the group nodded and hurried off, but Victor wasn't satisfied. "I only need one of you to stay with me. Someone who knows the way to the tower so I'm not wandering around this keep."

"I will!" a young woman announced, glaring at the others until they nodded and began to shuffle off, a few with unhappy grumbles. Victor chuckled and examined his guide. She was an interesting-looking character. The sides of her head were shorn down to a black stubble, and the top hung in braids woven through with carved, wooden, and, if he wasn't mistaken, bone loops. Her pale face was marked by dozens of deep, raised, red scars, and the hollows of her dark eyes were shaded by black paint. She looked fierce and sturdy, tall and broad-shouldered.

"What's your name?"

“Nia, Lord.”

“All right, Nia. Lead me to the tower, please.” At his words, she turned and began to hurry through the keep. She led him up two flights of stairs, down several long corridors, and then through a heavy, polished door into another steep, winding stairway. Victor could tell they were in the tower by the nature of the curved walls and by peering through the occasional window. “Did Dunstan have this glass installed, or was it here?”

“I believe it was here, Lord.”

“You don’t have to say ‘lord’ whenever you speak to me. I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Very well.” She climbed steadily without tiring, and as they passed the first door on a short landing, she pointed to it. “Nothing much in there. Some old scraps of furniture.”

“Okay. You know the keep well?”

“Aye, from our time here as thralls and from the last few days scrounging for food and valuables.”

“Food . . . did you have to eat when you were thralls?”

“Lord, please forgive me, but I’d rather not dwell on my time under the curse. It’s a nightmare I’d soon put behind me, but to answer your question, we ate but sparingly; our bodies were changing, and we hungered for only one thing—the blood Dunstan’s wampyrs doled out to us.”

“Yeah, that’s shitty. We’ll get your bellies full of warm, good food soon.” He followed her up several more levels and then asked, “Do you have any idea what’s behind the door?”

“Likely something unholy. Dunstan kept it well guarded, and it resisted all our attempts to break it open. The door’s metal is magically warded and infused; we pounded and pried at it, but it mended itself faster than we could damage it. Some of the lads were thinking of chipping away the stone walls to get inside, but our explorations through the keep and catacombs kept us distracted.” She looked over her shoulder, her dark, shadowed eyes briefly locking with his.

“Then you came along.”

“Do you resent me?”

“Resent? The one who freed us? The one who saved our very souls? Not in a million lifetimes, Lord.”

“What level are you, Nia? Forgive my bluntness.”

“I’m level twenty-four. I have the damned blood affinity of my former master, but I’ll be using it for healing. I swear on the graves of my mother and my baby sister, taken by the fiend that was my father.”

“Your father . . .”

“Aye. He was taken by Dunstan when I was a girl of twelve. He came back to visit us in Brook Hollow, the village where we lived when I was fifteen, and on that visit, he flew into a rage . . .” her voice grew quiet, her words trailing off.

“Forget it. I’m sorry I asked; I didn’t mean to open up old wounds.”

“Thank you, Lor . . . thank you.”

Victor let his mind wander down dark roads, imagining the lives of the people, the ordinary humans on Dark Ember, and their horrific existence. Despite his efforts to avoid it, despite consciously trying to keep the thought from forming, he found a part of himself beginning to wonder if he’d be satisfied with simply killing Prince Hector and driving the invaders out of Fanwath. He scowled, shaking his head. Hadn’t Victoria told him that Hector was a minor lord in the grand scheme of Dark Ember? Hadn’t she said the old ones, the truly powerful undying masters of that world, had been in power for hundreds of years, that they’d been ancient even before fleeing Earth? “Talk about biting off more than I can chew . . .”

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing, Nia. Well, not nothing, but nothing I can really contemplate right now.” As he spoke, they rounded the final curve of the stairs, and there, before him, was an ornate, rune-inscribed, silver door with a big, four-pronged keyhole at its center. “Well, well. What’s hiding behind such a fancy door, I wonder.”

Nia moved to the side, taking up a position against the stone wall to the left of the door. Victor produced the heavy silver key and stepped forward to insert it into the weird slot. It sank home with a satisfyingly smooth series of clicks, almost like a magnet pulled it in. He slowly rotated the key, each quarter-turn eliciting a resounding click in the silver door. When he’d spun it through a full rotation, the door pulled away from the frame with a hiss of moist, warm air. “Woah, airtight.” Victor held an arm over his nose, troubled by the strange, musty, ripe air. It didn’t quite smell like decay or death, but it didn’t smell fresh.

Before he opened the door further, he listened, waiting to see what might reveal itself. The only sound to come to his ears was a faint ticking as the door’s metal began to contract, perhaps adjusting to the much cooler ambient temperature outside the interior room. Victor put a hand on Lifedrinker’s haft and pulled the door open with the other. When the steam wafted out of his eyes, and he focused on the weird, red-lit interior, he almost ripped her free from her harness and cast Iron Berserk.

The room was oval in shape and completely lined with the same rune-inscribed silver as the door he’d just opened. It was like a vault, almost, making Victor realize the former thralls never would have been able to break into it by chipping away the stone walls outside. A globe of red-veined

crystal hung from the center of the domed ceiling, pulsing with crimson light, and beneath it was a silver chair. What had startled Victor and almost sent him into a violent rage was the naked, shriveled body of a man on the metal chair. He wore nothing save the same black stone crown that Victor had seen on the horrible wampyr, Dunstan.

Victor might have thought the wampyr had cheated death somehow, reconstituted himself in this chamber, if not for the gaping hole in the body's chest where a heart should have been. Had Victor stopped the creature from resurrecting itself by eating its heart? If not the consumption of the flesh, had his destruction of part of its spirit disrupted the weird magic? Victor turned to Nia. "You know anything about this?" He moved to the side, making room for her so she could gaze within, and watched as her eyes widened in horror and a hand flew to her mouth. Her surprise seemed genuine.

"There were rumors, whispers that Dunstan was immortal, more than . . . usual for his kind. It's certainly true that he was very old, though not as ancient as the great masters of Dark Ember."

Victor jerked his chin at the metal door and the room beyond. "Was this silver chamber here when you all arrived?"

"I don't think so, Lord. I was a lowly thrall, however—I know not what Dunstan brought from Dark Ember. I was set to watch the battlements almost from the moment we arrived. I do recall seeing the windows of this tower being filled in with stone, though."

"Okay. Do me a favor and go to the stairs. Holler if you hear anyone coming." Victor gestured around the curve of the tower to where the landing was. Nia hurried to fulfill his request, and he turned back to the door. He'd had a strange wave of paranoia when he thought about investigating the chamber, a spine-tingling wave of claustrophobia at the idea that someone might swing that silver door shut on him. With that in mind, he moved around to the front of the door and tried to remove the key, but it wouldn't slide free in the open position.

Growling, Victor summoned his great bear totem with inspiration-attuned Energy. The monstrous creature stepped out of a cloud of shimmering, white-gold mist, a deep rumble of greeting in his throat. A yelp from the other side of him, near the stairs, told Victor that Nia had noticed his massive companion, so he called out, "Don't worry; he's here to watch my back, too."

"As you say, Lord," Nia's voice came to him from beyond the bulk of his friend.

"Okay, hermano, you sit in front of that door and don't let anyone close it on me, comprende?"

The bear huffed, pressing his enormous forehead down and into Victor's shoulder, then he stepped back and ponderously laid down before the door. There was no way anyone was going to swing that thing shut without making a hell of a scene trying to move his companion. Nodding, Victor steeled himself and stepped into the weird, round chamber, ready to try to figure out the mystery of the humanoid corpse wearing Dunstan's crown.

The air in the spherical chamber was moist and warm, and Victor hated breathing it into his lungs. Nonetheless, he walked in and let his gaze drift over the rune-inscribed walls, floors, and ceiling. With nothing else to focus on, he stepped toward the body in the silver chair and the crystal globe suspended above it. Victor had seen plenty of undead, and though they often looked much like a corpse, much like the body before him, they always had some sort of aura, an Energy that gave their deathly aspect some palpable vitality. This body was inert, of that he was certain.

Was it Dunstan? Victor found himself asking the question repeatedly as he took in the frail, withered form. He supposed it could be. This is what the man might have looked like sans his transformation into a wampyr. How would he ever know? Even if he could test DNA, he didn't have a sample from the previous monster before it was reduced to ash and left buried in the depths of the catacombs. "The crown," he muttered. It was the only real clue he had—that and the hole where the corpse's heart should be. Why would nothing but the key to this chamber remain in the ashes of the wampyr? The crown hadn't been there; it was here.

With dread sending a chill down his spine, he lifted a hand toward the weird, crudely inscribed stone circle. The artifact certainly didn't match the aesthetic of the silver sphere. Its stone material was one thing, but its sharp, angular runes were also at odds with the elaborate, fanciful text scribed on every square inch of the sphere. When his flesh touched the stone, his mind flashed with images of Dunstan's wampyr form wearing it, looming large with lustful red eyes. He couldn't tell if it was just his memory jumping to recollections of his battle or if the crown really projected them.

It was cold to the touch but thrummed with Energy, a powerful artifact indeed. "But what do you do?" Victor whispered, running his fingertips along the rough, sharp runes. Was it alive? Did a spirit dwell within? Did he dare try to bond with it? Victor had undoubtedly done some impulsive things in his day, but the idea seemed like madness, even to him; there was no hurry here, no reason he had to make a breakthrough with this strange, ancient-seeming artifact. No, he decided, it was better to wait and have someone with more knowledge evaluate the thing first. In any case, he was careful with it. He lifted it from the desiccated scalp, leaving behind imprinted gray flesh and wisps of white, dead hair.

Victor found a leather strap in one of his rings and tied it around the heavy crown, hooking it to his belt so it dangled near his hip. On the off chance that it was alive, he didn't want to risk damaging the spirit within by putting it into a dimensional container. Victor studied the naked, withered corpse for another moment, then gripped it by the shoulder and dragged it off the metal chair. He took it to the doorway and threw it out of the room to crumple against the stone wall beyond. He didn't know what this silver room was for, but he wouldn't leave that thing in there. He had a vague notion that the sphere was meant to animate the dead wampyr somehow, and he didn't want to leave any possibility that it might have some crazy potential to bring Dunstan's spirit back to the body and restore him with vigor.

He studied the room carefully one more time, and, not seeing anything else of note, he backed out and swung the door shut. He grabbed the key and twisted it counterclockwise to relock the door, and when it had completed its full circuit, Victor felt some give as though he could continue twisting it. "Hmm," he muttered and turned the key further to the left, eliciting one more click out of it. The silver metal flashed brightly with Energy, and then the key was yanked out of his hand as the door, and the room to which it was attached, began to shrink rapidly. It was so fast and flared so

brightly that when Victor's vision cleared, he was stunned to see the key, still attached to the jeweled chain, sitting in the center of the original stone-walled room of the tower.

Stepping toward it, Victor saw, upon closer inspection, that the key no longer ended in its original four prongs but had a small round, silver ball at that end—the room. It had shrunk down to the size of a large marble. Victor picked it up and looked over his shoulder at his big bear totem, apparently asleep with its gigantic head on its front paws. Shrugging, he hung the chain and key over his head and stuffed them down inside his armor, another object he'd need someone with the proper talents to identify.

“Lord Victor!” Nia's voice came to him from beyond his giant, sleeping companion.

“Yeah?” He waved a hand at his bear, releasing the creature from this realm.

As he strode through the mist left behind, Nia called out again, unaware that he was mere steps from her, “Some of your people are at the gate!”

“That's good! Do me a favor and burn this corpse while I go see who it is.” When Victor mounted the steps, he saw another soldier leaning forward, hands on knees, trying to regain his breath. “Did you sprint all the way up here?”

“Aye, Lord.”

“Thanks!” Victor waved as he bounded down the steps, leaving Nia and the other soldier watching him with wide eyes. He was in the courtyard in less than a minute, jogging toward the inner gate, then across the bailey to the big curtain wall. He hollered, “Open up!” as he drew near. He slowed as he entered the gatehouse tunnel, standing under hundreds of tons of stone and the murder holes above his head. Somewhere within, he heard the windlass creak, and then the massive gate bar lifted up and away from the gates. As soon as it was clear, Victor grabbed the handle and pulled the right half open.

He'd barely pulled it halfway before an armor-clad woman with a shiny helm and bright teal eyes smashed into him, hugging him with a ferocity that made Victor laugh as he stumbled back against the wall. “I missed you too!”

“Idiot! For days, we've been marching, and for days, I've been dreading what I'd find. You couldn't send word?”

“Edeya has my book!”

“What about these soldiers you conscripted?”

“I only just got here! I've been unconscious for most of that time!” Victor's laugh had faded, and he spoke soothingly, still squeezing Valla close. “I'm sorry, okay, but I'm glad you're here. Come on, let's go inside, and I'll fill you in.” He'd been leaning slightly down, speaking into the side of Valla's helm, and when he looked

up, he saw Kethelket, Lam, and Edeya waiting in the gateway. “Hi, everyone! It’s great to see you all. You especially, Kethelket; I wasn’t sure you made it out, but I had a feeling you had.” He smiled down at Valla again, then turned and motioned for everyone to follow him. “It’s good that you all didn’t attack. I mean, I’m glad you waited at the gate and didn’t kill any of our new soldiers.”

“Well, your banner was flying, and we could tell you claimed the keep, so it would have been madness to assault it without checking what had happened.” Valla entwined her fingers in his while she spoke, and they led the way through the gatehouse.

As they walked, Kethelket spoke, raising his voice to be heard from behind Edeya and Lam, “Victor, we fought free quickly, my kin and I. I want you to know that most of my rescued brothers and sisters wanted to rush to your aid, but I wouldn’t allow it. They were wounded, stripped of their gear, and many foes were left between us and you. Taking stock, I remembered your words and felt it prudent to bring them to safety. Tell me, though, how came you to the soldiers patrolling the walls above?”

“It’s a long story.” Victor slowed in the baily so that Kethelket could walk beside him. “Let me see if I can give you a brief version—I killed Dunstan deep underground after a pretty good fight. Due to some impulsiveness on my part, I ended up losing consciousness for a handful of days. When I found my way out of the depths and back to the keep, all the wampyrs were dead, even those I hadn’t killed with my axe. Dunstan’s true followers died when he died. Some of his soldiers, more thralls than true believers, who hadn’t yet grown into fully undead creatures, regained their humanity. I mean, they returned to their true selves, their living bodies, and healthy spirits.” Victor guided the others through the inner gatehouse.

“I gave them the option to flee to the north, seeking their freedom in the lands beyond the pass, or to join us in the destruction of these undead invaders. Not a single one of them opted to flee, and they all swore loyalty to me.” He glanced over his shoulder at the faces of the others, expecting objections, but they were surprisingly calm and introspective. “Kethelket, the survivors gathered all the treasure and gear they could find from the dead wampyrs. I bet your people’s things are among them.”

“Thank you.” He nodded, but his eyes were distant. “I’m pleased that you’ve given these people a chance to redeem themselves. I know what it means to serve an evil master.”

Victor frowned, wondering how far he should go with the thought that had struck him. Should he voice it? Too late to pull it back, his mouth started almost of its own accord, “That’s good, Kethelket, but keep in mind that these people were raised like cattle, enslaved by the vampiric asshole who owned the lands where they lived. They didn’t want to join his army, and they

definitely didn't want his 'gift.' I wish I could do more for them than give them a chance to kill more of the monsters from their home world, but it's the best I could do."

"Understood, Victor. Sir." The tone in his voice almost made Victor regret his words, but he felt it was an important distinction. These people had no redeeming to do; they had vengeance to seek. He felt Valla's hand tighten on his and let the matter drop. He had Kethelket's support, and that's what mattered.

"Anyway, I claimed the keep, and I took the treasures the System doled out. After I have them identified, if I don't need them, I'll either put them in the campaign store or gift them to people."

"Well deserved." Lam clapped him on the shoulder as they stepped into the courtyard. Many of the former thralls were present, watching to see the leaders of the army they'd be joining, perhaps wondering if someone would talk Victor out of his decision to welcome them. He hated the idea that they had to worry about their future, that they didn't feel secure in their place.

"Edeya, I have work for you."

"I'm ready!" She stepped forward, and Victor was once again struck by the beautiful changes in her appearance due to her new bloodline. Her wings were dazzling, and she just seemed so much more . . . everything—confident, powerful, capable. It all added up to a weight of presence that just hadn't been there before.

"First, where's Sarl?"

"With the Ninth, ready to rush to our rescue should we need it."

"Lam, can you go ahead and give him the all-clear? Have him get his soldiers in here, and let's set up some duty rotations."

"Well," Lam looked around, sighing heavily, perhaps annoyed that she'd been the one selected to play messenger girl. "On my way. Save a drink for me; I want to hear about your battles!"

"I'll wait for you!" Victor laughed, watching her turn and launch herself into the sky. "Edeya, come over here. I want you to meet Agnes." Victor walked over to where Agnes still sat with her two assistants, going through equipment and jewels, many of which must have been dimensional containers. Valla and Kethelket kept pace, clearly interested in what he'd have Edeya do. "Edeya, this is Agnes, and she's been cataloging not only these items but also the soldiers who swore fealty to me. I want you to look at her notes and help with the process. Can you do that for me?"

“Of course, sir.”

“Thank you.” Victor made eye contact with Agnes and added, “Edeya is a very old friend as well as a high-ranking lieutenant in our army. Understood?”

“Aye, Lord.” Agnes stood up straight, eyes on Edeya, waiting for her to come forward and take charge of the process. Victor nodded and led Kethelket and Valla away from the group, leaving them to their work. When they stood relatively alone near the stairs leading into the keep, he turned to Valla. “Is it too much to hope that you brought my travel home?”

“I did. After we claimed Black Keep, we marched, and I brought it with us, not knowing if we’d return.”

“You claimed it? Good! What about Borrius and Rellia?”

“They’ve claimed Rust Keep and are now besieging the southernmost outpost. They’re calling it High Keep because it sits high in a pass that controls access to the south beyond these contested lands. The legion has it surrounded, having left garrisons in Old Keep and Rust Keep, but are waiting on word of you and the Ninth before committing to an attack. Additionally, they have eyes on the two citadels that guard access to Hector’s base of operations—the walled town that sits atop the mountain beneath the green star.”

“Damn! They’ve been busy. So, we’ve locked down four of the five outposts? Any word from the pass? Are our people doing well? Any word from the Empire?”

“Let’s expand your house and go within before we speak further. Briefly, though, our people in the northern pass are well. I believe Edeya has correspondence for you from Thayla.” Valla dug around in her belt pouch and pulled out the little jade rectangle of his travel home. “I’m glad you gave me permissions with this.”

“Yeah, me too, but I guess it would’ve been safe in Black Keep. You all left a garrison?” Victor moved further toward the corner of the courtyard, looking for a good spot to set the house down.

“Of course! Kethelket left nearly a hundred of his people, those who needed rest, and Sarl left fifty of his soldiers behind.

Victor grunted, setting the jade down and activating it. As it thumped and jumped around, he backed up. “It’s good I got us another hundred soldiers here, then.”

Valla opened her mouth to say something but seemed to change her mind, looking around the courtyard. “Let’s get inside,” she said instead, nodding to Victor’s fully-expanded travel home.

“Right.” He stepped up to the door, pulling it open. Pausing, he glanced back toward the gate to see if the Ninth was making their way inside yet but didn’t see any activity. Victor was a little worried about how the troops would respond to the new recruits, but he could trust Sarl to maintain order, couldn’t he? Growling with annoyance, he said, “Hang on a minute.” He looked down at Valla and met her eyes. “Are you wanting to get me inside so you can try to talk me out of adding these folks to our army?”

“Not exactly, but couldn’t we discuss . . .”

“Nah, this isn’t going to work like this. I need to talk to everyone. I think there’s a need for some clarity about these people. Kethelket, will you please fly out and meet Sarl and Lam? I’d like the cohort assembled in the bailey. I have words for everyone.”

Kethelket looked at Victor, his dark eyes narrowing as understanding clicked in his mind. “Of course, Victor. Consider it done.” With that, he spread his wings; they fluttered, and he streaked up and over the inner wall.

“What’s going on, Victor?” Valla’s voice was hushed, subdued.

“I love you, Valla, but the prejudices and traditions of Fanwath rub me the wrong way sometimes. I need to make a few things very clear to the soldiers and officers about our new soldiers and about how things will be going forward.”

Valla stepped back, her mouth closed, lips in a straight line, and Victor could tell she felt rebuked. It wasn’t what he’d wanted, but he didn’t want to go into the privacy of his house and have her start in on him about how he couldn’t trust all of the former thralls. He didn’t want to hear it because he wouldn’t agree but also because he wanted to have a sliver of fantasy in his mind that she wouldn’t do that. “As you say. I’ll take my place with the troops.” She turned stiffly and began to walk away, but Victor took another step and reached down to grab her hand.

“I feel like you missed the first part of what I said. I love you, Valla. Come on, stand by my side and hear my words. I’ll listen to you afterward if you have objections, okay? I promise.”

She glanced up at him and quickly glanced down, perhaps not wanting him to see the moisture in her eyes. She nodded, though, and squeezed his hand back, so he took the win. Striding to the center of the inner courtyard, Victor raised his voice and shouted, “Perry, Nia, Agnes, and every other survivor of Dunstan and his wampyrs, get down here and line up!” As the former thralls nearby scurried to obey his command, Victor walked up to Edeya. “Put that stuff on hold a minute. We need to have a bit of a briefing out in the bailey. Would you mind going to stand with Lam and Sarl?”

“On my way, sir!” Edeya winked at him, letting him know her old self was still in there, as she fluttered her new wings and lifted into the air, showering him and Valla with beautiful, blue motes of Energy. Victor turned to see most of the new soldiers already forming ranks in the courtyard, many of them watching Edeya

fly away with wonder in their eyes. He imagined such a sight wasn't something they might witness in a dark, undead world.

"Listen up, soldiers!" Victor said, turning and holding Valla's hand aloft. "This is Valla ap'Yensha, the Tribune Primus of our army, and if that doesn't mean much to you, you need to be aware that she's the third highest-ranking officer in the entire legion." The former thralls weren't disciplined in the way that ordinary soldiers were—they'd been controlled by fear and magic their entire lives. Still, they stood still and straight, gazing at Valla with wonder and admiration plain in their eyes, and Victor felt Valla tighten her grip when she looked into their faces.

She gave his hand one more squeeze, then let go and, lifting her voice to be heard, she said, "I'm very pleased to meet you all, and I'm pleased that you're joining our cause. I have much to learn about your kind and each of you, but you can believe that if your Legate Primus here," she nodded to Victor, "has vouched for you, then everyone in this army will respect you."

Victor felt his grin growing wide as she spoke. "That's right. Now, form a single file line and follow me into the bailey. Your brothers and sisters at arms need to meet you, and I have some words of introduction for all to hear."