

Victor BK6: Ch41

Book 6: Chapter 41: Post-Mortem

Victor stood before the ranks of the ninth cohort, running his eyes up and down their rows. They were tough-looking men and women. Every single one of them, from the smallest, slightest Ghelli to the biggest, most muscular Shadeni, looked like they could handle themselves. They each bore scars and carried experience in their eyes. Many wore ribbons and medals on their chests. Some wore awards from previous campaigns in the Imperial Legion, but most only displayed what they'd earned during the campaign, and, in this cohort, almost everyone had won accolades.

About half of them had earned multiple medals for the battle with the Ridonne. During the weeks of travel from Persi Gables to the Untamed Marches, the legion quartermaster, with his many assistants, had been hard at work creating more medals and ribbons to be handed out after further skirmishes and battles. Sarl's lieutenants had been busy awarding them for the cohort's many victories against the undead. Victor saw silver battle commemorations, red-ribboned medals for valor, blue for sustaining injuries, and gold medals for exceptional prowess, usually measured in enemies killed. The Glorious Ninth were the most decorated men and women in the legion, of that Victor was sure, even not having seen all that Rellia and Borrius had taken the rest of the army through in the last week.

While the cohort stood at attention, quiet, ready to hear his words, Victor turned his gaze over his shoulder to see the black-clad men and women who'd survived their existence as thralls under Dunstan. It was a much smaller group, about a sixth as many as were lined up facing them, but they were solid, serious-looking people. Of course, they were all human, so they had a size advantage on the Ardeni and Ghelli and certainly on the occasional goat-like Cadwalli and the diminutive Bogoli. Victor thought about that briefly while he let his eyes run along their number—these were the first non-undead humans he'd run into other than his cousin, Olivia.

How strange! It was weird to lay eyes on so many men and women who didn't have red or blue skin, who didn't have brightly colored eyes or hair or horns or wings, or any of the other myriad oddities that he'd grown accustomed to in his time on Fanwath. Still, it was plain that these people's ancestors had come from Earth. They, too, stared back at him quietly, waiting for him to speak. He locked eyes with Perry for a moment and offered a brief nod before turning back to the cohort. He looked to the left, glancing over to Sarl and the heavily cowled figure beside him—Victoria. He was glad she hadn't tried to flee; he had questions for her. Beside them were Edeya, Kethelket, Lam, and now Valla, as she finished walking over and turned, standing shoulder to shoulder with Lam. Suddenly, he felt nervous.

Victor frowned, reminding himself of who he was. He was the man who'd delved into the dark, twisting depths below this very keep. He'd descended into the nest of wampyrs and single-handedly slain most of their number. Then he'd battled, deep underground, their evil lord and freed this keep and the people behind him. He was Victor, the man who'd faced down a thousand reavers and bought time for these other men and women to arrive on the field, saving the fifth cohort. He was the man who'd led these people to victory against the Ridonne, slaying their champion from another world or dimension. He had no need to be nervous; these soldiers loved him. Many had said as much. They'd listen to him, and his words would be well-received. He was sure of it.

Victor reached into his Core and opened his pathways to a flood of inspiration-attuned Energy, using it to cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. As the white-gold Energy spread through him and radiated out, touching every soldier assembled in the bailey, he saw eyes light up, smiles widen, and understanding flash across their faces—it was obvious why they were there; it was time for Victor to explain who the men and women lined up behind him were. “Brave, tireless Ninth!” he began, speaking in a loud, clear voice.

He wasn’t titan-sized. He was just Victor, a man larger than life with or without his titanic aspect. He stood before them, decked out in his shimmering magical wyrm-scale armor and his massive, intimidating Helm of the Kethian Juggernaut. With the bright light of inspiration running through his mind, Victor knew it didn’t matter what size he made himself; these soldiers respected him. They’d seen him put himself on the line for them again and again. They not only would listen to him, but they wanted to. They wanted to please him. He suddenly realized that this wouldn’t be difficult at all; his nervous energy was from his fear, and it had no place here.

Everyone stood quietly, so still that a distant observer might think they were statues. Victor nodded and continued, “Thank you for rushing to this keep, ready to come to my aid. As you can see, Dunstan is dead. His ugly, undead wampyrs are dead, and the keep is ours.” He paused a moment as some of the more exuberant soldiers began to whoop and cheer. He smiled, nodded, then lifted a hand, and they grew quiet. “When I killed the foul creature that ruled in this keep, some of his thralls were set free from his control.” He turned and held out a hand as though presenting the humans lined up behind him.

“I know it’s easy to be suspicious of them. These are men and women who, not long ago, might have been forced to fight against you. I think it’s important that you all understand the hell they’ve been through. On the world of Dark Ember, where Hector and his undead servants come from, people like these,” again he gestured to the one-time thralls, “are allowed to live small lives in villages. They’re controlled by bullies, not unlike the Ridonne, but a thousand times worse. Whenever the vampiric lords want fresh meat or soldiers for their armies, they come to the village and take them. They don’t offer riches and power; they don’t convince them to sign up. They simply take them, infect them with the dark magic of their vampiric bloodline, and force them to become monsters like those you and I have been fighting.”

“It seems the curse takes time to grow roots in a person’s soul, to really grab hold and twist their spirits into undead things. These men and women behind me were the lucky few who hadn’t been fully consumed by it. Whether consciously or with some instinct for survival, they’d been fighting against it. When Dunstan died, his magic fled their blood, and they became normal, living people again. More than that, they have a thirst for vengeance in their blood! They remember the vile things Dunstan and his kind have done to them, their families, and loved ones. They want justice! I offered them freedom. I offered them the chance to flee this war. Every single one of them chose to stay and fight. They want to see

that green star snuffed out! They want to feel the undead break beneath the blows of their weapons!”

Again, Victor paused, looking left to right, up and down the ranks, meeting many eyes, looking for dissension. He didn’t find any. “Can I count on you, Glorious Ninth? Can I count on you to take these new soldiers under your wing? Will you teach them the ways of our legion? Will you help them fill your ranks? You won’t find fiercer companions! Nia, come here.” Victor turned and watched as the tall, scarred woman stepped forward stiffly, her broad shoulders pulled back. Her eyes were nervous, but Victor saw the spark in them, the same light that had made him want to ensure his people would treat her and her kind fairly. “Nia, how many loved ones have the wampyr and their kind taken from you?”

“All, Lord. More than I like to think about to count.”

“What does it mean to you to join the Ninth here?”

“Everything, Lord!” She spoke with breathless passion, eyes bright, springing with tears as she looked upon the assembled soldiers, her desire to be one of them so plain, so desperate, that it was palpable.

“Thank you, Nia.” Victor turned back to the line of black-clad former thralls. “Let me see your fists in the air if you have a score to settle with Lord Hector!” He watched as they each lifted their fists, scowling fiercely, perhaps thinking of one lost family member or another, perhaps remembering being treated as cattle. Victor nodded and turned back to the cohort. “Well? Can I count on you?”

“YES!” they thundered, slamming their fists to their chests in a vigorous salute.

“Captain Sarl.” Victor locked gazes with him until he stepped forward and saluted.

“Legate, sir!”

“Get your lieutenants together and work these new soldiers into your unit rosters. Take their oaths of service and assign them a partner, someone who will be there to guide them through the many customs and routines of our legion.”

“Yes, sir! Lieutenants! Step forward!”

Victor nodded, then lifted his voice again. “Thank you, Ninth! I’m counting on you to make this work. I’m counting on you to help these men and women find the justice they seek.”

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“That was a good thing you did, if a bit awkward for your recruits.” Lam pulled out a chair at the table and sat down, smiling across at Victor and Valla. Edeya and Kethelket took seats on either side of her.

“Awkward?” Victor nodded. “Yeah, I don’t know how I envisioned it in my head, but I suppose putting them all on the spot like that, on display, I guess, was a little rough. Still, I wanted the army to know how I felt. I didn’t want there to be any doubt that if they held grudges or conspired against the former thralls, they’d be acting against my wishes.” He turned to Sarl, the last of them still standing, leaning on the chair to Valla’s left. “Did I put you in a bad spot, Captain?”

“Not at all. I need the bodies. If you trust them, then I trust them. Besides, they’re signing the same contract the rest of us did.”

“Good. That’s the attitude I was hoping for.” Victor glanced around, noting the silence from everyone else, especially feeling it from Valla. He knew she’d meant to argue caution with the new troops, but he’d put her in an impossible position to do so with his public display of acceptance. Now, he supposed, they would all wait and find out if he’d been short-sighted. It was fine with him. As Sarl said, the former thralls were all signing a contract, and he believed their sincerity when it came to their desire to fight their former masters. “Enough about them. Where’s Victoria?”

Sarl gestured toward the front door. “She’s waiting for you to call her in. I told her we had strategy to discuss and you’d call for her when you were ready.”

“Good. Edeya, any word from Rellia and Borrius?”

“Yes! They’re thrilled to hear of your success here. They still hold the High Keep under siege. Borrius is reviewing strategic options but has some ideas. Rellia fears that if you bring the ninth cohort to support them, we’ll make it easy for Hector to make a counterstrike against one of the outposts we’ve secured. Borrius is in agreement and even thinks we should perhaps start putting pressure on one of the citadels, relieving them of the worry of undead reinforcements coming to High Keep.”

“What about the ‘baron’ there? Isn’t he some gargantuan flesh-shaping guy, the one Victoria thought might come to Black Keep to attack us?”

“Yes, they’ve had sightings and encounters with his constructs. So far, Polo Vosh and Rellia have risen to the occasion. It seems the legion outnumbers Karl the Crimson’s forces handily, and though he has some powerful units, he’s loath to send them out, not after he lost many in his first engagement.”

“It’s not just Polo and Rellia,” Lam interjected. “There are hundreds of rank four and higher individuals with the legion. Even considering their average level is lower than the Ninth’s, they’ve had little difficulty wiping out the undead chaff. Only a few of this Karl fellow’s units are a significant threat, and, so far, the legion has had the numbers to neutralize them with ease, usually with the help of well-planned control magic.”

“Aye,” Edeya nodded. “It seems they’re quite weak to certain elemental magics.”

“So, we leave them to wrap up that siege and move against one of the citadels. How are they situated with regard to the plateau where Hector’s base is?” Victor took out a blank piece of parchment and began to draw the contested lands between the mountains and the Silver Sea. On the northern edge, he drew a square and labeled it Old Keep. Then he shaded in a forest southwest of it and drew Black Keep in the center. Mentally tracing the path he’d taken on Guapo, he drew in the square for the Sea Keep, and then on the eastern edge, he made a square for Rust Keep. To the south, before the second row of mountains, he made a square for High Keep. Finally, at the center, he drew a representation of a big, flat-topped mountain and labeled it Hector.

“The citadels are here and here,” Edeya said, leaning forward and pointing to the northern side of the plateau. “They’re near each other, connected via an enormous, vaulted span. Either can send troops to support the other.”

“And they guard the only road up the plateau,” Lam added.

“That’s inconvenient for us, but it also limits Hector; he can’t easily send troops out unless they go down that road.” Valla leaned forward and pointed. “If we’re besieging them or even making feints and ambushes around those citadels, Borrius and Rellia will be free to finish with High Keep.”

“Guys . . .” Victor took a deep breath and shook his head. “Maybe it’s because I haven’t laid eyes on it, but I have a hard time believing some undead invader with powerful magic would be stuck using roads. Can’t he have his minions carve a path down the side of the mountain elsewhere? Come to think of it, can’t we carve a path up?”

“Certainly.” Kethelket nodded but kept speaking, “But I’ve had scouts observe the place, and it’s not what you might be picturing. It’s more a tremendous mountain with sheer rock walls and cliffs that rise to a concave mountain top. I can see why people are calling it a plateau—the area on the top is significant. However, there were similar peaks on Kthella before the worlds were joined. I think those who describe it as a dormant volcano are more correct.” He stood and began to pace as he continued to speak, “I’m not saying your point doesn’t stand, but it would be a massive undertaking to create a new roadway of any significance down or up the side of that peak. If I’m not mistaken, Borrius has stationed scouts to observe the slopes; we’ll be well warned if Hector begins work upon a new egress from his base.”

“You’re not mistaken.” Edeya tapped the command book, indicating she had the reports available to read.

“Okay.” Victor sat back and folded his arms before his chest. “How long will it take to get the Ninth into a position to harass those citadels?”

Sarl cleared his throat to respond. “It took us five days to get here from Black Keep, but Victor, the soldiers are exhausted. We double-timed it and only slept in four-hour shifts. I recommend the opposite as we move toward the citadels. We should travel slowly with plenty of time for rest and drills at the end of each day’s march. We still need to integrate your recruits. Considering the distance, linearly, is a bit smaller than the march to Black Keep, I’d estimate a seven-day journey.”

“We should be able to do that,” Lam chimed in. “We must have bought ourselves some downtime, destroying so many of the invaders’ armies. Consider the horde that burned to ash in the forest. Consider that four of Hector’s five barons have fallen. If he’s raising an army of undead to try to take back some territory, he can’t possibly do so faster than that. Kethelket?”

“I agree. I know a thing or two about Death Casters, and even if this Hector is twice what Belikot was, it would take months to raise a significant force, something that could truly challenge the legion. However, that doesn’t consider the forces he has available at the citadels or in his base. It doesn’t take into account more troops he might pull through the portal. Even so, I think seven days is an appropriate pace. What’s the alternative? Pushing the Ninth to the point of breaking? As tough as they are, they’re mortal and require rest.”

“Okay. So, numbers-wise, we’ve got how many troops?” Victor looked at Sarl for the answer.

“We have a hundred or so Naghelli, the ones who didn’t stay behind at Black Keep. We have five-hundred and sixty-two soldiers in the Ninth, not counting the hundred-plus recruits you just got for us.”

“Victor,” Edeya spoke up, hot on Sarl’s heels.

“Yeah?”

“There are more than a cohort’s-worth of soldiers at the pass. Thayla wrote to you in the book, and that was one of the things she mentioned. You should read her message, by the way, some of it was more personal.”

Victor mentally made a note to read the message. “Does that include the Shadeni tribe?”

“No! Borrius left behind many of the extra troops who’d been swelling the cohorts on the march, and there’s been a steady influx of fortune-seekers coming over the pass.”

Victor looked to his right, locking eyes with Valla. “Thoughts?”

“We should call for reinforcements. We should bolster the Ninth to a double cohort. Have six hundred of the highest-level soldiers at the pass meet us at the citadels.”

“I like the sound of that. Sarl?”

“It would be easy to double-up unit numbers. I could keep the same command structure in place.”

“Kind of the beauty of the legion structure,” Lam added. “Cohorts are often bolstered like that depending on the assignment.”

Victor nodded, looking at Edeya. “The troops at the pass have been drilling? They know the commands?”

“Yes, of course. Most of them were drilling with the legion all the way here during the march.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll leave that to you, Sarl and Lam. Coordinate the meet-up. Now, I have one more request, Sarl. When it comes time to leave behind a hundred soldiers to garrison this keep, take volunteers. I’d like those who are most weary, those who could use a break from the constant fighting, to stay here. I promised the former thralls that they’d be brought to the front line, that they’d get a chance at spilling some undead blood.”

“Understood.”

“Okay. I want hourly watch rotations this afternoon and tonight so that no one has to be on duty for long. Let’s let the soldiers relax and celebrate a little; they deserve it.” Victor smiled at the people around the table and added, “You all deserve it. I’m so lucky to have such dependable, competent friends leading this army.”

“Here, here!” Lam laughed, pounding a fist on the table.

“Well said!” Kethelket nodded, inhaling deeply through his nose and sitting up straighter.

Valla reached under the table and grasped Victor’s hand, squeezing it tightly. Her cool fingers against his hot flesh brought to mind another matter, and he added, “When you march tomorrow, Valla and I will stay behind.”

“What?” Edeya was the first to respond, eyes wide, voice rising with a tinge of panic.

“Relax!” he laughed. “I don’t mean permanently. We’re going to use these.” Victor fished the two “apples of evolution” out of his ring and set them on the table. “I received these when I claimed the keep, and I’m . . . claiming them.

Valla will, of course, object,” he chuckled and winked at her, “but she deserves one. I’m eating the other because I have to keep advancing, too, regardless of my current strength. We don’t know what Hector or his closest subordinates will be like. I have to be strong.”

“What are they?” Sarl leaned close, looking at the foil-wrapped fruit.

“Apples of Evolution, whatever that is. I’m assuming racial advancements.”

“Victor, I . . .”

“Didn’t I already say you’d object? Overruled.” Victor squeezed her hand.

“He’s right, Valla.” Lam reached over the table and took Valla’s other hand.

“You’re too selfless, and you’re often in the thick of things with Victor. I’ve even pushed my race to advanced. What are you? Still in the improved ranks, yeah?”

“I, too, am at the advanced stage.” Kethelket nodded.

“Well, I . . .” Sarl chuckled and shook his head.

“You need to spend some of the campaign tokens you’ve earned, buddy,” Victor laughed. “Okay,” Victor smiled and nodded at Valla as she bit back further objections, “it’s settled, then. We’ll eat these apples here, then haul ass on Guapo to rejoin you all. Oh!” He paused and snapped his fingers, reaching back into his dimensional storage container. He retrieved the silver, rune-etched spyglass and held it up. “Before we end the meeting, help me figure out what this thing does.”

Book 6: Chapter 42: Relationships

After their meeting, when everyone had had their fill of talk and drink, and things going forward were settled, Victor walked his command staff to the front door to say goodnight. On the way, as they passed by the short hallway leading to his library, Edeya tugged Victor’s sleeve and asked, “Could I speak to you for a minute? It’s about the message from Thayla.”

Valla had been walking beside him, and she squeezed his hand briefly before stepping forward. “I’ll show the others out.”

“All right. Night, all!” Victor called, smiling stupidly—Valla had produced a bottle of brandy she’d been hanging onto from Coloss, and Victor had enjoyed it a bit too much. He followed Edeya into the library and, on a whim, lifted the little spyglass, focusing it on her. A green halo limned her body almost immediately as the glass magically clarified the image. They’d figured out the little artifact’s purpose, or at least one of them, while sitting around the table. It seemed to indicate the strength of the people observed through it, relative to the viewer, with a crude, if effective, color system.

When Victor had studied the soldiers outside, almost all had been green, like Edeya, but he'd gotten some more clues when he'd looked at Valla, Lam, and Kethelket. They'd all been shades of blue. The real breakthrough had come when he'd handed the spyglass to Valla, and she'd seen him as deep crimson, Lam and Kethelket as pale yellow, Edeya as pale blue, and Sarl as green.

Victor was shaken from his thoughts of the spyglass when he walked into the big map table, stumbled, and nearly dropped the little scope. "Are you okay?" Edeya laughed.

"Heh, fine." He shook his head, grinning, and slipped the spyglass back into his storage ring. Edeya produced a thick Farscribe book and held it close to her chest, hugging her arms around it. She seemed nervous to him, like she was struggling to find the right words. "Spit it out, chica." He knew calling her that would break the tension.

"Back to that, are we?" She laughed, then set the book down on the big table. "Well, I wanted to let you read this message from Thayla. There are two Farscribe books at the pass that they're using to stay in touch with the legion, this one that I carry and another that Lieutenant Darro carries for Rellia and Borrius." Edeya flipped the book to one of the most recent entries, and Victor saw some paragraphs of Thayla's sharp-angled handwriting addressed to him. Edeya pointed to a note at the bottom of the page, "Edeya, please pull the next page from the book and give it to Victor so he can write back when he has a minute."

"Oh, I see." Victor nodded, his buzz fading as he began to worry about what the hell Thayla had written to make Edeya so nervous.

"Yeah, she even wrote on the top of the page." Edeya pointed to the next page where, neatly printed on the top, were the words, This Page For Victor's Use. Without further ado, Edeya ripped the page out along with the previous page where Thayla's message was written.

"They'll still work?"

"Oh yes. These two pages will still reflect the words written on them with the ones in the copy back at the pass." Edeya smiled, then gripped Victor by the back of the arm, squeezing gently. "If we don't talk before we march, be careful, and don't take too long to catch up to us, okay? I'm nervous about what awaits us as we move toward the center of all this corruption."

"Yeah, all right. Don't worry; I don't plan to take my time." He watched her leave, and as she got to the doorway, he added, "Thanks, Edeya." She smiled again, nodded, and left, her shimmering, azure wings drifting through the dim hallway like fairy dust. Victor sighed and picked up the two pages, shuffling them so Thayla's letter was on top. He'd just turned his eyes to the first line when Valla spoke up from the doorway.

“Anything to worry about?”

Victor held up the pages. “I don’t think so, just a letter from Thayla. Haven’t read it yet.”

“Ah, that’s right. Edeya mentioned it earlier. Well, I’ll leave you to concentrate on that. I’m headed to bed. See you soon?”

“Oh yeah. I won’t be up much longer.” Victor’s eyes were still on the page, and when he looked up to see if Valla had more to say, she was already gone. Was she upset? He didn’t think so. “Let’s see here.” He straightened out the page and began to read:

Victor,

We hear much of your campaign here in Northpass, as they’re starting to call the little village between the walls the engineers and Earth Casters are building. I know this book isn’t for our private use, so I’ll trust Edeya to stop reading here and pass this note along to you. Things sound promising with regard to the campaign, and you should know that things are good here, too. I won’t bore you with all the details, as I’m sure Edeya gets reports from the legion personnel in this same book, and you’ve no doubt heard it all from her already. Things are exciting, though! We’ve all enjoyed watching the construction process, learning to hunt the slopes south of the pass, and observing the reserve forces here drilling on the new parade grounds outside the walls. What a strange name for a bunch of gravel fields! It must have something to do with Imperial traditions, don’t you think?

Deyni is well! She’s become quite a huntress with that bird of hers! She and Challa go out every morning, and they’ve impressed everyone with their contribution to the food stores. It’s not me or Deyni that I write to you about, however. I’m worried about Chandri, and I’m not sure what to do. Tellen isn’t any help—he’s too hands-off with those girls, and I’ve come into their lives too late to change any of that. He says she’ll figure things out, and she probably will. That said, I’ve made the, perhaps foolish, decision to add to your no-doubt immense pile of worries. Chandri has grown bitter and angry. When I confronted her about her attitude, she made an offhand comment about things being her fault, ‘her choice to live a small, stupid life.’

When I pressed her, she fought with me, saying things women say to each other when their anger gets ahold of them. I know she didn’t mean them, so I won’t bother repeating her words here, but your name came up more than once. I think that when you left in the winter, when you said goodbye, Chandri figured it would be the last she’d see of you. I don’t think she ever imagined she’d be embroiled in a campaign like this, that she’d ever see you leading an army, dragging her people along with it. She’d never imagined spending so much time in your proximity, and if she did, that she’d be such a footnote, someone whom you passed by now and then and said hello to. I think she imagined she was more than that to you.

She knew you’d be moving on to bigger things, but she thought it would happen far from her. She feels snubbed, Victor. She thought she held an important place in your heart. It may not seem logical, but she was ready to have you fade out of her life, but she wasn’t prepared for it to happen while she could still observe you.

What can you do? I have no idea. Talk to her? I know you care about her, despite what she might think. I know you're very, very busy, but I'm sure you'll find a way to make things right with her. I just wasn't sure you knew things needed making right. I hope this news doesn't distract you too much. I hope you'll have great success and, hopefully, have a chance to rest soon, a chance to visit those of us who aren't on the frontlines.

With much love,

Thayla

"Oh, what the hell?" Victor groaned as he lowered the page and stood from the edge of the table. He walked over to the big, comfortable chair he favored and collapsed into it. "If it's not one thing, it's another." He reached over his shoulder and pulled Lifedrinker loose from her harness. At first, he was just trying to get comfortable, but he realized he also wanted the comfort she usually provided. He pressed the cool metal of her axe head to his forehead and sighed, "Well, beautiful, once again, I'm dealing with some damn drama I seem to have created simply by being myself."

He wasn't sure what he'd expected from Lifedrinker. Usually, when he complained about things like that, she provided some clarity in the form of a simple desire to fight something. He didn't always agree with her urge for combat, but it always made him feel better to see a different perspective, a different focus on priorities. One thing was sure: Lifedrinker never made him feel bad, always supported him, and was usually quick to point out how he was in the right and those who disagreed shouldn't have crossed him. Of course, on this occasion, Lifedrinker decided to complicate things instead of providing clarity. Rather than love, unquestioning support, and a desire for battle, she sent waves of uncertainty, doubt, and even resentment through their bond.

Victor, why do you forsake me? You promised to share your spirit again soon, and I've ached for it!

An image flashed through Victor's mind. A great, silver-furred wolf, alone, howling into the dark, waiting for a response and hearing nothing but silence as the howl echoed away. He frowned and held the axe at arm's length, staring at it. "Seriously? It hasn't been very long! You know I love you, chica! I'm . . . conflicted, though. What exactly am I doing with you when I join my spirit to yours? Is it . . . am I being faithful to Valla? I know people teased me about it, about us, I mean, but I never thought of you like that before. It wasn't something possible, you know? You were an axe; I was a man. If our spirits can get together, though . . . what does that even mean?"

Lifedrinker was an axe of few words, and rather than answer his question, he felt hot emotion pulse out of the haft into his hands. Her feelings were clear; she didn't care about anything other than her love for him. She didn't care what he said or did with anyone else so long as they were together. Images of him standing tall, swinging her through battle after battle, killing monsters, creatures, and men and women in the hundreds flashed through his mind. Along with those images flowed Lifedrinker's feelings of raw, palpable excitement, pride, hunger for conflict, and, under it all, a deep, unwavering devotion to Victor.

Victor shook his head and balled up his fist, gently thumping it against his forehead as he squeezed his eyes in frustration. “God, you’re so good, Lifedrinker, so straightforward and true. You don’t lie. You don’t play games. Are you too good for me? Do I even deserve you?” He sighed and sat up, shaking his head. “Still, you must know how I’m different than you, right? I love to fight, true, but I also enjoy other things in life. You know I’m not always focused on you or what we do together, right? You know how I feel about Valla. You know I care about other people and other things. I want people who enjoy peace to have it. That’s why I’m here, in these lands, fighting these undead pendejos.”

Victor paused, unsure what he was getting at, where his thoughts were going. “I think what I’m trying to say is that I understand what you want and how you feel, but you have to understand that my life and my desires are a little more complicated. You have to understand that I’m a little concerned about what it means to you and me when I connect our spirits like that. If I’m not doing it to win a fight, am I just doing it to be closer to you, to show my love and affection? If so, is that disloyal to Valla? Because you’ve got to understand something, chica, I enjoyed it too. I felt different somehow when I pulled my spirit back, and it was good

.”

If it’s good, it’s good!

The words were so clear and so simple that Victor had to laugh. Still chuckling, he turned Lifedrinker crossways over his lap, holding her haft with both hands, admiring the weird, depthless nature of her living-wood haft with its tiny motes of light winking at him from the dark grains and whorls. “Let me think about things a little more, okay? Hell, let me talk to Valla.” Reluctant acceptance came to him through the dense, warm wood. “Gracias, amor mio.”

Victor rubbed his temples and pressed his eyes shut briefly, trying to wrap his head around everything. He’d hoped to get some comfort from Lifedrinker, but now he had another thing to worry about. With a grunt, he stood up, re-slung his axe, and moved over to the table, summoning a pen from his storage ring. He took the blank page on which he was supposed to write a response, smoothed it out with his hand, and got to work, trying not to let his frustration bleed into his words.

Thayla,

Thanks for the message. I appreciate you looking out for me concerning Chandri’s feelings—it’s certainly not something you had to do, but I recognize that you’re looking out for her as much, or maybe more, than me. I promise I’ll have a good, long heart-to-heart with her when I get back. Problem is, I don’t know when that’ll be. Things haven’t really slowed down here, and we’re trying to capitalize on our momentum. Realistically, it’ll be weeks, at least, before I can get back up there. In the meantime, maybe you can let Chandri know that I’m awfully sorry for not . . . Scratch that! If

you do that, she'll realize you messaged me about her, and she'll probably get even angrier. How about this: next time you're all together, let her, Deyni, and everyone know that I asked about them and that I'm looking forward to spending time with them all. I promise I'll try to make things right.

No matter what, it was nice to hear from you, Thayla. It's nice to be reminded of what I'm fighting for.

Love,

Victor

Victor sighed and folded the pages in half, sending them into his storage ring. Feeling a little lighter for having at least responded to Thayla, he made his way downstairs and into his room. The lights were dim, hardly on, but he saw Valla curled up under the blanket, breathing peacefully in her sleep. He started to undress, hanging his armor and Lifedrinker on a rack of wooden pegs near the door. He'd just sat down on a bench to pull his boots off when he heard the sheets rustle, and Valla sleepily spoke up, "Coming to bed?"

"Yeah."

There must have been something in his voice because she asked, "Want to talk about it?"

"I don't think my current troubles are anything you want to hear about, to be honest." He chuckled a little ruefully and tugged at his boot.

More rustling of sheets signaled Valla sitting up against the pillows as he started on his second boot. "I always want to hear about your troubles. How else can I be any help?"

"Well," Victor's nervous chuckle returned as he dropped his boot and decided to be honest, "I guess you could say I'm having some women troubles."

"Excuse me? I think I'd know about that. Something to do with Thayla? I thought you and she were . . ."

"Nah." Victor stood and pulled his shirt off. "It's not like that. She's fine; she wrote to me about Chandri."

"Chandri? Did you and she? Victor, really?"

"No, it's not like that! We were close, is all, back when I was staying with the clan. I mean, we almost were something, but it was just a couple of flirting kisses, and then she . . . God, Valla! You don't want to hear all this!"

"Well, hold on!" Suddenly, her voice wasn't sleepy at all. "You said 'women' not 'woman.' Is there another former lover I need to . . ."

"Oh my God, Valla! For one thing, Chandri wasn't a 'former lover.' Anyway, the other 'woman' is Lifedrinker." Victor glanced at the axe hanging by the door, feeling a surge of guilt for talking about her like that.

“Lifedrinker?” Valla leaned forward, the sheets falling away from her, revealing a sheer, silky white nightgown that Victor hadn’t seen her wear before. Did that mean something? He slapped his head, groaning.

“I’m an idiot. Our first night back together, and I’m coming to bed late, moaning about problems with other women. It’s not what it sounds like, Valla. I’m just worried about their feelings. You know me.”

She sighed and leaned back, letting her furrowed brow relax. “Yes, Victor, I know you. Your heart is too big, but, of course, that’s what I love about you. So, let’s start with the woman in the room with us. What’s wrong with Lifedrinker?”

Victor unbuckled his pants and let them drop to the ground, then he walked over to the bed and sat on the side of it, nudging Valla’s legs over to make room. “Well, you remember my Imbue Spirit spell? The one I used on you and Barn when we fought the night brutes?”

“Yes, you shared your courage with us.”

“Right. Well, it was more than my courage. It’s a piece of my spirit. I guess, in that case, it was a piece that reflected my courage because that’s the Energy I used when I cast it. Anyway, that’s beside the point. Recently, I cast that spell on Lifedrinker, sending part of my spirit into her. It empowered her, allowing her to damage Dunstan, for instance, when she couldn’t before.”

“Mmhmm. What’s the problem with that?”

“The problem came when I called my spirit back into me, and Lifedrinker got depressed! She loves having my spirit with her. It brings us closer together, and, well, I hate to deny her, but I also feel guilty. What exactly are we sharing when I do that?”

“You feel . . . guilty?” Valla frowned at him, narrowing her eyes again. “Why?”

“Because I love you, and I’d never do something to hurt you. I wouldn’t . . . well, shit, I wouldn’t cheat on you. When I share my spirit with Lifedrinker, we’re close, Valla. How is that okay?” Victor spoke from his heart and wasn’t trying to hide anything. Valla must have recognized that because he could see the sympathy in her eyes. She didn’t get angry as he’d feared she might. Instead, she reached out to grasp one of his big hands in her slender, cool fingers, gently squeezing it.

“You’re an idiot.”

The words were familiar to Victor, but he was used to hearing them from people like Thayla and Edeya. Hearing them from Valla brought an instant bark of laughter out of him. “Am I?”

“Yes! Do you love Lifedrinker in the same way you love me?”

“No!”

“Then why would you feel guilty about being close to her? You should feel close to her! You’ve been through quite a lot together, haven’t you?” When Victor nodded, she pressed on, “You’re allowed to love people other than me, you know. Do you feel sexually attracted to her?”

“Valla! No!”

“Well, I had to ask because you’re being very strange! You don’t feel guilty about loving Thayla, do you? Don’t deny it; I know you love her!”

“No, I don’t feel guilty ‘cause we both know we aren’t going anywhere in that . . . direction.”

“Well, I think you and Lifedrinker know you won’t become mates, right?”

“Yeah.” Victor sighed, chuckling nervously. Was he being honest? He could speak for himself, but what did he know of Lifedrinker’s true feelings? Hadn’t she spoken possessively of Valla before? Was that something he should mention? “I can’t really speak for her; she’s not the same as us, you know? Some of her memories are ancient and come from the heartwood in her haft. I’m saying she might view a relationship differently than you and I.”

“I care about what’s in here.” Valla held her palm to Victor’s chest, over his heart. “If you can make her life better, this spirit who’s done so much with and for you, don’t you think you should? Share your spirit with her when she wants. I love her too, you know? If she hadn’t been there for you, loving and caring for you, you’d have died on more than one occasion. Am I wrong?”

“No.” Victor couldn’t say anything else; he was too fraught with emotion. He squeezed his eyes shut, images of battles where he’d almost died running through his mind. From the “boss” of the dungeon Lifedrinker had drained to his duel with Rellia, where she’d gifted him her own life Energy, to half a dozen other close battles where she’d made the difference between a loss and a win—where she’d been the difference between life and death. He felt Valla pull on his wrist, and he fell forward into her arms.

She stroked his head, rubbing her fingers through the stiff, shorter hair on the sides of his head.

“Shh,” she said, leaning forward to kiss his forehead. “Did anyone ever tell you not to worry quite so much about everyone else’s feelings?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, “Lifedrinker.”

Book 6: Chapter 43: Bloodlines

Victor and Valla watched the Glorious Ninth march away from the keep, a long column of armor-clad individuals wending its way east and north along the beach toward a gap in the hills where they’d turn toward the center of the contested lands. Victor let his gaze drift that way, proud of the clear air and bright sun in the vicinity; he’d been responsible for removing the sickly haze, allowing

him to see the heavy curtain of mist that hung in the eastern sky so clearly. It was distant, days and days of travel away, but it was there. Even in the morning sunlight, he could make out the faint green glow of the Death Caster's "veil star."

"They'll be all right." Valla had mistaken Victor's angry scowl for one of concern.

"Yeah. I just want to get these undead assholes out of here. It stresses me out to think he's got an open portal there, but we don't know what kinds of limitations he has on calling more troops through."

"Limitations?"

"Remember what Victoria said? I mean about the portal repelling those beyond a certain threshold of power."

"Oh, yes, I remember." Valla frowned, watching the distant column of marching soldiers. "I hope Lam keeps a close eye on that woman."

"Lam and Kethelket will both watch her. Kethelket won't let her surprise him."

Valla turned to lean an elbow on the parapet, looking more fully at Victor. "Did you suspect there are other limitations?"

"I suspect, but I don't know. The System seems to have rules for this invasion. Hector already has far more troops than we do. Well, he did before the forest fire and our recent victories. Still, if he had the resources back home, would he be allowed to send out the call to bring another fifty thousand troops through? It doesn't seem that would be fair, so would the System deny their passage through its portal? Of course, the System might consider us as part of Fanwath as a whole. It might think we could gather more troops if we tried our hand at diplomacy, begging the Ridonne or the free cities for aid."

"Or it might just consider the number of us who have the quest it issued in the pass . . ."

"Well, that's what I'm getting at. We just don't know. Hector might have already pulled through all the troops he has access to. We might be about to wrap this whole thing up." Victor shrugged.

"I can see it's the frustration of not knowing that's bothering you. I suppose all we can do is find out, and that starts with you and me eating those apples." She stepped close to him and gazed over the parapet at the waves crashing against the beach. She leaned her head against his arm and entwined her fingers with his. "Are you ready?"

Victor squeezed her hand and nodded, though she couldn't see the gesture. "Yeah, let's get this over with." He led the way off the parapets, returning the salutes of the guards stationed on the wall. When they'd crossed the bailey into the inner courtyard, he saw Uvu reclining on the cobbles outside his travel home and felt a surge of fondness for the big cat. He was lying on his side,

soaking in the sunlight, his head just at the foot of the steps leading up to the house. Victor wondered if, in his mind, he was guarding their home. “Good boy!” He squatted to scratch the lazy cat’s ear, eliciting a twitch and a partial yawn.

“He’s enjoying the sun.” Valla, too, paused to give the cat some affection, hugging him around the neck before following Victor up the steps and into the house. He turned and, pressing his finger to one of the runes next to the door, activated it with a trickle of Energy, securing the magical locks. A few minutes later, he and Valla were in his bedroom, kicking off their shoes, hanging up their armor and weapons, and then reclining on the bed, propped up by pillows, side by side.

“Hope these apples work fast. I mean, I hope they have a big effect, but we don’t lose weeks in the process.” Victor produced the two gold-wrapped fruits, handing one to Valla.

Valla lifted it, weighing it in one hand. “Do you remember the racial advancement rewards for sale in the Warlord’s token store?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Remember how he sold them in tiers—advanced, epic, legendary?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re wondering what tier these might fall under, huh?” Victor regarded the apple as Valla nodded. “Well, I guess we don’t get to know. If they’re only ‘improved’ or whatever, then it won’t affect me as much as it does you.”

“Well, I hope they’re potent, as you said. Then we’ll both make good strides.”

As he thought about her words, Victor nodded and stood up, moving to the foot of the bed. “I think I’ll lay on the floor. There’s no way my Alter Self spell will last through this process, and if this process does add a lot to my Quinametzin bloodline, I might grow even more. Don’t want to break the bed . . .”

“Okay, but I wasn’t trying to hint at that.” Valla began to run one of her sharp nails along the gold foil’s seam. “Ready?”

Victor grunted as he lay on the rug at the foot of the bed. “Ready.” He couldn’t see Valla any longer, but he heard her sharp inhalation and slight gasp. Peeling the foil from his own apple, he soon understood her reaction. It smelled amazing, bringing to mind every food Victor had ever loved—hot pancakes dripping with syrup, fresh, hot tortillas with his abuela’s homemade refries, albondigas sprinkled with fresh cilantro and lime juice; the images kept flashing through his mind with every tiny whiff of the apple’s potent vapors.

“Eat it quickly!” Valla called. “Its essence escapes with each second!” That was the last he heard from her before the tell-tale sound of teeth crunching into an apple came to him. Victor couldn’t argue, so he took a huge bite, ripping through almost half the apple with his powerful jaw and teeth. Of course, the smells only amplified with the fruit’s juice exploding in his mouth, and Victor almost lost himself in an ecstasy of pleasant tastes. It was sweet but also carried hidden depths of flavor, things his mind couldn’t immediately wrap around. He thought he tasted vanilla, and he’d try to focus on that flavor only to be swept away by something altogether different, like hints of rosemary or cinnamon.

Soon, he couldn’t focus on the flavors any longer because, as he swallowed down the second half of the apple, he became aware of the roiling ball of Energies in his stomach. He knew it was more than one type immediately. He recognized the pure natural Energy, the hot, metallic touch of a blood attunement, and the many biting flavors of elemental Energies. He was sure there were others. He even felt hints of spirit attunements—the cloying, cold fingers of fear, the hot fangs of rage, and something warm and pure that he couldn’t pin down. As he tried to examine those forces, turning his mind’s eye inward, wondering what the magical fruit was doing, they began propagating through his pathways and into his body, touching every cell. Victor’s awareness began to slip away, no matter how he scrabbled to hold on, to watch the process.

#

Ichtaca sat upon his carved-bone stool and looked into the red, sweating face of the youngster. “Mecati, can you hear me?” The girl shivered and shook, her brow furrowing and relaxing at odd intervals. She was deep in a fever dream, the poison coursing through her blood. Was what the father had said possible? A poisoned barb shot from the bow of a fey creature? The puckered, oozing wound looked plausible, but why hadn’t he brought the offending dart? It didn’t matter; whether he lied or told the truth, the solution was the same—this was Mecati’s time to earn her place among the Quinametzin. Whatever the source of the toxin, her fortitude must prevail against it.

Ichtaca took the cloth from the bowl of cold spring water and twisted most of the water out. Then he laid it upon her brow and tried again, speaking forcefully into her ear, letting his prodigious aura press against her, “Mecati, open your eyes.”

The girl’s eyes snapped open, glossy with fever, red veins standing out. She was still, though, observing, taking in her surroundings. “Healer?” Her use of his status was a good sign; she recognized him.

“It’s time to fight now, Mecati. You can’t let your body, strong as it is, do all the work. Turn your mind inward. Quinametzin need not fall prey to things as mundane as a toxin. It’s an invader in your system, and you can drive it out.”

The girl’s eyes darted from him to the window and back again, then she licked her dry, peeling lips. “How?” Her voice was hoarse, the breath pushing the word past her lips thready and weak. If she didn’t master the poison that rampaged through her veins, she’d be dead soon.

“How do you see your Core? How do you force your essence to bend to your will? The same way, Mecati! You are Quinametzin, and we do not suffer poison!” Her dark brows drew together as his words woke something in her, breaking through the fear and weakness, stirring her Quinametzin pride. “Good! You are above these things, are you not? Do you suffer as the small people do? Do you cry from hunger or whimper in fear of the dark?”

“No!” This time, though her voice cracked, Mecati spoke clearly.

“A Quinametzin worships no other. We do not seek salvation or guidance. We do not bend our knees. We do not tolerate invaders on our lands or in our bodies! Are you Quinametzin?”

Mecati’s teeth ground together, her lips pulled back in a fierce grimace as she scrunched her eyes tight, clearly struggling to do what he’d asked, to look inward, through her pathways and into her body, into her blood where the offending toxin must now lurk. Could she do it? Could she peer into herself in such a way? Could she use her will to drive her essence against the invading poison?

“You are one of the mighty, Mecati! You are one of the great ones, the rulers of these lands! Will you tolerate that poison in your blood?” Ichtaca slid off his stool and crawled onto the wooden cot, straddling the girl, placing his tattooed, fetish-bedecked hands on either side of her neck, pressing his hot, powerful flesh against hers. How far should he go to help her? Not far, he decided. This was a test for the girl, a rite of passage. He shouldn’t interfere much. Just a touch of essence to aid her weakened Core. He let the barest trickle bleed forth into her, and she began to tremble, no, vibrate! Her heels bounced up and down on the cot, her body convulsed and thrashed as her head bounced upon the pillow her mother had brought.

Despite her convulsions, Mecati’s brows stayed furrowed; her bared teeth maintained their grimacing snarl, and Ichtaca felt the heat from her body begin to radiate like a forge. “Good!” he growled, squeezing her shoulders in encouragement as he stood up. She’d found the path, and she was doing what she must. If he knew medicine, and he did, she’d soon be free of the toxin. She’d be exhausted but stronger for the ordeal. More importantly, she’d proven her worthiness to walk among her people. Ichtaca nodded firmly, then turned for the door; it was time to give the young Quinametzin’s parents the good news.

#

Valla drifted into nothingness. Though she opened her eyes wide and looked from left to right, up and down, she saw naught but blackness. Why did she have the sensation of drifting? Was it

because she couldn't feel anything beneath her? Nothing was under her feet, nothing beneath her back. When she moved her arms, she felt nothing. Could she even be sure she moved them? That thought brought brief panic, but she forced herself to calm. She must be dreaming or having some sort of vision. Hadn't Victor described something of the sort?

She'd advanced her race several times but never experienced anything as he'd described. She'd never had a fruit like what she'd just eaten, however. It had been labeled as providing some sort of "evolution." Was that hinting at a bloodline? Was she about to have a vision as Victor did when he'd learned of his Quinametzin heritage? Hope sprang into her heart, though she wasn't sure she even had a heart. Was she breathing? Again, panic ran through her consciousness, but realizing it, she reasoned that she was at least thinking and feeling emotions. Would that happen if she didn't exist any longer? Somehow, her consciousness was apart from her body, but that was all right. "Nothing to panic about," she tried to speak, but she wasn't sure it worked.

As she drifted and lost track of time, she let her mind run through all those things that weighed heavily upon her but which she rarely felt she had the time to ponder. Of course, Victor was foremost in her thoughts. She thought of their closeness and their intimacy, and warmth infused her floating consciousness. Then she thought of her fears—of losing him to death or simply due to falling behind, forgotten as he took on quest after quest where she wouldn't be strong enough to follow. What did it say about her that she feared the latter more than the former?

Unable to think of a resolution, she let her mind drift to other worries. What about her mother? What about Rellia, the woman who'd adopted her, raised her, and spent so much of her life forging her into an aide and successor? How would Rellia handle it if she left Fanwath to adventure with Victor? Would she break down? Would she grow bitter and distant? Would she and the others they left be overrun and killed by the Ridonne?

In despair at the idea and her lack of solutions, Valla turned her mind to other things, wondering if there couldn't possibly be something pleasant to think about. Of course, her mind had other plans and began to consider the campaign and question whether her thoughts of leaving with Victor weren't premature. How closely had Victor come to death already? How nearly had he died against the reavers? What wasn't he telling her about his clash with Dunstan? Why had it taken him almost a week to climb from the depths to claim the keep?

Flailing, trying to escape the negative, worrisome thoughts, Valla tried to force herself to think of anything else, and, had she been able, she would have sighed with relief when her thoughts settled on Midnight Hope, her sword. What a wonderful weapon! She was sure she was making headway with bringing her to consciousness. She'd begun to feel emotions from the weapon—anger, excitement, hunger. The blade loved to fight and loved to be held by Valla. She would have laughed at that thought; it reminded her of Victor's troubles with Lifedrinker. If only he knew how she could relate. Her sword was a jealous blade, always eager to be held and disappointed when Valla sheathed her.

I've been listening to you, Valla.

The voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Valla was just grateful for a change in the empty, nothingness. "You have?" Again, she formed the words and spoke as she would at any other time, but she couldn't feel her mouth, her lungs, or her ears. Did the words take shape?

Yes. You're a kind and strong woman, and I'm impressed by you.

“Who are you?”

I'm a fragment of your lineage, a tiny bit of your ancestry, a progenitor that has faded to near nothingness in the dilution of your bloodlines.

“The dilution . . .”

Many are the peoples who make up your history, Valla. My time was long and long ago. I faded in your ancestors' blood even before my people began to die out among the larger population. Still, I was there, near the beginning, an ancient spark that traveled through history to bring you into existence.

“You're my ancestor? Who are you, though?”

So little of me still exists. Heranya was my name, and I rode the winds around the Tarcris Peaks.

“Tarcris? That was in the old world, on Alurath? I've never met someone with that name; is it Ardeni?”

Alurath, aye. Ardeni, nay, Valla. I was Ordeni with the Rihven bloodline.

“I had Ordeni ancestors?”

At least one! As you drifted here, I searched your thoughts for my people, but they're gone, aren't they?

“They were small in number when the worlds were joined. They were the first to come together to build a new civilization. I wasn't alive, but it's taught that the Yovashi, a species from another world, called down pieces of the moon to destroy their city, all but wiping them out.”

As I feared. I saw glimpses of your world, and not a single Ordeni face graced the crowds in your memories. I feel great sorrow, Valla, this fragment of me that lives in you. Will you help to revive the memory of my—our—people? Will you take up the mantle of an entire species and carry it forth into the worlds?

“I . . .” Valla could feel the sadness lacing the words of her ancestor, and she struggled with the impulse to immediately agree. “Will I have your bloodline, too? Can you tell me about it?”

In your memories, I saw many Shadeni and Ardeni but only one Ridonne. Do the Vessi and Ridonne no longer wage war?

“The Vessi are dead. The Ridonne have wiped their bloodline clean from the world. I've only seen one Ridonne because they rule from high places and don't mingle with those they deem lesser.”

What a tragedy! The worst of us lives on, then. No Vessi and no Rihven—a fallen world.

“It's not that bad . . .”

Forgive me, Valla, daughter. Little of me lives on in you, but it's enough for me to feel—enough for sorrow and rage to war for space in my fragmented heart. You've consumed something potent, daughter, something that wants to wake a bloodline. You have more and newer contenders. You could spurn me, and something else will wake in the place of your Rihven heritage, but I beg you to embrace me!

Again, Valla grappled with emotion and the impulse to say yes. Her ancestor hadn't answered her question, hadn't told her what a Rihven was. Still, she'd given her a hint—the Ordeni had been the strongest Energy users from Alurath, driven to extinction by the jealousy of the Yovashi, though they'd been few in number before that. Had their Rihven bloodline been the cause? Had they been brought low because of the Ridonne's obsession with exterminating the Vessi and, apparently, the Rihven? Valla stopped deliberating and answered her progenitor with her heart, "I will embrace the Rihven bloodline."

Book 6: Chapter 44: Rest and Reflections

As his vision faded and Victor suddenly felt himself in his own body again, he snapped his eyes open, only to be bombarded with System messages. He inhaled deeply and blinked his eyes a few times, trying to push past the strange disorientation he felt, lying on the floor, looking up to see, beyond the obscuring, opaque System windows, a cloud of something like smoke or steam. Figuring he'd reorient in a few seconds, he turned his attention to the messages:

*****Congratulations! You have refined your bloodline to the epic stages! As a result, for all species-related considerations, you are effectively Quinametzin. You stand as the embodiment of your ancient progenitors and will continue to inherit their talents and further reflect their nature as you delve into the secrets buried in your ancestry. Stand tall, Quinametzin, for you are a titan!*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new Bloodline Feat: Epic Quinametzin.*****

*****Epic Quinametzin: As a result of breaking through to the epic levels of your bloodline, all of your attributes have permanently increased by 50 points.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Feat, Titanic Constitution, has been refined to Greater Titanic Constitution.*****

*****Greater Titanic Constitution: Your titanic bloodline has enriched and fortified the microscopic structures of your body, from your blood to your bones to the hairs on your head. Your body is capable of sustaining legendary levels of Energy, with the potential for tremendous physical attributes. Henceforth, you'll automatically receive 5 bonus points in vitality each time you gain a level. Moreover, your battles against invasive Energies and infections have fortified you, making your resistance to such incursions unrivaled in the natural world.*****

"Holy shit." Victor had to blink his eyes several times and reread the description of his new Feats before it really sank in. He'd just gained nearly ten levels' worth of attribute points. Were Quinametzin really so much more robust than a human? His prideful instinct was to say, "Of course!" Still, he had to remember that he'd apparently reached the epic level on his racial advancement stat; an "epic" human might receive a similar boost. He chuckled and shook his head,

somehow doubting it. Before he could become distracted by anything else, he looked at his status page for the first time in a while:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 1

Class:

Battlemaster - Epic

Level:

56

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Base 5

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 8

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9

Breath Core Energy:

500/500

Energy Affinity:

Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1

Energy:

21412/21412

Strength:

330

Vitality:

439 (483)

Dexterity:

174

Agility:

197

Intelligence:

160

Will:

541

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Greater Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness, Battlefield Presence, Aura of Command, Epic Quinametzin

“Holy shit!” he said again, this time more vehemently. His Energy levels had massively increased with the fifty points added to his intelligence and will. Aside from that, his other attributes looked much healthier to his eye. Six months ago, he would have been overjoyed to see his secondary physical attributes so high; they were on par with what his strength and vitality had been back then. He almost lost track of himself lying there, daydreaming about his next sparring match with Kethelket, wondering how much quicker he’d be.

Victor let his eyes drift over the various line items he’d taken for granted in the past, and something stood out to him. His race was listed as “Quinametzin Bloodline.” There was no mention of “human.” “Que interesante,” he muttered, again thinking of himself six months ago and chuckling. He would have been freaked out by that fact, but now he didn’t care. He was Quinametzin. Surely, they were plenty compatible with humans, or else he wouldn’t exist.

One other thing got him thinking as he looked over his status sheet—his Breath Core Energy was clearly influenced by his Breath Core level, but not by his intelligence and will as his normal Energy stat was. Did no attribute affect his Breath Core? Was he missing some other stat that creatures born with such an ability had? It would be something he’d have to investigate, but he knew he wouldn’t find answers to that question on Fanwath. Putting the thoughts aside, Victor sat up and regarded his surroundings.

His early impression that the room was clouded with a haze of fog hadn’t been a hallucination. A faint mist of blue-gray steam hung in the air, hot and moist in his nostrils as he breathed deeply. Victor had a hard time concentrating on the anomaly because he couldn’t get over the lightning-charged strength, vitality, and overall wellness that pervaded his body. He felt incredible. Holding his big, powerful hands in front of him, he stared as he squeezed them into fists, released the pressure, and squeezed again. It felt like he could crush rocks with those hands.

He stood up and found himself engulfed in the weird steam, and then his head bumped into the generous nine-foot ceiling. “Hah!” A wild chuckle escaped him as he considered his new stature. It wouldn’t do for the indoors, he decided, not until he’d built himself a home fit for a titan. He reached into his Core, teased out a bit of Energy, and cast Alter Self, reducing himself to something

closer to what he'd once been—a tall, powerfully built human. The spell formed effortlessly, and his body absorbed the potent Energies much more easily than before. He felt he could have reduced himself a lot more if he wanted. Hadn't Tes said something about his then-advanced bloodline allowing the spell to work? It seemed it worked even better now.

As his height lowered and he came out of the steam cloud lingering near the ceiling, Victor immediately noticed its source—Valla lay cocooned in writhing coils of the thick stuff. He couldn't see her clearly, only occasionally catching a glimpse of her face or feet as the steam roiled. Is this what it was like when someone underwent a sizeable racial advancement? The apples must have been potent to give him three full ranks and take him into the epic tier. How greatly must they be affecting Valla? She'd only been in the improved ranks.

She didn't seem to be suffering or in any kind of trouble; her body was still as the steam did whatever it was doing. Victor began to wonder how long he'd been out and how much longer Valla would be. He reached into his storage ring to pull out the Farscribe sheets he and Edeya had exchanged before the ninth cohort marched. Sure enough, he had several updates from her, each written a day apart. "So, assuming she's writing an update each day, I was out of it for four."

He skimmed through the messages, pleased to find that the Ninth had been having an uneventful march thus far. They'd been traveling at half-time, taking long rests between marches for drills and rest. The new troops were fitting in well, learning the tactics and camp procedures quickly. Edeya described them as fierce and eager to fight their former overlords. Most importantly, according to the last message, they weren't yet halfway to the citadels that guarded the road up to the poison-shrouded mountain where Hector held his seat of power.

Victor looked again at Valla, wondering if he should do anything. Should he sit nearby, or could he venture out of the house to check on the keep and the soldiers standing guard? If the apple were affecting her anything like the racial advancement he'd consumed inside the dungeon near Greatbone Mine, she could be out for days or weeks. He was tempted to lean close, to wave away the steam surrounding her face, but he feared such interference might cause some sort of problem. No, he decided, best to leave her to the process. He'd go outside and check on her frequently.

With that decided, Victor put on his armor and picked up Lifedrinker, shrugging into her leather harness. He hurried out of the house, eager to stretch his legs, get a breath of fresh air, and bask in some sunlight. When he stepped out into the courtyard, he squinted into the bright sky, gauging the sun to be nearing its zenith but not there yet. "Morning still." He smiled, turning his face upward, soaking in the heat. The sunlight was warm, but this close to the sea, the air had a bit of cool dampness to it, and he stretched his lungs, pulling in a prodigious breath. "Damn, that feels good."

Some soldiers performing day-to-day chores, dumping feed out of a flatbed wagon the Ninth had left behind into a handcart, looked up at the sound of his voice. They dropped their shovels and snapped to attention. Victor smiled hugely and returned the salute. "Come here, men." His voice boomed out, echoing off the stone walls and cobbles, and the two hurried over. Victor saw more soldiers move into view on the parapets, responding to the sound of his unintentional hollering. "Give me an update. How long was I out?"

"It's the fourth day, sir!" The Ardeni had to crane his blue face and bright green eyes upward to look Victor in the face.

“Mmhhh, good. That’s what I thought. Well, what’s the update? How’s the keep?”

“Shall I get Lieutenant ap’Fanin?”

“Is that who Sarl left in charge?”

“Aye, sir!”

“All right, get him. I’ll stretch my legs and walk out to look at the sea. Send him after me.” As the Ardeni and his silent partner hurried away, Victor strode for the courtyard gate. It was wide open, so he walked through and into the bailey, glancing to his left at the sound of clashing weapons and shields. A dozen soldiers were practicing under the shouted instruction of a sergeant Victor recognized but whose name he’d forgotten. He waved as he continued toward the curtain wall and the exterior gate. “This is a good keep.” He rested a hand on Lifedrinker’s haft as he spoke, and she immediately responded.

I’ve missed you! You feel different, stronger. Will you share your spirit with me? Your she-wolf said she cared not!

“Now?” Victor laughed, strolling into the corridor under the gatehouse. “Why not?” Victor pulled her from his harness and gathered up some glory-attuned Energy. He cast the spell, sending a portion of his prideful spirit into Lifedrinker. “See how you like that!” Her reaction was instantaneous. Her blade shimmered and sparkled, motes of golden, sizzling Energy dripping from her gleaming edge. A burst of emotion came through his grip on her haft—excitement, pleasure, and, of course, pride. Whether she was proud of him for sharing his spirit with him or proud of herself for convincing him, he had no clue. For all he knew, it was just his spirit bringing out her own cockiness.

The gate was closed, but a guard was stationed beside it. From the center of the trap-lined tunnel, Victor shouted, “Open up!” The guard yanked on a chain, causing a bell to ring up above, and moments later, the windlass began to turn, lifting the great bar holding the gates closed. “Thanks.” The guard snapped a fierce salute. Victor nodded, then stepped outside. He stood in the shade of the tall curtain wall and gazed down the rocky slope to the beach and the cresting, silvery waves of the sea. “Hell yeah. I like this keep.”

The ocean was loud, crashing and crashing as the wind-tossed waves hit the shore. He watched them, admiring their relentless power as he walked down the slope a short way. A rocky overhang made a direct approach to the keep impossible, forcing the gravel roadway to wend its way down to the beach like a snake. Victor didn’t want to go down, though, so he stood on the rocky ledge and, holding the buzzing Lifedrinker on his shoulder, stared out over the water, savoring the fresh air, the warm sun, and the glorious view. He felt more alive than he ever had, more ready for anything. He wanted to venture forth into that wild, wide world. He wanted to find new things and conquer new places. He wanted to . . .

“Ahem, excuse me, sir.”

Victor turned to see the young Ardeni Lieutenant ap'Fanin standing at attention behind him. "Relax. Thanks for coming out to speak with me. I wanted to see something other than stone walls."

"My pleasure, sir. I, too, grow weary of the confines of yonder keep."

"Mmhmm. So, tell me, how have the last few days gone?"

"Uneventfully, sir. We've spent our shifts keeping watch, cleaning, and drilling. So far, we've not laid eyes on anything more threatening than a flock of erebii, and they weren't a problem for anyone save poor Delia, whom they shat upon as they flew past."

"Erebii? Those are the big white and brown birds?"

"Aye, sir."

"Heh, well, my condolences to Delia." Victor smiled, gazing back at the keep, imagining the soldiers standing watch on the walls when the birds flew overhead, scurrying to escape their indiscriminate bombardment. "Well, I'm going to be here a while longer, I figure. Tribune Primus ap'Yensha isn't yet ready to leave. Anything you all need help with? Could I help with some sparring? I think it would be good for the troops to practice teamwork against a larger opponent."

"I think that would prove invaluable, sir." The man spoke firmly and nodded to add weight to his words.

"What's your first name, Lieutenant?"

"Rano, sir."

"Care if I call you that?"

"I'd be honored!"

"Good! All right, Rano, how many troops are at the keep? A hundred?"

"One hundred and one, sir."

"Okay, have you broken them into squads?"

"Aye, sir! We have ten squads."

Victor looked away from the keep, back to the ocean, wondering why there wasn't a dock. Who built this keep, anyway? Judging by the old watchtower he'd used to escape the underground, it had been on these lands for a while. Were they remnants from an old world before the joining, as others suspected? Wouldn't there have been a village by the sea? Had the sea come from one world, the keep, and these lands from another? The idea that the System had somehow squashed four worlds together to make Fanwath still boggled his mind. When Rano sniffed and moved his arm to push some hair out of his eyes, blown there by the breeze coming off the water, Victor turned back to

him. “Right. Well, go make a schedule. I’ll work with two squads daily—one in the morning and one after lunch.”

“Right away, sir.” He saluted, and Victor copied the gesture, then watched him jog back to the keep.

“That’s a good idea, isn’t it, chica? Those guys might face a big bastard wampyr or something on the battlefield. They should get some practice fighting a guy like me.” The truth was, he itched to get some practice in, to cast Iron Berserk and let his Energy swell his frame. He wanted to do a lot more than spar, but he’d settle for that over nothing. With one last look at the water and a few more thoughts of adventure and exploration, he returned to the keep, resigning himself to finish what he’d started before he entertained thoughts like that. He had to get rid of these pinche undead, which meant he needed to stick around for a while longer.

The next few days fell into a relaxing routine for Victor. He spent the evenings and nights with Valla, watching her, marveling at the weird Energy-dense steam that seemed to perpetually issue from her, completely swathing her body like a billowy cocoon. She didn’t stir, or if she did, he couldn’t see it through the thick clouds. He slept on the floor, quite content on the rug, and when he woke in the mornings, seeing no change in her, he’d go outside and spar with one of the units, encouraging them to use their skills and abilities to gang up on him.

For the first hour of those practice sessions, he’d keep himself hobbled, sized-down the way he liked to be when indoors. After everyone was warmed up, he’d release his hold on his form, cast Iron Berserk, and let the soldiers go all out. He still held back, and Lifedrinker recognized that they were “playing,” in her words. She didn’t burst into flames, and it almost felt like she helped him to pull back or angle her edge away when he slipped someone’s guard too easily. Still, the soldiers were battered and tired at the end of each session, and Victor felt relaxed, his stress driven away by the good fun of helping others learn something. It didn’t hurt that he also cast Globe of Inspiration and Inspiration of the Quinametzin, and many soldiers reported skill gains at the end of each session.

At noon, he’d check on Valla, eat a hearty meal with the soldiers in the keep, then start a new session with a second unit. After that, Victor would spend time cultivating, trying to work on his outdated cultivation drill, incorporating the things Khul Bach had taught him. He knew his drill was pathetic for his power level, but he’d been cheating to improve his Core by eating hearts, an ability people like the Warlord would be and had been quite willing to murder and commit atrocities to learn.

He met with Khul Bach twice during those three days and had long conversations about the nature of titans, what Victor should be working on, and how he’d made good progress toward his goal of being strong enough to return to face the Warlord one day. Khul Bach, as usual, didn’t like to talk for long, acting as though every second Victor spent in there speaking to him was a second he could be out trying to improve himself. It was after the second meeting, on the third day, when the soldiers on the parapets raised an alarm. Victor was in his home at the time, so he didn’t hear it, but eventually, Rano dispatched one of his sergeants to pound on his door.

When Victor heard the pounding and hurried upstairs to open the door, the Shadeni woman, a soldier he recognized from an earlier sparring bout, spoke breathlessly, “An army approaches, sir! Hundreds of foot soldiers and half a dozen giants! We can’t see them clearly in the dark, but the giants have eyes that glow with red flames!”

“Hello, Ileya. Is your arm still sore?”

Her eyes widened when he spoke her name, and she answered him, anxiety thick in her voice, “My arm? Yes, sir, but I’ve put some salve on it. I’ll be fine. What of the army?”

“The army? Hmm. Seems like they think they’re going to score an easy win here, what with only a small force left behind to guard this big keep. I’m afraid they’ve made a big mistake, though.” Victor grinned, his chest swelling as his Quinametzin pride opened his pathways, letting his Energy seep into them, his will to hold his aura in check slipping just a bit. “Yeah, a big, fucking mistake.”

Book 6: Chapter 45: A Clash of Giants

Victor stood on the parapet, flanked by Lieutenant ap’Fanin, or Rano, and several of his sergeants. The beauty of Sea Keep was the one-sided approach any attacking army would have to take, assuming they couldn’t fly. The sheer cliff behind the keep butted up against a great, rocky mountain range that stretched east for dozens of miles before giving way to more rolling hills and plains. Meanwhile, the front of the keep had limited exposure due to the rocky slope leading down to the shore. Only a narrow, winding, gravel-strewn road gave access to the sliver of hard, stony ground before the curtain wall. Victor caught his first glimpse of the incoming army down that winding stretch of road.

“How do they know we have a light garrison?” one of the sergeants asked, squinting as he peered into the moonlit shadows.

“They must have spies, observers. Who knows what manner of undead creatures might lurk up on yonder slopes.” Rano jerked a thumb to the right, toward the high, rocky peaks leading away to the east.

“Yeah.” Victor nodded. “They counted our guards, watched the light activity in the courtyard, and figured we were easy pickings. I just wonder where these guys came from.” He peered down at the army, his Quinametzin eyes easily piercing the shadows. To him, the darkness was tinged in strange orange and red tones, the pale light of the moon enhanced by his epic-level physiology. However it worked, Victor had a clear view of the shambling undead creatures and the hulking monstrosities marching in their midst. “Looks like around eight hundred undead and six of those giants.”

Rano turned to look up at him. “You don’t think they’re from the other keep? The southern one?”

“I dunno. Maybe. Maybe they were outside when Borrius and Rellia surrounded it. It could be that this force was on its way to help one of the other keeps, even

this one, and whoever commands it saw an opportunity. We don't know how Hector communicates with his generals. Maybe he gave the order."

"Can this wall resist those giants?" a sergeant to his left asked.

"For a while, maybe. They're about twenty feet tall, and I don't know if you all can see this, but they're kind of built like gorillas. Ugly, deformed, hairless gorillas, but what I mean is their oversized arms are practically dragging on the ground while they walk. I bet they pack quite a punch."

"Gorillas?" Rano turned to lift an eyebrow at Victor.

"Doesn't matter. I'm just saying they look like they were built to smash stuff." Victor watched the army for a minute more, judging they were only about a mile distant, halfway up the winding road. "If we're going to do something before they hit the wall, we better decide now. Any ideas?"

"If it were just the undead, we could hold them at the wall, I'm sure." Rano sounded stressed, almost like he'd done something wrong. Victor could guess what he was thinking.

"You're wondering if you should've built some defensive measures on the road, prepared more for a circumstance like this."

"Aye. We spent too much time drilling and cleaning. We should've been out there digging trenches, laying traps, building barricades."

"Eh, we don't have time to play what-if. What are we going to do about those giants?" Victor had an idea of what he'd do, but he was hoping to get some more ideas before he charged out there and tried to carry the battle on his shoulders.

A feminine voice piped up from off to Rano's right, "What if we don't close the outer gate?"

Victor leaned forward to see around the lieutenant and one of his burlier Shadeni sergeants to lay eyes on the speaker. She was a thin, pale-haired Ghelli with tiny wings, reminding him of Edeya before she'd gone through her racial enhancement. "I'm listening."

"If we don't close the outer gate, they'll funnel toward it. Why smash the wall when there's a big opening? Let them drive through, use the murder holes and whatnot, while you wait in the bailey for any giants that come out. We have ballistae on the inner wall to help with them, too. Obviously, we'll keep the inner gates closed . . ."

Rano nodded. "I like the idea of turning the bailey into a killing ground."

"Huh. Not bad. I'll stand at the gatehouse tunnel and smash any that come through. We'll need men on this wall in case they try to use ladders or something to swarm over. If we get overrun, you can use the wall to retreat to the inner courtyard, yeah?"

“Aye, sir!” Rano turned and began to give his orders. Victor turned away, focusing again on the approaching army. Were all those giants the same? Who was leading this force? Did they come without a general? Were they just an extra patrolling force Hector had called to action? He was beginning to think so, watching as the army neared the last bend in the road. He was getting ready to hop down to the courtyard to get into position, but then he noticed that one of the giants was hanging back while the other five plowed forward to the front of the pack of undead. “Are you the boss? Okay, pendejo, we’ll see what you guys are made of.”

When he turned away, he found all the sergeants were busy ordering the hundred defenders into position. It looked like about two-thirds of the soldiers were ready to defend the curtain wall from climbers or whatever the army tried to send up the wall. He turned to look over the bailey to the inner wall and saw fire teams near each of the six ballistae. He knew other defenders were inside the gatehouse, ready to rain hell down on the undead that came through the tunnel. Victor pulled Lifedrinker from her harness, still gleaming and dripping with golden, glory-attuned Energy. He’d left his Imbue Spirit in effect and didn’t plan to cancel it anytime soon. “This’ll be interesting, beautiful.”

I yearn to cleave their flesh! I hunger for it! Let all witness our might as we lay your enemies low!

Victor chuckled, then severed his Alter Self spell, expanding to his natural size, nearly ten feet tall. He placed a hand on the parapet and hopped over the wall, landing on the cobbles with a thud that shook dust from the stones. He strode to the inner gate and stood at the opening as the soldiers inside raised the portcullis. The tunnel leading through the curtain wall was big but not big enough for those giants to get through easily. He could still walk through it, but they’d have to stoop. He’d have a similar problem if he berserked.

Over the last few days, while drilling with the troops, he discovered a few things about himself. First, he’d learned that, as the System had informed him, he was considered a Quinametzin now. He knew that because his Titanic Leap worked without Iron Berserk or Titanic Aspect. Another thing was that, just as he’d grown in his natural state, he was larger when he cast Iron Berserk, something like eighteen feet tall and God knows how many pounds. Finally, he’d begun to notice changes in himself, in his personality. At first, it didn’t register with him, probably because he was himself, and it’s always a little hard to look at oneself objectively. Still, he’d begun to notice a certain pridefulness that made the old Victor seem mild.

This revelation might have been troubling to him once upon a time, but, likely due to the changes in him, he couldn’t find it in himself to feel upset. So he was changing, wasn’t that good and proper? Shouldn’t one evolve as one grows in power? Should he still act like a lost kid from Tucson? No, he’d moved well past that stage in his life. He was a warrior, a titan! He was Quinametzin, and those who challenged him should learn the folly of their ways . . . “Heh, there I go again.” Victor chuckled, catching himself in the midst of his inner monologue.

Standing before the gatehouse tunnel, he looked up at the parapets and shouted to Rano, “What are they doing?”

“They’ve stopped at the end of the road! It looks like they’re forming ranks—the giants are in the front. Well, five of them!”

“Well? Start shooting! That’s only two hundred yards!” That was one of the things Victor appreciated about the Sea Keep; there wasn’t enough room atop the rocky shelf for a proper army to assemble out of harm’s way. The outer ballistae could easily reach the edge, and many of the soldiers had abilities and spells that could accurately launch missiles at that range.

“Sorry, sir! I thought we might wait to hear their intentions!”

“Hell no! They marched onto our land with undead soldiers. Fuck them up!”

Rano’s voice rose to new heights as he screamed the order up and down the line, “Fire! Fire! Unleash your ancestors’ fury! Burn the dogs!” He went on and on, and because of the distance of the enemy force and the discipline of the soldiers atop the wall, his words rang clearly through the bailey. Victor smiled at his colorful enthusiasm and nodded, twisting his fist on Lifedrinker’s haft. He listened to the thump of the ballistae and the cranking of their windlasses as they were reloaded. He watched the sky brighten with flashes of color as the Elementalists threw their fire and lightning at the incoming undead.

Soldiers began to yell and cheer, buoyed by their small victories, as the undead began to fall. For a moment, he regretted hopping down from the battlements so soon, thinking he should have watched the attack for a while, but then he considered the magical nature of his enemies and the idea that they might spy him standing up there. No, it was better to wait there, out of sight, and give them a titan-sized welcome as they came through the tunnel. Still, he was curious, “Rano!” he bellowed, “Do the ballistae hurt the giants?”

“I . . . I think so, sir! They still come, though blood leaks from their misshapen forms!” Victor watched through the dark tunnel, waiting, getting ready. He wanted them committed, wanted them in the tunnel before he exposed himself. The shouts and screams of his soldiers grew more frenetic, the flashes of magical Energy more strobe-like, and Victor felt his breathing quicken, his heart begin to thump. He wasn’t nervous; he was excited. Thunder and flashes were frequent now, the casters with shorter-ranged spells unleashing all they had. When a cacophonous peal of thunder rolled over the courtyard, shaking the stones, Victor almost cheered, impressed by whatever soldier had cast such a spell. His enthusiasm dimmed, though, when he realized it wasn’t friendly magic.

A new kind of darkness obscured the moons, throwing more shadows around the courtyard, and then a frigid, stinging rain began to fall, bringing forth screams of pain from the garrison troops. Victor felt it, cold and burning on his flesh, but he shrugged it off. It would take more than that to hurt him. Still, the soldiers suffered and needed his support. “Time for action, chica,” he growled, then he cast Banner of the Champion and Iron Berserk, and suddenly, the entire bailey

was awash with brilliant golden light. Victor stood so tall that his massive banner hung in the air, visible over the parapets.

Lifedrinker, despite the growth she'd gone through in the last months, was once again a hatchet in his massive hand, and Victor held her high, ready to bring her down on the first fools to push through that tunnel. Despite his bolstering light, the soldiers were suffering, screaming in the burning rain, and Victor bellowed, "Get inside the gatehouse, or fall back to the inner courtyard! Take cover!" His voice was booming, breaking through the screams, the crashing thunder, and the sounds of the undead horde as they streamed for the open gateway. He saw the soldiers hurry to obey, many going into the enormous gatehouse before him. Many others ran, panicked, with shields over their heads, for the far ends of the curtain wall, aiming for the heavy metal doors that would admit them into the higher, inner keep walls.

Victor wasn't worried. So what if some of the undead climbed the wall unmolested? Where would they go? Into the bailey with him! He laughed at the thought, and before he grew too busy with fighting, he looked at his current physical ability scores.

Strength:

330 (1377)

Vitality:

439 (596)

Dexterity:

174 (313)

Agility:

197 (355)

His laugh grew louder at what he saw, a throaty chuckle that rumbled out of his chest. Even giving ten percent of his power to Lifedrinker, his attributes were monstrous. His strength and vitality were boosted by Sovereign Will; his strength, dexterity, and agility were increased by Iron Berserk. On top of all that, his Titanic Rage feat further enhanced his strength. His physical attributes were far beyond what his level might indicate, and he could feel it. In his mind, he could drop his axe and smash his way through that wall with his bare hands.

As his red-tinged eyes took in the first of the giants struggling to get through the tunnel, he held Lifedrinker high, waiting off to the side. Arrows pumped into the hulking shape as it lurched, hunched over, stumbling and jiggling toward Victor. As hot oil doused the form, sloshing over the creature and sloughing off great swaths of cooked flesh, he began to wonder if the poor bastard would get through to him. Another throaty chuckle escaped him as he began to stoke the flames of fury in his pathways, pumping it into his arms with Channel Spirit but leaving it out of Lifedrinker; she was glorious as she was, and he didn't want to distract her with more fury.

He itched to charge into the tunnel, to ruin the giant stumbling its way through, but he didn't want to stand under those arrows, oil, and other projectiles being lobbed by those in the gatehouse. He waited, grinding his teeth in anticipation, and then the first giant came out of the tunnel, lifting its misshapen, knobby head in a bellow of victory, raising its giant, pink, club-like arms high in the air. Victor brought Lifedrinker down in a vicious hack, her brilliant gold-lit blade ripping through the

thing's shoulder, removing one of those big arms with a thunk and a thunderous crack as she tore through the bone.

Victor laughed and lifted one mighty boot, kicking the reeling giant in the hip and sending it sprawling away from the gate to slide over the cobbles. It thrashed and writhed, but it was terribly wounded. Its bulbous pink flesh was riddled with arrows, covered in blisters, and ripped with a hundred gashes. Its eyes had been boiled out of its head, and great gouts of red-black blood pumped from the stump Victor had just made. "You're big, but you're no titan!"

He wanted to taunt it more, to cut pieces from its monstrous form, but another was already emerging from the tunnel, and this one wasn't nearly as badly hurt. It lowered one of its monstrous, lumpy shoulders, revealing a row of strange, black, horn-like spines, and charged at him. Victor loved to grapple, and having something bigger than he was for a change was a rare treat. He lowered his center of gravity, caught hold of one of the longer horns, gripping it with a hand that could crush stone, and easily turned the monster's charge, giving it five rapid hacks with Lifedrinker as he threw it past.

Lifedrinker screamed with fury and excitement, reveling in the action, sending sparks of golden Energy flying in her wake and showering forth from each impact. She tore massive gashes through flesh and bone alike, and when Victor flung the monstrosity aside, it tumbled to the ground. As it rolled, the cobbles were splashed with blood and dark, slippery things that were meant to be on the inside of the monster but had been freed by Lifedrinker's wicked blade.

Victor stepped to the side of the tunnel and peered around the stone, red fury obscuring details but making it easy to pick out the thrashing piles of undead in the passageway. The murder holes were doing their job, and the third giant struggled to push past the mounds of dead zombies and shamblers. Victor took the respite to dispatch the two downed flesh giants, hacking through their spines, splitting their skulls, and dashing their brains onto the cobbles. They were weak, in his opinion. "Not even a challenge! The soldiers could handle these stupid things." For some reason, the ease of his victories made him angry, and he could feel the rage in his heart begin to boil, beating through his blood and darkening his vision further.

He stared into the tunnel, saw the third giant was still only a third of the way through, and decided he'd had enough. Focusing on the thing, he lowered his heavy helmet and cast Energy Charge, fueling it with his most plentiful Energy—fear. In a streak of screaming shadows, he tore through the mounds of corpses and collided with the great, fleshy monster, smashing it like a Mack truck t-boning a school bus. The explosion resounded through the stones of the gatehouse, but the fleshy giant came apart before the stones did, and it exploded out of the tunnel in a shower of blood, bones, viscera, and sagging, empty skin.

Drenched in hot red fluids, Victor ran forward, screaming his fury. He began to curse his weak enemies as the undead massed outside the gate, waiting to come through, charged him. Some of his curses were out of character, things he'd never think of to insult someone in a rational state of mind, "Weaklings! Worms! Dare you challenge me? Feed the soil, then, pathetic things!" Other curses were more in character, more like the old Victor dialed to the max, "Fucking die! Eat shit! I'll rip your shit-eating faces off!" Meanwhile, he tore a swath through the undead, aiming for the fourth and fifth of the lumpy, misshapen flesh giants.

He hacked the zombies and shamblers apart with his axe, grabbed them with his left hand, and threw them about like playthings. He was surrounded by undead, too stupid to care that they

weren't hurting him, that he was ripping them to shreds, and they kept filling in, hindering his progress toward the two giants. The big monsters were working their way around him toward the gate, and Victor had had enough. Again, he flooded his channels with fear-attuned Energy and cast Energy Charge. He obliterated scores of undead as he exploded with dark Energy, streaking through the miniature horde and slamming into the first of the giants. Just like the last one, this one came apart in a shower of blood and gore.

Victor roared and began to lay into the second one, shrugging off its tree-trunk-sized arms as they rained return blows upon him. Those big, two-hundred-pound fists crashed into his Juggernaut helm, slid off his shoulders, or were knocked aside by Victor's left hand as he went to work with Lifedrinker, carving terrible wounds into the gigantic, roaring monster. The fleshy giants were ugly as sin up close. Folds of pink flesh surrounded bright, burning red eyes over huge, noseless nostrils from which blood and slime sprayed forth. Beneath those sickening orifices was a round mouth filled with rows of yellow, angular teeth. It tried to employ that sucker-shaped bite a few times, but Victor just threw it off, smashing it with Lifedrinker's edge for its efforts.

When the final giant was dead, torn to bits at his feet, Victor's chest heaved as he looked around. Some of the undead were still charging toward him, but most had streamed into the tunnel now that it was clear of giant bodies. There couldn't have been more than five hundred, and Victor wasn't worried about them; the soldiers could finish their work on those stupid, mindless things; they had the walls to their advantage. No, he had other fish to fry. Where was that last giant? Where was the general who commanded this little horde? Where was the one who'd summoned that magical, evil rain?

Drenched in blood and gore, Victor stood tall, smacking the occasional undead that strayed near, and scanned the rocky shelf, looking toward the road. "Where are you? Come and fight!" He started forward, kicking zombies like footballs and splitting shamblers like cordwood as he walked away from the keep. He'd made it halfway to the road, a trail of ruined undead marking his progress when the giant stepped forward. His great, helmeted head was the first to appear as it made its way up the last stretch of the sloping road. The helmet was black, the metal looked thick, and the angular eye slits shone with baleful red Energy. Then his enormous shoulders and chest rose into view, similarly clad in heavy, black plates, held together by links of black chain.

While Victor watched, the giant continued forward, and the rest of him came into view—thighs like mighty oaks, fists in gauntlets that could have doubled for engine blocks, and finally, hanging from the giant's right hand, dragging a furrow in the ground behind him, an axe that made Lifedrinker look like a toy. "Glad you came out to play with old Karl, little one. I'd worried there wouldn't be any glory in this victory," the giant rumbled.

Book 6: Chapter 46: Battle on the Bluff

Victor watched Karl, or Karl the Crimson if this was the guy Victoria had told him about, continue to stride closer, and as he crested the rise, Victor took his measure. He was a true giant of a man, easily as large as the monstrosities he'd sent against the keep but not misshapen and lumpy. His gigantic plates of flat black armor made him even more impressive to behold. Victor felt a wave of excitement at the prospect of a good battle, felt his annoyance at the weakling undead begin to fade to background noise as he twisted his fist on Lifedrinker's haft. He didn't reply to the giant's taunt, but his teeth were bared in a hungry grin as he stalked toward his new opponent.

“I thought you’d moved on, taking your little army toward Hector and your inevitable destruction. I’m pleased I’ll have a big, fat head to mount on my next creation.” With a grinding clatter, Karl dragged his giant axe over the stony ground and swung it with a whoosh up to his shoulder, gripping the haft with both hands. Victor didn’t answer, but a low growl began to rumble through his chest as he thought about the flimsy giants this man had just claimed credit for.

“Come,” Victor growled, and then he danced forward. He moved like a bear, power evident in every step, every flex of his wrist as he wove Lifedrinker left and right. He wasn’t impressed by the giant axe; when did making something big make it better? True, as a titan, he wasn’t known for being small, and much of his dominating power came from his size, but he wasn’t a giant, overfilled sack of bones like those creatures he’d just slain; he was Quinametzin, and he was hard as steel. The cords of muscle standing out on his forearms, shoulders, and back were powerful, ready to snap into action like pressure-driven pistons. Karl might have more bulk than he, especially with all that plate armor, but Victor saw him as a concrete wall, and he was the sledgehammer.

Karl waited for him to get near, then, like a spring snapping a beartrap closed, he ripped his great axe in an overhead smash, aiming to split Victor in half. The axe fell like a lightning-charged guillotine, slicing the air and crashing into the stony ground, showering the vicinity with shards of gray rock and hundreds of brilliant sparks. Victor wasn’t there to appreciate the mighty blow, however; he’d darted to the left, and as he skirted around the black-clad giant, he hacked Lifedrinker not once but three times into his armor-covered side, taking advantage of Karl’s arms being extended, swinging that giant axe.

Lifedrinker had cooled during the lull between Victor’s slaughter of the undead and this new contest. As he swung her, though, she burst into molten fury, her inner heat adding to the power of his enchantment. She still shed brilliant sparks of glory-attuned Energy, but they were hot and sizzled the air as they fell, scoring the stony ground with black burn marks. Her gleaming edge shimmered hotly, heating the air to the point that even getting near her edge was a dangerous proposition. Karl’s armor screeched as she split it, carving deep grooves in the dense material, so hot that she liquified the metal where her blade touched it.

When Karl regained his momentum and hacked his gigantic axe in a wide, flat arc, hoping to catch Victor still on his flank, his face beneath the black metal visor of his helm was crimson with fury and pain as blood sizzled against the torn, hot metal plates on his side. Victor wasn’t there to receive the blow; he’d continued to circle the giant, and this time, he darted forward and delivered one mighty hack to the side of Karl’s right knee. Lifedrinker didn’t have to cut through any inch-thick metal plates; he struck the gap between the jointed, round cap over Karl’s knee and his thigh plate. Lifedrinker screamed her excitement and lust for violence as she split the air, slicing through the chain armor like it wasn’t there and burying herself deep in the giant’s flesh, biting into his bone.

Karl roared in agony and swept his axe around, kicking out with his other leg, trying to get at Victor. Victor ducked the whooshing blade and yanked on Lifedrinker, using her grip on Karl’s bone to pull his leg out from under him. The armor-plated giant’s sweeping kick turned into a pirouette as

he toppled and crashed to the ground with a tremendous thud and the rattle and clank of metal. Victor stepped on Karl's outflung forearm, holding it to the ground, and then he lifted Lifedrinker high, her blade smoking as it scorched the very air, and chopped her at the giant's face with enough force to split stone.

Lifedrinker's eager, high-pitched warcry echoed and bounced off the stone as she fell toward the giant, a lightning-fast streak of burning metal, but just as she was about to deliver her fatal blow, Karl exploded with cold death-attuned Energy twisted with something else, something familiar to Victor from his duels with Valla—iron. The Energy billowed out of Karl like an expanding shell, and Lifedrinker smashed into it. The defensive ability or spell was effective in that it slowed her decent, but it wasn't enough to stop her; Lifedrinker struck that shell with such burning, deadly force that its blue-gray surface turned white at the point of impact and instantly began to shatter and come apart.

Though Lifedrinker broke through the barrier, she'd been slowed enough for Karl to lift an armored forearm and deflect her deadly blow. Still, Victor ground down on Karl's other arm, keeping him in place as he lifted Lifedrinker for another hack. Karl wasn't out of surprises, though; his right hand was pinned, and he hugged his left arm in front of his face, yet, somehow, his giant axe smashed into Victor's back, splitting his wyrm-scale armor and gouging deep into his tough, Quinametzin flesh.

Victor stumbled at the unexpected blow, growling in fury as he spun, expecting to see some undead remnants of Karl's army had interfered with their contest. Instead, he saw the enormous axe wielded by a ghostly, translucent replica of Karl sans his armor. Karl's spirit form glowed with a deathly blue Energy, and Victor knew this was some kind of Death Caster magic. He instantly poured a torrent of fear-attuned Energy into his pathways and summoned his bear totem—if Karl wanted to bring friends into the fight, Victor would oblige.

As he stepped back, lifting Lifedrinker, warily circling the spectral copy of Karl, a dark, roiling mound of shadows rose from the ground, and deep, angry roars echoed out of it. Victor grinned as he heard his bear brother's fury. The giant axe-wielding spirit dove at him, whipping the enormous axe in a great cleave, and Victor backed away, tapping the clumsy strike with a quick thrust of Lifedrinker's head, adding to its momentum and then stepping into the blow as it whooshed past him. Meanwhile, with a bone-rattling roar, his great, dark, shadow-clad bear erupted from the pile of darkness and fixed its furious, purple-lit eyes upon Karl as he struggled to rise.

While Victor went to work on the spirit, his bear pounced on the giant. Even big as it was, the bear looked more like a dog as it slammed into him, but Karl's knee wasn't working right, and he wasn't armed. They both tumbled to the ground in a furious grappling melee as Victor's totem swiped its dark, eight-inch claws in a frenzy, snapping its great maw against Karl's arms as he tried to throw the bear off him. Victor hacked Lifedrinker, one-handed like a killer with a hatchet, to great effect on the spirit-like copy, cleaving off big hunks of its essence, which splattered to the stone ground in steaming, gel-like puddles.

The spirit opened its mouth in silent screams as Victor whittled it down, easily dodging the clumsy swings of the massive axe, a weapon ill-suited for up close, dirty fighting. The spirit seemed to know what it was doing, constantly backpedaling to get some room to swing the weapon. Even so, it was trivial for Victor, an epic-ranked axe fighter, to press his advantage, to stay inside the big axe's arc, and continue to deliver blow after devastating blow to the spirit's form. It grew paler and paler, and after a final, powerful hack that seemed to shatter its essence, it exploded into a cold, damp, softly glowing mist and faded away.

As Karl's axe fell to the stone with a cacophonous clatter, he turned to the giant only to see him finally on his feet, lifting his bear above his head, ready to throw Victor's brave totem down the rocky slope toward the ocean. Victor growled in fury, released his bear to return to the Spirit Plane, and then, as Karl stumbled, suddenly holding nothing but air, he cast Energy Charge, powering it with glory-attuned Energy.

In a shower of golden sparks and a streak of bright light, he ripped over the rocky ground to slam into Karl's exposed flank. The giant wasn't ready. How could he be? Victor hit him like a battering ram, the concussion so deafening that boulders broke free of their centuries-long resting places and tumbled from the heights, crashing their way down the mountain slopes, many bouncing and cracking all the way to the sea. Victor nearly drained his glory-attuned pool of Energy as the spell worked to deflect the force of the impact. Karl wasn't so lucky.

As Victor smashed into Karl's back, a ripple of energy tore through the giant that exploded blood vessels, ruptured organs, and sent fluids bursting out of Karl's every orifice. Many of his armor plates ripped free of the chains holding them, flying out over the rocky slope, and then Karl's body followed them, tumbling as he cried out in a final gasp of surprise and agony. He soared past the winding gravel road to land with a great thump, flopping like a broken toy from one rocky shelf to the next until he came to rest on the edge of the beach.

Victor watched Karl's descent with a wild grin, and even before Karl's body came to a rest, he leaped down after him. He wouldn't leave the giant any room for some pinché undead recovery. In two Titanic Leaps, he stood on the beach and approached the broken giant with Lifedrinker buzzing in his hand, hungry for her due. As Victor's heavy footprints shook the ground and the giant, amazingly not yet dead, opened his blood-soaked eyes, he wheezed, "What are you?"

Victor regarded the giant. Much of his armor had fallen away as he'd bounced his way down the rocky slope. His exposed flesh was pale and deathly, and Victor knew he was undead. His arms were twisted and broken, his knee that Lifedrinker had chopped was utterly ruined, and that foot rested near his shoulder, so badly bent was the leg. His helmet had broken free, and his thick head of orange-red hair lay spread on the sand, almost like a pool of blood. Victor's anger was cooling quickly; he felt only contempt for this unnatural giant. He lifted Lifedrinker high, her smoldering blade dripping hot sparks on Karl's broken chest. "I'm a titan!"

"But," Karl wheezed, "You're smaller than I . . ."

“You’re a giant of a man, Karl, but a giant next to a titan is like wood before steel. Make your peace.” With that, Victor brought Lifedrinker down in a devastating chop, planting her gleaming, white-hot edge directly through the center of Karl’s breastplate. She split the metal like a sheet of paper-thin tin, burying herself to the wood of her haft into Karl’s chest. Karl’s bloody eyes widened almost comically, and he opened his beard-covered mouth in a silent O of pain and dismay. Then, the light faded from his eyes as Lifedrinker earned her name.

As Victor’s rage cooled further and he lost his Iron Berserk, he stood beside the gigantic corpse and waited until Lifedrinker finished. After he’d yanked her free and hung her in her harness, he pulled the rings from Karl’s giant fingers, three of them the size of bracelets. That done, he cast Honor the Spirits, watching as the brilliant white, ghostly fire consumed the massive corpse. As the flames died away, the ethereal smoke vanishing into nothing, he turned and began trudging up the slope to the keep.

He was glad to have won, glad there hadn’t been any terrible surprises with the army’s attack, but he also felt uneasy, like he was wasting time. The giant had claimed not to know Victor was there, but the whole thing almost felt like a distraction. He supposed it would be strange for Karl to throw his life away for a distraction. Victor shook his head, continuing up the ramp, ears peeled, listening for the sounds of battle from the keep. They were still there; clashes of metal on metal, men and women shouting, but they were infrequent, and nothing sounded desperate. He figured the undead were struggling to do anything against the walls now that the giants were gone, and their commander was dead. The soldiers were probably whittling them down from safety.

When he reached the top of the slope and paused by the scene of his battle, he stooped to pick up the gigantic axe. Now that he was back to his normal size, the weapon seemed more monstrous, even absurd. It was a dark, gleaming gray-black, singular piece of metal molded into a haft and an axe head, utilitarian and plain. The blade was shaped like a gigantic wedge, a simple shape for an axe, but large and heavy and clearly designed to cut through anything with that deadly sharp blade. Victor lifted it, his muscles straining from the weight, and laughed at the absurdity; the weapon was bigger than he was. “Are you alive?”

No answer was forthcoming, so he lowered the weapon and continued toward the gate, dragging it behind him, digging a trail in the blood-spattered gravel. He walked past hundreds of dead zombies and shamblers with only a vague recollection of slaying them all. There’d been more than he thought. He had to force his way through piles of the undead in the gate tunnel, and when he finally emerged, he paused to watch as the soldiers continued their slaughter. They’d come out of the gatehouse and their shelter in the higher, inner courtyard walls to surround the bailey, raining death upon the shambling, lurching monsters.

The rain had ceased when Victor engaged Karl, and the clouds that had obscured the moon were gone. Fiery bolts, arrows streaking with Energy, lightning, frost, and even stone projectiles fell from the heights. Only a few dozen of the undead, already battered and broken, still stumbled about on the cobbles, listless and undirected in their failed assault. Victor leaned against the giant axe, propping the cold metal haft against his shoulder as he watched the slaughter. It was only minutes before the battle was over, and golden motes began to gather around the mounds of corpses.

Victor chuckled, turning to look through the tunnel, but couldn't see anything through the massive clouds of golden stuff. "Here we go," he laughed, then let the massive axe haft fall to the ground with a clang as he braced himself. Seconds later, he was struck with a torrent of Energy; his conscious thoughts were dashed away as he spun on a wave of euphoria, drifting through rainbow-colored hallucinations of ecstasy. He swore he saw Valla dancing through his visions, laughing and smiling like he'd rarely seen her in reality. Tingles of pleasure danced through his skin as his muscles spasmed, and the reward for his efforts washed through him. The influx recharged and renewed him, leaving him gasping on his hands and knees minutes later.

Victor grinned, still debilitated by the afterglow of the infusion, when he saw the System message before his eyes:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 57 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

"Huh. Nothing more? I guess it wasn't that hard a fight." Victor stood, lifting the big axe again, and walked across the bailey, dragging the giant weapon. He could hear the soldiers cheering and celebrating all around him, and when he reached the inner gate, Rano was there, bloody but happy, snapping a perfect salute.

"Sir! Well fought! You slaughtered those giants!"

"Good fight to you, Rano. You and your soldiers didn't give an inch. Do me a favor and secure that outer gate, then write a message in the command book."

"What's the message, sir?"

"Tell Borrius to quit twiddling his thumbs and attack High Keep; I just killed Karl the Crimson, and it should be easy pickings."

"That was one of the barons? I was on the outer wall when you threw him from the ledge! You smashed him like a training dummy!"

"Heh. Well, let's hope whatever's holding the citadels dies as easily, huh? All right, get to it. Oh, one more thing. Get some men together and take this axe into the great hall. Hang it above the biggest fireplace."

"Yes, sir!" Rano saluted again, then hurried toward the outer gates, hollering for some soldiers on the wall to join him.

A few minutes later, Victor sat on the floor at the foot of his bed, watching the weird, colorful steam swirling around Valla. "Well, you missed a good one, Valla. Eh, not really. It was just a bit of a workout. You probably wouldn't have liked it—no chance for fancy sword work." Of course, she didn't stir, so Victor looked at his Core and saw his Energies throbbing with potential, ready for anything. He'd run a little low on rage during the battle and almost burned up his glory-attuned Energy once, but he'd never really been in danger of running dry. It would take a much longer battle to do that.

Looking at his Core, though, studying his different Energies, a thought occurred to him: Why hadn't he tried to build any new Energy attunements? He'd learned to make courage and justice, but many more combinations were possible now that he had his glory affinity. What would glory and fear create? Glory and rage? What about glory and inspiration? "Then there's the triple combos like justice. What if I replaced inspiration in the justice weave with glory? What about glory, inspiration, and fear or rage? What if I could weave them all together?"

He was just thinking out loud, but he pitched his voice as though he were speaking to Valla. When she didn't respond, he sighed and pulled out a stack of paper sheets and some differently colored pens. "I think I'll start working on some ideas while you're resting, amor mío." He felt Lifedrinker vibrate slightly in her harness and chuckled. "Don't be jealous, chica. I love you differently." With no further protest from the axe, Victor smiled and settled down to his work.

Book 6: Chapter 47: Rhiven

Over the next couple of days, Victor spent less time than he wanted working on his new Energy weaves. The soldiers on garrison duty were still members of the ninth cohort, and they'd gotten an infusion of excitement and enthusiasm when they'd witnessed Victor's fights with the giants and then from their flawless destruction of the undead swarm. He couldn't hold it against them when they asked for more training. After their extended bouts, Victor felt guilty going inside while they marched out to the roadway and began constructing barricades and rebuilding the watch tower on the beach. The only solution he could think of was to spend some of his free time helping with that endeavor.

So, he spent most of his days working with the soldiers, and then, in the evening, while he sat with Valla, he took time to visit with Khul Bach and worked on his cultivation drill, which he felt was very close to advancing out of the "basic" category. Finally, after cooking up a large meal and checking his Farscribe books and pages for correspondence, he'd sit with his notes and ponder the complex patterns of Energy that he hoped to weave. He was making progress, but it was slower than he'd anticipated.

When he'd created courage and justice, he'd had help from Gorz and Old Mother. Sure, he'd learned a lot since then, even made some spells of his own, but weaving Energies was different from building spell patterns. At first, he thought he'd do something simple by replacing the inspiration in his justice weave with glory. He'd thought it was a no-brainer—a complex weave, sure, but all the hard work had been done. It turned out that different affinities weren't exactly plug-and-play. When he tried to build the weave in his pathway, the glory-attuned Energy didn't hold the pattern where inspiration did; it kept slipping and drifting. He tried to force it with the power of his will, and though he could do so, keeping it where he wanted it, the pattern never "snapped" together; it never flashed and became a new attunement.

He wasted two days trying to modify the pattern to make the glory-attuned Energy work with it, but, in the end, he decided it was like trying to force a spring into a mechanism that wanted something more like a cog wheel. What he needed was to craft a mechanism meant for the spring from the ground up. What it boiled down to was that Victor's idea of tackling what he'd thought would be the easiest new weave turned out to be one of the more complicated ones, so after two

days of struggling, he decided to try working with something a little simpler. Rather than trying to put together another weave involving three Energies, he chose two—rage and glory.

On the fourth night after Karl's ill-fated attack on the keep, after a hard day sparring and working on the watch tower, Victor sat down to eat a plate of sliced meats, cheeses, and fruits. He quietly munched as he flipped through the pages he was sharing with Edeya, turning to her latest missive:

Victor,

I received word from Rellia today. The legion has captured High Keep and, leaving a sizeable garrison behind, will begin the march to reinforce us at the citadels. She said Borrius plans to split the legion; half will march north along the western edge of Hector's current territory, and the other half will march along the eastern perimeter. Along the way, they plan to split off support units to add to each keep's garrison. They know we've called for the reserve cohort at the pass to join us, so they plan to take their time, ensuring they haven't missed any other "surprise" armies like the one that assaulted you at Sea Keep.

As for us, we finally have eyes on the citadels. I thought we'd see one, have to deal with it, and then the other, but they truly are twin structures, and they're connected via a great marble span that crosses a wide, raging river. We've learned that the river flows from the east, originating in the mountains beyond Rust Keep. The legion crossed it on their way south to High Keep, but it was much more docile on the plains. Here, among the hills surrounding Hector's mountain, the river is a formidable barrier, rushing with white waters over boulders and falls. We've crossed it further west and now make our way up through the hills toward the first citadel.

The castles are intimidating, each guarding a side of the massive arch. Their walls must be a hundred feet high, built from the same white stone as the bridge. Only a narrow approach is possible because of the steep slope, and there's no room to stage an army before the enormous gates. For now, Sarl and Kethelket have judged our best course of action will be to lay siege, holding ground out of range of the defenders and preventing any more of Hector's forces from leaving the mountain. Sarl intends to build siege weapons, hoping to soften the defense and perhaps destroy the gate before our eventual charge.

It's good that we got here ahead of the army; it'll take weeks to properly prepare for what looks to be a difficult assault. I hope you and Valla are well and that we'll see you soon.

With affection,

Lieutenant Edeya

Victor frowned, staring at the page with unseeing eyes; he was busy picturing the scene, imagining the two tall keeps and the bridge between them. He was glad the army would hold off, dig in, and prepare for a real siege. He wanted to be there when they attacked. If they couldn't breach the gates with siege equipment, then Victor would be the one to assault them. In days past, he'd determined that Karl's axe was not conscious. However, it seemed to be made of incredibly dense, enchanted metal, and he had an idea that it would be better at smashing defensive structures than Lifedrinker. "Which is good, lovely," he said, resting a hand on Lifedrinker's haft. "You're meant for better things than chopping wood."

He wasn't surprised when she didn't answer but simply hummed with pleasure. She wasn't the talkative sort. "Unless you count screaming in battle." Amusement rippled forth from the axe, and his grin widened. Victor stuffed the last slice of peppery cured meat into his mouth and stood. "Okay, let's go check on Valla, then get to work on that Energy weave." With a final pat to Lifedrinker's haft, he walked down the stairs through the long hallway to his bedroom. On some level, he knew something had changed the second he opened the door; he'd grown used to the layer of magical fog hanging in the air near the ceiling, and when it wasn't present, he jerked his eyes to the bed, only to find it empty.

"Valla?" He frantically scanned the room, eyes settling on the door to the bathroom.

"Don't come in here!" her voice cried from behind it. Of course, Victor immediately started for the door.

"What's wrong?" He rested a palm on the warm wood, his need to see she was all right warring with his desire to respect her request.

"I'm . . . I think I made a mistake, Victor! I'm not me anymore!"

Victor touched his hand to the handle, and the house, recognizing him as the owner, unlocked the door with a click. Still, he didn't open it. "Take a breath, Valla. Can I come in?" He tried to keep his voice steady, tried to slow his pounding heart.

"No! Ancestors! Oh, Victor! Just wait until night, close your eyes, and let me slip away in the shadows. Let me hide among the other outcasts in the world!"

"You're freaking me out, Valla. I'm opening the door."

"No!" A thud accompanied her objection, and he knew she was leaning against the other side of the door, pressing it closed.

"Okay, then tell me what happened."

"One of my ancestors spoke to me. Somehow. Ugh! I don't know how it's even possible. Is she in my blood? Did I meet her spirit? No, she said it was just a fraction of herself . . ."

"Valla, slow down! Take a breath. What actually happened?"

"She wasn't Ardeni, she was Ordeni." Her words stirred a faint memory in Victor's mind, and he tried to pin it down. It was something Chandri had told him . . . a story about the world forming.

"Oh! Aren't they the people who got destroyed when the world was new? Didn't they all gather to build a new city, using what they learned when the System arrived? Like, weren't they really talented with Energy?"

“And the Yovashi called down a piece of the yet-unformed moons to annihilate them.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, that part sucks, but it’s neat that you have a piece of them in your ancestry . . .”

“A piece? Hah!” Soft thuds accompanied her words, and Victor could tell she was bouncing her forehead against the wood.

“Come on, Valla, just tell me.”

“My ancestor had the Rihven bloodline. She asked me to take it up.”

“Okay . . .”

“I thought it was the noble thing to do. I thought I should rise to the occasion, to bring forth this lost bloodline, to ‘share it with the world,’ or some other nonsense she spouted.”

“That’s exciting, right?” Silence. “Valla?” She didn’t answer for several long seconds, and Victor pressed, “Talk to me.”

“I just, well, I just didn’t expect such changes. I should have known better; the Rihven were compared to the Ridonne. Why don’t I remember any art depicting them? Did the Ridonne purge them from history? I didn’t know I’d look like this, dammit!” As she swore, Victor had to fight to push his amusement down; the woman he loved was in despair—this was the time to be serious.

“I don’t give a shit if you’ve sprouted tentacles and grown a dozen eyes. I love you, Valla. Come on! I’m a titan, not a chickenshit boy. Let me see what my lovely, beautiful, sweet, brave, powerful woman looks like.” In response, Victor felt the doorknob twist, and he let go of the handle as it slowly swung open, revealing her. “Holy fucking shit, you dummy! You’re gorgeous!”

“I am?” Tears streamed from her eyes, and Victor reached out to wipe them with a thumb as he looked at her, really taking in the changes. He could see why she’d be upset, even though she was totally wrong. Yeah, she’d changed a lot, but she was still Valla; she was still amazingly beautiful by any standard. Even so, if he’d changed that much with his first dose of the Quinametzin bloodline, he might have been freaked out at first, too. Valla was a good foot taller than she’d been, and though his house was built with high ceilings and accommodating doors, she was as tall as he was in his slightly reduced form. Her skin, while still retaining a hint of blue, was much paler, and strangely, Victor thought he saw a shimmer of silver in it as he rubbed her tear away with his thumb.

If the changes had ended there, with her added height and different skin, he imagined she would’ve taken them in stride. Those were the most minor of changes, however. Her hair, too, was different.

Only hints of its seafoam color remained, largely replaced by shimmering, metallic silver tresses. Her eyes, once pure, glittering teal, were flecked with swaths of silver. Even her facial structure was different; he felt like he was looking at Valla's long-lost older sister; her cheeks were higher, her jaw more defined, and her brow more angular. She looked more . . . regal was the only word Victor could think of.

Despite all those changes, Victor thought the last was the one she was really struggling with. Valla had grown wings, and they weren't little fairy wings like a Ghelli's. They were full-on, massive, feather-covered wings. They twitched, expanding and contracting awkwardly, one at a time, clearly throwing Valla off balance. He could see her struggling to control them as he regarded her. Even so, the wings, while big and maybe cumbersome, were beautiful. The feathers were silver with teal highlights, just like her hair. "Yeah, silly. If you were a ten before, now you're a fucking twenty."

"What?"

"Nothing, just trust me, okay? You look amazing. You're the prettiest person I've ever seen, and I've seen some knockouts, as you know . . ."

Valla punched him, blurting out a noise that was half sob, half laugh. "Stop it! These wings are terrible! I don't know how to keep them still! Look at the bathroom; I destroyed it!" Victor looked over her shoulder to see the towels, knick-knacks, and toiletries they'd accumulated on the counters were spilled and scattered all over the floor.

"You just got 'em, silly. It's going to take a little getting used to. Why do you think I was so obsessed with learning to make myself smaller when I'd first started to look a little like a Quinametzin? It's hard to change your mental image of yourself. You need to practice with those wings, but think about it, Valla! You're going to fly!" He watched her eyes, watched the tears still pooling, but saw something light up in them, a glimmer of excitement. "Yeah, I'm jealous of that, dammit! Hey! If I make myself small enough, you could fly me around . . ."

"I'm not carrying my lover around like a baby!" She growled, and Victor noticed another change; her sharp, catlike teeth were mostly gone—her dentition looked very human now. Was that a result of her embracing her Ordeni ancestry? Was that one of the differences between them and the Ardeni?

"Okay, forget all this physical stuff. How do you feel? Did anything else change?"

"Yes!" She started to cry again, tears bursting out of her eyes and streaming down her cheeks. Victor pulled her close, still standing in the doorway, holding her against his chest and stroking her head, smoothing his fingers over her light, surprisingly fluffy, silvery hair. "I . . . I'm not crying from being sad! When I looked at my status sheet, I got hung up staring at my race; it says I'm Ordeni now with a Rihven bloodline." She sniffed and, pressing her face into his chest, kept speaking, "But when I finally looked further, I saw the biggest change of all. I

worked so hard to get my affinities up over six using the techniques I'd learned from Tes. So hard!"

"Yeah?" Victor was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Had she lost her affinity?

"Now my air affinity is over eight. Just like that, without any work!" She pushed away from him, scowling, and boy, could she scowl with those angular silver brows. "I feel like I cheated!"

"Shit, Valla, are you kidding?" Victor shook his head, bemused. "You worked hard to get it up to six, and now it's eight. If you hadn't worked hard, it might not have risen as high. You're not a damn cheater. Anyone who can advance their race will do so. You know that!"

"Not everyone does . . ."

"Well, they aren't our peers. We need to be strong, and this is how you do it. Fucking-A, Valla! Your affinity is awesome! This is going to help so much!"

Valla sniffed, the waterworks drying up. She looked into Victor's eyes, and he savored it, enjoying a little dive into those beautiful silver-teal orbs. After a moment, she let go of his arms and took another step back, shaking her head ruefully. "I can't even put my armor on."

"Ah, shit." Victor glanced at her new, huge appendages sprouting from between her shoulders and frowned. "We gotta think of a way to fix that." He frowned, shaking his head, putting the thought away for another time. "We'll figure it out. On another note, though, how many racial ranks did you get? I got three . . ."

"Ten!"

"Damn! I'm glad I gave you one of those apples, then."

"Well, you're the one talking about how we need to get stronger, but that's a good example of how you don't follow through with your own advice . . ."

"Not true! If I ate another apple, I might get two ranks out of it. You think two more racial ranks for me is as valuable as having an ally as strong as you? How about having to worry less about the woman I love? How much is that worth?"

"A lot because this woman isn't going to let the man she loves do all the heavy lifting anymore."

"Right," Victor nodded, "heavy lifting. Like when you fly me around . . ." Again, Valla punched him, and he took a step back, laughing. "Hey! Careful! I think your knuckles are bigger." With that, she chased him out of the bathroom, and as she ran behind him into the bedroom, her wings unfurled, and she laughed, leaping after him. Soon, they were entangled, wrestling on the bed, and their horseplay transitioned from laughter to kisses, and not much sleep was had in Victor's house that night.

When he woke in the morning, he lay with his face in the pillow, listening to the odd sounds of Valla muttering and cursing to herself, accompanied by the repeated sound of her wings folding and unfolding, sometimes slowly and sometimes with an audible crack as they snapped to their full span. He slowly turned to his side and peeked through one half-open eyelid to see her pacing back and forth through the room in nothing but her underwear as she fought to gain control over her new appendages. “We’ll stop early each day so you can practice on the way, too,” he muttered.

“We’re supposed to . . . how did you put it? ‘Haul ass on Guapo,’ not dilly around so I can learn to control my gods-damned body!”

“Gods, huh?”

“Well, how do I know? Sure, we have ancestors, but your grandmother believed in a god. Tes mentioned old gods. Who knows what’s out there?” She snapped her response at him, and when she turned to regard his sleepy smile, her angry, furrowed brow softened, and she laughed and flopped to the ground, sitting on the carpet beside the bed. “I’m ridiculous!”

“Nah, you’re great.” Victor sat up and stretched, yawning. “Anyway, it’s okay if we take a little extra time; the Ninth is just sieging the road leading up to the first citadel while they wait for the reinforcements. Come on! Let’s get breakfast, and then we’ll get on the road. Have you got an old breastplate or something you can wear ‘til we find an armorer qualified to mess with Tes’s wyrm scale?”

“Of course. In any case, I’ll need you to help me cut some holes in the backs of my shirts.”

“I dunno, I kinda like you like that.” As Valla’s cheeks bloomed red and her eyebrows drew together, Victor laughed and rolled to his side, burying his head under a pillow, bracing for her retaliatory attack.

Book 6: Chapter 48: Wings

Rano and a few of his sergeants hung around in the courtyard while Victor prepared to leave. He’d summoned Guapo, and Uvu prowled around the courtyard, well aware that something was going on. He kept sniffing the air, chuffing, and pacing near the stairs leading into Victor’s travel home. Victor figured the big cat knew Valla was awake and would emerge soon, probably alerted through their bond. While he waited for her, Victor took some time to go through the big storage rings he’d taken from Karl.

One was full of supplies—barrels of lamp oil, timbers, iron brackets, bolts, and pins, along with the tools that would be used to put them together. When Victor showed Rano, he suggested they were for building siege equipment. Victor shook his head, bewildered. “Why wouldn’t the idiot use some of this stuff?”

Rano shrugged. “Perhaps he was overconfident in the power of his giants. Perhaps he didn’t realize you laid in wait.”

Another of the rings was filled with more disturbing things. There were dozens of sealed casks within, and when Victor took one out and hammered it open, he found it full of blood. There were huge crates stuffed with body parts, from human limbs and skin to organs. Victor grew disgusted in his perusal and handed the ring off to Rano, “Build bonfires near the sea and burn these things.”

“Aye, sir.”

In the last of the storage rings, Victor found more personal things—clothes, armor, notebooks, weapons, and myriad disgusting things that could only have been trophies or mementos. The latter ranged from fingers in velvet-lined jewelry boxes to large portions of human skin mounted to frames meant for hanging on a wall. Scanning through them, Victor didn’t find anything that interested him other than some sacks of beads numbering in the hundreds of thousands. He took those and, again, handed the ring to Rano. “You can distribute the weapons and armor as awards to those who need them, but I’d like you to destroy the disgusting trophies.”

“Trophies?”

“Yeah, I think that sick asshole kept parts of, I dunno, victims or maybe friends to display. You’ll see what I mean.”

“I’ll see it’s done, sir.” Rano was mid-salute when he suddenly gasped and took a step back, eyes on something over Victor’s shoulder. Uvu made a funny rumbling, yawning sound, and Victor knew Valla had emerged. He turned to her, face lighting up with affection. He caught his breath, much like Rano, when he saw her standing there on the stoop of his travel home, her wings partially extended, catching the morning sunlight in a spectacular shimmer of silver and soft green-blue iridescence. She was tall, powerful, and sharp-looking in her snug black uniform pants, well-shined boots, and white, tucked-in uniform shirt.

Victor had helped her to trim some holes in the backs of her shirts for her wings, and they seemed to have worked well. Midnight hung from her waist on her sword belt, and Valla had donned a shiny, silver breastplate that covered her chest and matched her helmet. To him, she looked like a Valkyrie or angel, girded for war. When she met his eyes with those spectacular silver and teal irises awash with the rich, warm sunlight, he felt he could forget everything in the world and simply stare at her. Then she smiled, and he wanted nothing more than to rush over to her, hold her, and kiss her.

Of course, Victor knew none of that would be cool with Valla, not with the soldiers gathering in the courtyard and on the ramparts to stare. Silence had fallen over the keep like a blanket; everyone was still, stunned by the appearance of a creature only vague legends alluded to. Valla wasn’t one to speak much in the best of times; she didn’t like attention focused on her, and Victor could tell this was a struggle for her. Nonetheless, she squared her shoulders and spoke into the courtyard. Her voice, while still hers, was loud and powerful, and it carried well—she’d been trained to address troops, after all.

“Soldiers, I thank you for guarding me well while I went through my bloodline evolution! As you can see, I’ve brought forth the aspect of one of my more

distant ancestors—she was an Ordeni and, more than that, a proud carrier of the Rihven bloodline. Look upon me and behold the last of a people who once walked among the Shadeni and Ardeni—a people who stood up to the Ridonne and were exterminated for their trouble. Now, enough gawking! Back to your work! Guard this keep well in our absence!”

It became apparent that the soldiers weren’t sure how to react. Some cheered, some clapped, some did as she said—stopped gawking and got back to work, and some kept staring, unable to wipe the stupefaction from their faces. Victor broke the spell on Rano by walking between him and Valla, holding out his hand to take hers. “You look great.”

“Thank you, love.” She took his hand and stepped down to the cobbles where Uvu paced, rubbing his long, furry body against her as he circled with repeated, rumbling chuffs vibrating his chest. “Hi, Uvu, sweet boy,” she cooed, rubbing his head and massaging his fuzzy ears. Looking at her with the cat, Victor wasn’t so sure he’d serve very well as a mount. Valla had sort of outgrown him. He wondered if that mattered now that she had wings. Would she be able to fly further than the Ghelli? Her wings were undoubtedly much larger. He wondered how that would work—didn’t birds have hollow bones and a skeletal structure designed to support flight? He knew for a fact that Valla was no lighter than before. In fact, she was heavier . . .

“Anything else, sir?” Rano asked, finally having found his voice, interrupting Victor’s musing.

“No, I don’t think so. We’ll be off shortly.”

“In that case, I’ll make my rounds. It’s wonderful to see you, Tribune Primus.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Valla smiled, looking up from the affections she was pouring onto Uvu.

As Rano saluted and walked away, Victor asked, “What will you do about this big boy? I suppose you can still ride him, but your feet might touch the ground . . .”

“He’ll follow at his own pace. If not a mount, he’s a boon companion.” She hugged the giant cat around his neck. “Aren’t you, big soft boy?” The great cat yawned hugely, exposing six-inch fangs by way of reply.

Victor clicked his tongue, and Guapo, golden and proud in his glory-attuned form, walked closer to the small group. “I’ll pack up the house—you’re done in there?”

“For now, aye.” Valla’s words were muffled, her face still buried in the fur of Uvu’s neck. Victor chuckled, rested a hand on the travel home’s front stoop rail, and mentally issued the command to compress. A few minutes later, home securely fastened to his belt, he hopped onto Guapo’s back and held his hand

down for Valla, swinging her up behind him. As they trotted out of the courtyard and through the bailey, Victor was surprised and a little embarrassed to see Rano and all of his soldiers lined up to watch them depart.

He sat up straight and, not wanting to look like some kind of dopey nobleman or something, didn't wave. He just locked eyes with as many soldiers as possible, nodding his appreciation. He wasn't sure how Valla responded to the attention, but he felt her shifting behind him and figured she might be waving or saluting. When they exited the outer gate, Victor urged Guapo to pick up the pace, and soon, they were trotting down the steep, winding road toward the beach. "Hey," he called over his shoulder, "when are you going to try flying?"

"When no one else can see me!" Valla laughed, squeezing his ribs as she leaned into him. Victor chuckled, then leaned forward, urging Guapo to go as fast as he could over the rough, curving road. They made the beach in no time, and then they really started to move as Guapo understood Victor wanted to follow in the tracks left behind by the Ninth. Despite a couple of weeks having passed, the passage of six hundred soldiers was still quite evident, especially as they got into the shrub-covered, loosely wooded hills. The turf was well-torn, and bushes were trampled in a wide swath. The cohort had chosen a route traversable on foot, and Guapo had no trouble pounding over the same path.

After an hour or so, Victor knew poor Uvu was well behind them, and he shifted so he could look back at Valla. At some point, she'd removed her helmet, and though she still held his sides, she was leaning back, face in the wind, her hair streaming behind her. Her wings weren't unfurled, but they weren't tight to her back, either. Her eyes were closed, and she wore a contented smile. It looked like she was really enjoying the air coursing through her hair and feathers. Victor had intended to ask her if she worried about Uvu but didn't want to interrupt her joy with a worry she'd clearly put out of her mind. Instead, he turned back to the front and enjoyed the ride, himself.

When he ran like this, Victor had no doubt that Guapo was twenty or more times as fast as the cohort. He figured they could reach their destination in less than two days if they tried, but he didn't intend to hurry. He planned to let Guapo run until noon, and then he and Valla would make camp, and he'd give her some time to practice with her wings. Victor didn't want to bring her into combat if she'd never even sparred with those new appendages; what if she couldn't find her balance?

When he pulled Guapo to a halt on a broad, grassy hill, it wasn't even noon, but he liked the spot so much that he'd decided to stop early. A single tree, young and green, sat atop the hill next to a burned, broken stump of a much larger one. Victor liked to imagine the sapling was growing from a seed left behind by the dead tree. When his big spirit horse stopped beside the tree, and Victor scanned the horizon, he could clearly see the wall of gray mist that made up the border of Hector's lands. It was still quite distant, beyond hills and canyons, but from that height, he could imagine the route and figured Guapo could get there in less than a day.

Of course, their route wasn't straight to Hector's mountain—they had to turn north, skirt those foothills, and find the river that led up to the dormant volcano and the roadway the citadels guarded. Even so, he knew if they left early the next day, they'd make it; Guapo had hardly slowed from his fastest gallop all day as he followed the cohort's trail. "Let's stop here."

“For lunch?”

“Nah, for the day. We can finish the journey tomorrow, so let’s take some time for you to practice with those wings.”

“Ugh! I was hoping to be alone. It’s going to be embarrassing!”

Victor laughed, sliding off Guapo. “Don’t be like that. You know I’m not going to tease you! Much.” He reached up to help her dismount, but she ignored his hand, sliding off on her own.

“Think you’re funny?” She stretched her back, slowly turning in a circle, admiring the view from the hilltop. “A nice spot, at least!” She turned to look back the way they’d come over rolling hills covered in a mostly green carpet of grass that faded into the horizon. “I hope Uvu enjoys himself and does some hunting and exploring on his way.”

“I’m sure he’s loving it.” Victor began pulling chairs and camping equipment from his storage rings, setting up a picnic area in the grass. “How about I cook us up something for lunch while you stretch those wings out?”

“Well, I can see you’re not going to let the matter rest, hmm? All right. I am curious, but please, don’t watch me at first.”

“Cross my heart.” Victor laughed at her puzzled expression, then got to work, lighting up his camp stove and boiling some water. He could hear her steps as she moved down the hill a short way, then the flutter of wind through her wings as she spread them out. His hearing had improved along with the rest of his senses as he’d grown more powerful and his body had evolved, so it wasn’t hard to pick up her soft exhalation and the ruffle of feathers as she tried flying for the first time. He was surprised, though, when the sound rapidly faded. Had she taken flight so quickly? He broke his promise and turned to look for her.

He immediately saw her, higher than the hilltop, yet hundreds of yards distant. She jerked from left to right as though trying to find her balance, but it looked awkward and difficult, like she was at the mercy of the wind. Then her feet, trailing beneath her, straightened out behind her, and he could see her pull her heels together. Almost like magic, her flight evened out, and she banked to the left, exposing the full expanse of her massive wings. They glittered in the sunlight, and a distant laugh came to him on the breeze. Victor sat down on one of the comfortable chairs he’d set out, envy gripping his heart as he watched her flap those wings, gaining altitude and truly soaring like a bird.

“There must be magic involved,” he said to Guapo, who stood near the green sapling, idly chewing on grass. “Her body isn’t like a bird’s, so magic must be buoying her flight, making those wings work so well.” He stared at the proud spirit Mustang for a long second. “Why are you eating grass, you goofball?” Of course, no answer was forthcoming, so Victor chuckled and returned to cooking. He didn’t have a vast repertoire of dishes, and, in fact, he wasn’t really cooking

at all. He was just heating some soup he'd bought in Coloss and adding some fresh ingredients. It was a brothy vegetable soup, and he pulled the meat from a whole roast bird he had from his time with the Shadeni, adding it to the pot. Guapo wandered closer, and Victor laughed. "I know it's a warm day, but I was in the mood for soup. Don't get any ideas; it's not for Mustangs."

As he stirred the pot, the thud of feet hitting the ground and rapid steps told him Valla had landed, so he turned to regard her. Her hair was wild, her cheeks were flushed, and a huge smile told him things had gone fine. "Victor! I wish you could fly!"

"Hah! Me too! It went well?"

"Yes! It was like . . . well, it was like my body knew what to do as soon as I got some wind in my feathers!" She came closer to his camp stove, sniffing the air. "Smells great!"

"Chicken vegetable soup!"

Valla folded her wings tight to her back and tried to sit on the chair, but they hung below her butt, and she couldn't make it work. "This is absurd! How am I supposed to sit?"

"Maybe open them partially? So they hang to the sides of the chair?" He watched her frown with concentration, trying different positions and finally settling on something like what he'd suggested. "It'll take some getting used to, huh?"

"Yes, but it's all worth it! I never imagined the feeling I had up there! I was so free and fast! I wager I can travel as quickly as Guapo!"

"Faster, I'll bet, once you get used to it. If you get really high and just soar on the wind, you won't have to worry about obstacles like he does."

"True! And they're different from Ghelli and Naghelli wings, at least at the level we've seen. I know I can go higher and faster than any of them."

"Yeah, those wings of yours are serious business. Lam and Edeya have pretty wings, but there's no way they could keep up with you."

"You watched me?" Valla scowled in mock outrage.

"I waited for a little while . . . well, until you were in the air, at least!"

Valla's laugh trilled again, and Victor couldn't help joining her. It was good to see her so happy; he could probably count the times she'd really laughed in the past on his ten fingers. The two of them sat together, enjoying each other's company, eating soup and salty, wafer-like bread for a good hour. After lunch, Valla took another flight. Then, when she returned, flushed and excited, full of tales of the things she'd seen, they sat together, just taking in the fresh air and warm sunshine. Toward mid-

afternoon, Victor suggested they spar for a while so Valla could get used to her wings in such an activity.

They started off slow, moving at half intensity, practicing their forms, their attacks, and counters. They had to stop and repeat things several times as Valla kept throwing herself off balance with her wings. After a while, Victor stopped and suggested, “Why don’t you try using your wings more rather than trying to control them? Go ahead and extend them and use them like the limbs they are.”

“I’ve just been trying to hold them tight so they don’t throw me off . . .”

“Yeah, but have you ever seen birds fight? They have their wings out and use them as much as their talons or beaks.”

“Where have you watched birds fight?”

“Hah, I don’t know. Probably some internet videos.” He laughed and shook his head. “Never mind—it’s a thing from my world.”

“You’ll have to explain it to me sometime. I’d like to hear more about your world.” When Victor nodded, Valla spread her wings with a crack, and they began again. This time, she kept her wings out, flapping them to aid in her movement, and Victor found it a lot harder to close with her and deliver his attacks. Her wings were very strong, and she could use the hard, bony edge to knock him or his arm aside when she spun. He wondered at the metallic sheen to her feathers; would they continue to harden as she advanced her bloodline? Would they eventually be as good as armor?

When they decided to break for dinner, she laughed and charged him with a violent, exuberant hug. “You were right! I did much better when I stopped trying to control them, when I stopped trying to move like I did before I had them.”

Victor hugged her back, smiling. She’d been slower and a little awkward, but he could tell she was going to get stronger and stronger—her ceiling had, literally, been vastly expanded. She would be very formidable when she grew used to those wings, and their movement became second nature. “It’s good, beautiful. You’re going to be great.” As he hugged her, he set his eyes on the distant wall of eerie, green-tinted mist. Hector was waiting for him. He wondered what the pendejo was even like. “When we catch up to the cohort, let’s talk to Victoria about Hector. I want to end this pinché invasion.”

She laughed and squeezed him harder. “We will. Who could stop us now?” Victor chuckled at her confidence; she was sounding almost Quinametzin. It was good, but something in him wanted to look for a piece of wood to knock his knuckles against.

Book 6: Chapter 49: Staging

It was near sunset the next day when Guapo powered up a steep hillside, providing an unobstructed view of the mountain approach, the cascading falls, and the citadels that sat like white-washed chess pieces on either side of the raging river. They were still too distant for Victor to pick out details; he

couldn't see any people on the ramparts or crossing the impressive stone span of the bridge between them. He could see the snakelike road that led up through the foothills to the first citadel, and, not far from where he and Valla sat atop Guapo's back, he could see his army encamped, guarding the approach to that road.

He frowned as he looked away from the army, up the hill, back to the two massive keeps guarding the road to Hector's base, the town at the top of the mountain. He still couldn't see anything of the actual volcano or plateau or whatever it was. Just past the second citadel, the curtain of green-tinted fog grew too thick. It was like a sickly cloud had come down to the ground, obscuring all observation. Even the air around the citadels was hazy, and Victor had a feeling that if they weren't so high on open hilltops, so exposed to the air currents and the flow of that raging river, they'd also be near-impossible to see.

Valla shifted behind him and pointed. "It looks like the reserves from the pass are here." It was true; the encampment was far too large just to be the ninth cohort. They'd set up a perimeter fortification and even constructed a stone watchtower further out, directly on the curve of the gravel-strewn mountain road leading toward those two final fortifications guarding the approach to Hector's base.

"Yeah. Looks like they noticed us." Victor pointed to movement down the slope, about halfway to the encampment. A rider on a roladii was galloping toward the camp.

"Well, I suppose we'll need to get this over with." Valla didn't sound excited, and Victor knew she was nervous. It would be the first time people who really knew her, other than Victor, would see how she'd changed.

He clicked his tongue, getting Guapo moving again, then reached back and found Valla's hand, squeezing it in his. "You'll be fine. Are you sure you don't want to fly into the camp? Really give them something to talk about?"

"No!" She snaked her other arm up around his chest, pulling herself close to his back. "Could you maybe make yourself a little bigger so I don't look so tall?"

"Hmm?" Victor had been reducing his size the same amount as usual, which happened to be just about the same height Valla now stood. "Seriously?"

"At least at first?"

"I mean, we're tall right now, too tall for comfort in some houses. You want me to add another couple of feet to myself? 'Cause that's what'll happen if I cancel my spell."

"Don't cancel it! Just relax it a little. Give yourself another six inches. Just for now, Victor!" She squeezed him again, and he sighed, chuckling. His protest was more about teasing her than him actually caring. He extended his will and pulled back the flow of Energy to his Alter Self spell, and he and Guapo both expanded in size. "Better!" Valla laughed.

Victor tapped his heels against Guapo's sides, and the Mustang leaped into a gallop, tearing down the hillside and thundering over the grass and scrub-covered ground toward the encampment. No one could mistake the massive horse for anything other than Victor's mount, so he wasn't worried about alarming the sentries. As they pounded over the cleared area outside the camp's fortifications, Victor urged Guapo to slow, and they trotted through the wooden palisade gate. The soldiers atop the ramparts saluted, and some shouted excited greetings. Victor waved and turned back to wink at Valla. She smiled, encouraged, and partly extended her beautiful silver-teal wings, allowing her feathers to ripple in the breeze of their passage.

When they'd ridden past the latrines, the stockyards, a few hundred tents, and the cook pavilion, Victor caught sight of Lam and Edeya, their wings glittering blue and gold in the early twilight, and turned Guapo toward them. Just as they arrived and slid down from the horse's back, so too did Kethelket and Sarl, one fluttering in from the east on dark, silent wings and the other walking briskly attended by a small retinue of junior officers.

"Valla! Roots!" Lam cried, the first to find her voice as Victor and Valla, smiling and waving, stepped toward the group.

"Rihven?" Kethelket asked, his voice hushed and his eyes distant with some ancient memory.

"Rihven?" Edeya asked, looking around the group, clearly puzzled by the word.

Valla wasn't one to enjoy the spotlight, and she spoke up, probably to put the mystery to rest so they'd stop talking about her, "That's right. I've awakened the Rihven bloodline from an Ordeni ancestor. Now, forget about that, will you? Tell us what news you have of your siege efforts."

"Oh, no!" Lam laughed. "We won't be put off quite that easily! I've never even heard of the Rihven bloodline, but Valla, your wings! They're just as spectacular as the Ridonne's! You're far more beautiful than any Ridonne could hope . . ."

Valla frowned and folded her arms. "The Ridonne killed my ancestors. They drove them to extinction. Well, I suppose that's not wholly true, or I wouldn't exist. There are likely others among the Shadeni and Ardeni with traces of their bloodline, but . . . well, let's say I'd rather you didn't compare me to one of them."

"I'm sorry . . ." Lam seemed to be having trouble finding the right words, and Victor was about to step in, but Edeya beat him to it.

"Valla, Tribune, we Ghelli aren't always cognizant of the histories of the peoples from your home world. Tribune Lam didn't mean any offense."

"Right, I didn't . . ."

Valla took a deep breath, and Victor noticed her clench and unclench her fists. "Oh, relax, you two. I know you didn't mean anything by it. I have a newfound animosity for the Ridonne, finding myself disliking them even more now that I've learned how they've doctored history to erase entire species of people. I don't hold it against you." Valla turned to Kethelket. "You recognized my bloodline?"

“Oh, aye. During the joining, when the world was new, I saw more than one Rihven among the Ordeni. I visited their settlement, the great garden city they’d constructed at the heart of the continent.”

“Starfall Sea,” Sarl said softly.

“Aye. From a hundred leagues distant, I witnessed their destruction. It was cataclysmic. A single act that wiped out one people and sealed the doom of another.”

“What other?” Edeya’s eyes were wide with fascination at the impromptu history lesson.

“The Yovashi, of course. When they called down the mountain-sized piece of moon to smash the Ordeni city, the disaster shook the ground and darkened the sky over the entire continent for months. It was the one thing that could unite all the other peoples from all four worlds; they made a pact to wipe out the Yovashi, and that’s what they’ve done. Largely.”

As the little group grew quiet, Victor glanced over their heads, noting the crowds gathering nearby—soldiers were curious, wondering what their arrival might herald. He was thinking about whether or not he should address everyone when Sarl spoke up, “It’s wonderful to see you both. Shall we go to the command tent and review what we’ve learned and how our preparations have gone?”

Victor nodded. “Lead the way.” As the group followed Sarl further into the camp, Edeya moved to walk beside Victor.

“You can see the reinforcements from the pass have arrived.” Victor could tell she had more to add, so he just nodded. “Um, it seems one of your old companions came along with them. I know this because she came to me asking where you were and when you might arrive in camp. Her name is Chandri, and I know I wasn’t supposed to read the note Thayla sent you, but I’m a fast reader, and I noticed that name in the text, so . . .”

“Ahh! She’s here?” Victor looked around, twisting his neck left and right, wondering if he’d catch a glimpse of her watching them among the other soldiers. When he didn’t spy her, he looked back toward Edeya and caught Valla grinning, shaking her head. “Thanks for letting me know, but I’ll have to think of an appropriate punishment for reading my personal messages.”

Edeya’s cheeks bloomed, and she sputtered, “I didn’t read . . .”

“He’s teasing you, Edeya.” Valla squeezed the much smaller woman’s shoulder, tscking her tongue. “You know him better than that.”

“True!” Edeya laughed. “When he’s this large, though, it’s a little hard to remember that he’s the same friend I had back in the mines.”

“All right, all right.” Victor held up his hand, shaking his head. “I can see where this is going. Let’s stay serious for a minute, okay? We have a war to win.”

“That’s rich coming from you.” Valla wasn’t letting him off that easily, but Victor was rescued by the group’s arrival at the command tent.

“Here we are. I can go over the lay of the land on this map.” Sarl gestured to a big square table where a large, colorful map had been drawn, complete with hand-crafted, painted wooden models representing troops, hills, and structures.

Victor stepped up to the table, and behind him, Valla cleared her throat. “Where’s your prisoner?”

Kethelket answered, “Victoria? She’s under guard in a nearby tent.”

Victor was glad she’d asked. He had more questions for the woman and was happy to see Kethelket was taking his duty as her warden seriously. “I’ll want to meet with her after this.”

“Of course.” Kethelket moved around the table to stand near Sarl. Victor approached on the near side, studying the table, already resenting his height; it felt like he was looking down at a child’s play table. Still, when Valla stood beside him, he remembered why he was so large and pushed the selfish complaint out of his mind, concentrating.

“I see you have some of the road past the citadel mapped out.”

“My scouts flew into the death fog in the darkness of night. The road follows a switch-back pattern for approximately three miles before descending into the caldera.”

Valla leaned forward and ran her finger along the curved road to a blank space on the map. “And what’s that like? The caldera?”

“My scouts couldn’t go within. Hector’s magic is too thick in the air there. He has ward stones set up around the entire mountain top.” He paused, frowned, and stroked his chin. “I have some soldiers who wanted to try anyway, to push past the wards, but I forbade it. I’m sure they’ll be caught.”

Victor felt a growl rumbling in his chest. “Good. I won’t feed that bastard any easy victories.” He tapped his big, thick finger on the map near the white-painted models of the citadels. “What about here? What kind of resistance are we going to face?”

Sarl fielded the question, “We’ve estimated the troops in the first citadel at something more than a thousand, but we don’t know much about them. They wear armor similar to the reavers we slew near Old Keep. Victoria claims ignorance about the lords of these keeps.”

“Any plan for attack yet? Are we waiting for the main army?”

Lam cleared her throat. “That’s one option. We’ve constructed six trebuchets designed to be used by our earth casters. I believe we can destroy that gate.”

While Victor stared at the map and tried to picture the assault, Valla asked, “And can they return fire? Are there no siege weapons atop those walls?”

“There are, but we can spread out, whereas those gates are stationary. We’ve also only seen catapults and ballistae. Our Energy-driven trebuchets have a much greater range.” Sarl reached forward to the map and tapped the area where their camp was drawn. “We can set up the trebuchets in a wide area.” He drew a semi-circular line with his finger. “They can hit the gate from every angle, and it will take the engineers in the castle a long time and great luck before they’ll return any damage to our fire teams. We can also reposition as they lock in a target. Time is on our side in a siege like this.”

Victor finally spoke, “Have you seen any troop reinforcements come down the mountain?”

“None per se,” Sarl replied, “though our scouts and watchers have seen things flying in the mist. I’m of the opinion that we don’t have a good grasp on the forces Hector may yet bring to bear.”

“How far out is my mother?” Valla asked.

“A week or more,” Edeya replied. “The same with Borrius. They’ve both encountered remnants of the armies Hector had patrolling his former territories, though they’ve made short work of them.”

“Huh.” Victor rubbed his chin, and his scowl must have been heavier than he’d intended because everyone grew quiet until, finally, Sarl asked what everyone was wondering.

“Something’s bothering you?”

“Yeah. Everything’s going too damn well. I can see we caught Hector by surprise. I can believe that much; we caught him with his pants down and picked apart his armies one by one by keeping our momentum in the face of some lucky initial encounters. I don’t believe that we’re going to wrap this up so easily, however. It feels too . . . neat. I think he’s biding his time—he saw we were wiping out his far-flung armies, and rather than throw his reinforcements at us piece by piece, he’s consolidating. I think this mountain is going to be a bitch to invade.”

Kethelket nodded. “As troubling as those words are, I fear you’re correct. From my understanding, this man was a prince in a world where war and competition are fierce. He won’t be a pushover.”

Edeya surprised Victor by speaking up without prompting. “So what do we do?”

He looked at her and grinned, and his Quinametzin heritage gave the expression a savage aspect. “We take it one bite at a time. We take the first citadel, and then we’ll have a much stronger foothold on this mountain from which to advance. If we play it right, we might be able to lure more and more of his forces down to defend it and the bridge. Rellia and Borrius are setting up watch

stations all around the mountain; we'll know if he does something unexpected. So, as Sarl said, we take our time, wear down this first citadel, then storm it. From there, we'll reassess."

When everyone was quiet, some nodding, some frowning, but everyone staring at the map, Victor continued, "I'll go and speak with Victoria now. Let's begin our bombardment at dawn. Can you be ready by then, Sarl?"

"Yes, sir! I'll have the trebuchets moved into position tonight."

Lam cleared her throat, "Be sure they have strong fire teams with Elementalists to guard against ranged responses."

Sarl chuckled. "Standard Legion protocol, aye?"

"Aye." Lam smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

Victor turned to the tent flap. "Right. I'm off to speak with Victoria. Valla?"

"Not this time. Hand me your house, and I'll get it set up. I want to meet with Edeya and compose some messages to Borrius and Rellia."

"All right." Victor pulled his jade travel home from the pouch at his belt and handed it to her. Her fingers lingered on his for a moment, and it looked like she wanted to say more, but she didn't. She nodded quickly and turned to leave the tent ahead of him, Edeya hot on her heels.

Kethelket stepped forward. "I'll show you the prisoner's tent." He led the way out, and Victor followed him just a few dozen yards to a dark tent with a single amber glow lamp posted outside. One of Kethelket's masked Naghelli stood outside. He saluted, and Kethelket nodded to him. "The legate will see the prisoner."

"Sir!" The guard hurried to lift the tent flap.

"I'll meet you later, Victor. Shall we spar tomorrow, time permitting?"

"Maybe. Let's see how the bombardment goes."

"Of course. I didn't say it before, but I hope you know how glad we all are to have you here with us. The troops don't show it, but being in the shadow of that mist-shrouded mountain comes with a burden that can be felt in lost sleep. Shadows within shadows awaken fears most men and women haven't felt since childhood."

Victor stared into his dark eyes for a minute, thinking about what he'd said, then nodded solemnly. "We'll shed some light on things around here, Kethelket. Starting tomorrow, the creatures on that mountain will be the ones losing sleep." Kethelket smiled grimly, then snapped a sharp salute, something he'd obviously been working on, and turned to walk briskly into the night.

Victor stooped to enter the tent, glad that the post at the center was a tall one, vaulting the fabric ceiling. When the second Naghelli guard saw him enter, she slipped out behind him. Victoria sat in a comfortable chair, a thick book in her lap. The only other furnishings in the room were a plush red carpet and another amber-tinted glow lamp. She'd closed the book when he entered, but her fingers

were inside, holding her place. Victor summoned a chair from his storage ring and sat before her.
“Reading something good?”

“It’s a book of folktales from this world. Fascinating stories, honestly.”

“Who gave you that?”

“The tall, winged woman with the golden hair. Lam, I think, is her name.” Victor frowned at her, something about that answer rubbing him the wrong way. Victoria knew Victor spoke to Lam often. She knew her name. Why did she put on this show of being unsure about it? Why did she describe her as though she wasn’t sure?

“Been spending a lot of time speaking to Lam? Anyone else?”

“I . . . you didn’t tell me I couldn’t speak to anyone. Not since you first put me in the tower.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I’ve spoken to anyone who would take the time to do so, Victor! I’m alone, lonely, bored. Having people to speak to, things to read,” she held up the book, “keeps me from thinking about the uncertainty of my future. I still fear Hector’s reprisal. I fear a change in heart among you and your allies. I count every dawn I wake, still alive, as a small victory.”

“Are you? Alive?”

“I’m more alive than dead. Might we agree to that, at least?”

Victor waved his hand, dismissing the subject. “Let’s turn our attention to something a little more important. Who commands these citadels? Why haven’t you told us about them as you did the other ‘barons’ in the outposts? More importantly, talk to me about Hector. What kind of creature is he? Don’t spare any details.”

Book 6: Chapter 50: Blowing Off Steam

“Hector? He’s a Death Caster, as pure of one as I’ve ever known; he doesn’t dabble in blood magic, nor does he feast on the life force of the living. He takes his power from beyond the veil, from the creatures he summons, and the dark pacts he makes. As for who he’s put in charge of the citadels, I couldn’t tell you. He didn’t share that information with me.”

Victor stared at Victoria as she spoke, unblinking, looking for any hint of subterfuge. He wasn’t good at reading lies, though, and he briefly wished Rellia was there with him. If anyone could read a liar, it was her, perhaps because of her life navigating the dishonest politics of the Ridonne Empire. He shifted in his chair, rubbed the stubble on his chin, and asked, “Isn’t it a little strange that you knew the other barons in the outposts but not the lords of these great castles?”

"I don't know. Is it? Hector gathered us barons to talk about his strategy for expansion on many occasions, but never was any lord or lady of the citadels announced to us. He has his sycophants, his hangers-on. He has powerful guardians that follow him everywhere. It's possible he's given one of those people command of citadels as they're quite close to his base, all things considered. Perhaps he simply has armies stationed within, led by one of his apprentices."

"He has apprentices?"

"Of course! While you are a master of your spirit Core, weaving spells with anger, fear, and glory, he is a master of death-attuned Energy. Many come to him for tutelage. Even some of the great lords of Dark Ember send their young his way. Why do you think he was chosen to lead this invasion?"

Victor frowned, something bothering him. It took a minute for him to realize it was how she'd spoken about his Energy affinities. "What do you know of my spirit Core?"

"Hmm?" She leaned back, raising an eyebrow. "Well, you nearly killed me with it . . ."

"Wasn't it strange to list off my affinities like that?" Victor leaned forward. Like an adult sitting before a child, he dwarfed her with his presence.

"I didn't list them all . . ."

"You didn't?"

"No! Is there a point to these questions, Victor? You're making me uneasy."

"Who's been talking to you about my affinities?"

"Victor," she swallowed nervously, running her tongue over her pale, dry lips, "you are the most powerful man I've ever met. Your soldiers and followers talk about you all the time; all I do is listen. You hold my fate in your hands, so of course, I listen."

Victor glanced around the tent, straining his ears. "I can hear murmured voices here and there, but no conversations taking place nearby. Are your ears better than mine?"

"No! Lord Victor." She paused, shaking her head, and Victor noticed the return of the honorific in her address. "I think I must have said something to upset you, and that wasn't my intention. I traveled for weeks with this army from the Black Keep to the Sea Keep and then to this encampment. I'm sorry if I should have ignored the men talking as they marched. I'm sorry if I grew too comfortable chatting with the army's leaders. I didn't intend to cause any trouble . . ."

"Forget it." Victor had grown tired of the topic. He wasn't even sure why he'd been bothered. Perhaps he simply didn't like someone who'd been an enemy

talking about his affinities like that. Her explanation made sense, though, and he supposed it was a strange thing to complain about. It wasn't like he'd tried to hide his power when they'd fought, and he'd nearly killed her. "Tell me something useful, then. How many soldiers can Hector bring through his gateway? Is there a limit?"

"I don't know the exact . . ."

Victor growled, interrupting her. "Make an educated guess."

"He raised funds and soldiers by holding lotteries for the barons he'd take with him in the invasion. Karl and Eric were the first to claim their places; they led the initial invading armies, conquering most of the territory." She sneered in contempt, her voice twisting into a snarl, "Small feat that it was—nothing was here to resist them!"

"Don't get sidetracked." Victor rolled his hand for her to continue.

"Dunstan, Faust, and I were part of Hector's second wave. We were chosen to hold three of the keeps that Eric and Karl uncovered."

"Faust?"

"The lord stationed in the keep your people have dubbed 'Rust.' He was of middling power—something of a savage. An upjumped ghoul, if you want me to get to the meat of the matter."

"Huh. I guess I missed that detail from Borrius and Rellia."

"Likely they didn't know they'd slain a baron; as I said, he was a savage, barely capable of speech."

"So, was there a third 'wave' of invaders?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Hector made it known from the early days that he'd be awarding five slots for other nobles to join in his invasion. I believe the System put limits on how many from our world could pass through the portal. He's not helpless, though; he's a powerful Death Caster, and his personal army is—was—enormous. The great horde you burned up in the forest was part of it, but he keeps his strongest soldiers close to hand."

Victor leaned back in his chair and thought for a minute, mulling over her words. He didn't see how lying to him would help her at this point, but he still felt like she was holding something back. It seemed strange that Hector would appoint barons to command the outposts but not the citadels. Could it be that Victoria simply didn't know? It was apparent these death-worshipping invaders didn't trust each other overly much, so perhaps Hector had kept her in the dark on purpose. Hadn't

he sent an assassin to the Black Keep to try to dispatch her after Victor severed their tether? “How do I destroy that veil star?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the mist-shrouded mountain.

“If you slay Hector, it will be easy enough. If you try to extinguish it before his demise, you’ll have to battle with it on the Spirit Plane.”

“How about that? If I Spirit Walk now and make my way up that mountain, will I find Hector on that Plane? Could I end this invasion that way?”

“I wouldn’t advise it, Lord Victor. I fought you on the Spirit Plane, and you are, indeed, mighty in that realm. Hector is, too, and the veil star gives him great strength. If you ventured into its light and faced Hector with all of his apprentices, I think you’d lose.” She held up her hands as Victor’s scowl deepened, and his Quinametzin pride allowed a trickle of rage to slip into his pathways. “I mean no offense, Lord. In a fair fight, I’m sure you could beat Hector on this plane or any other.”

Victor forced himself to calm down, pushing that bristling part of himself back. Had that been his problem when she’d mentioned his affinities? Had his Quinametzin nature been offended to have someone he viewed as a prisoner talking about him? Was he simply going to have to keep a tighter grip on his pride and watch himself for inexplicable frustration with others? “All right. Tell me about Hector’s base. What’s inside that caldera?”

“I was last there months ago.” When Victor scowled, she hurriedly continued, “I’ll describe what I saw—a wide low wall and dozens of stone buildings built from basalt quarried in the depths of the ancient lava flows. He has a castle there, but it was built hastily by vassals. It’s no ancient keep with mighty walls. If you can bring your army past the citadels and into the caldera, I think you will be able to crush him.”

“This army?”

“Oh,” she licked her lips again, “I meant your entire army. I don’t doubt you may win with just this force, but I’ve heard talk of a much larger army en route; was I mistaken?”

“Does he have innocent people working or living up there? People who aren’t in his army?”

“With the restrictions on the portal, I don’t think he brought his slaves with him. I heard Eric and Dunstan talking about how Hector had promised them the first choice of natives to replace their thralls.”

“Uh-huh.” Victor stood and sent his chair back into his storage ring. “We’ll talk more later.”

“Thank you, Victor. By the way, I appreciate you allowing me to have this back.” She touched the silver bracelet on her wrist. It was set with a large, nearly pink pearl.

“I did?”

“Your lieutenant. The one with the blue wings? She said you gave her permission . . .”

“Oh yeah. I think I told her you could have any non-magical items back. You said they were heirlooms, yeah?”

“Yes! This was my mother’s.” She looked a little pathetic as she gently touched the bracelet, and Victor could appreciate wanting something to remember your mother by. As he felt his heart softening, he scowled and allowed some more rage into his pathways.

“You’re welcome.” He turned and left before she could say anything more. “Keep a close eye on her,” he said to the guards as he walked by. Standing outside the tent, he scanned the area, wondering where Sarl was. He didn’t see him, but he saw Kethelket speaking to some Naghelli not too far away, so he approached the ancient prince.

When he saw him coming, Kethelket waved to Victor, dismissing his scouts. “Well, how was your meeting with the prisoner?”

“Not too enlightening, to be honest. More unsettling. I wish we had eyes on Hector’s town and his troops. Don’t take that the wrong way; I’m not hinting that I want to send your scouts in there. We can’t afford to throw lives away.”

“I’m not so sure it would be a death sentence . . .”

“No, Kethelket. If someone’s going to try to get eyes on that place, it’ll be me. Victoria gave me an idea, but I don’t think she meant to. If I could Spirit Walk up there . . .”

“Into the heart of a death caster’s territory? Victor, you’ve said, yourself, that Belikot was far weaker than even Hector’s barons. How strong do you think he is? It feels like an opportunity to spring a trap to me.”

Victor nodded, rubbing his chin and looking back at the tent where Victoria was being held. “You know, it really does, doesn’t it? She’s cunning, that one; do you think she mentioned something off-hand like that only to tempt my ego? Gah!” Victor shook his head and spat, a foul taste in his mouth. “I can’t wrap my head around it. Why would she try to trick me at this point? I had to break Hector’s tether on her and kill an assassin he sent her way. She’s seen us take one keep after another. Would she try to sabotage me somehow after all that? Still, I get a feeling . . .”

“Did she try to convince you to go up there via the Spirit Plane?”

“No. That’s the thing, she said what you said—told me not to go, that Hector would be too strong. My Quinametzin pride, though, it doesn’t like to back down from a challenge . . .”

“And you think she knows that? I think you give her too much credit. Take her words at face value, and don’t go up there, Victor. We’ll start our assault at dawn, yes? Let’s see how things go before we start taking drastic action.” He turned and gestured further into the camp. “If you’re wondering, I saw Valla setting your home up that way, just past the command tent.”

“Hah! Now I know what you’re doing—get me to speak to Valla, and she’ll surely talk me out of it, eh?” Victor clapped a massive hand on Kethelket’s shoulder, and the much older man chuckled.

“You give me too much credit! I was hoping thoughts of your lady love would send your blood pumping a different way . . .”

“Shit! You dirty dog!” Victor laughed. “Forget that, though. Let’s spar, huh? That’ll get my mind off these irritating thoughts.”

“How can I deny such a request?” Kethelket pointed to the western edge of the encampment. “We have some cleared space for drills over there. Shall we?”

Victor nodded, and the two men walked that way. He knew there were probably a dozen things he should do before taking the time to practice with his axe, but Victor had some pent-up frustration that he wanted to work out. He wanted to clear his head and try to see things in a new light, and the best way he knew how to do that was to exercise. He felt like he had to take advantage of the old sword master while he still could; who knew when they’d be parting ways again?

Victor felt like this campaign was drawing near the end, which meant he’d be moving on. He supposed he didn’t have to do so immediately. It might be nice to hang around in the Marches for a while to see how things shaped up. He could spend some weeks or months training with Kethelket and helping some of his other friends to make some gains before he left. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Wouldn’t it be interesting to see how Rellia and Borrius grew the colony? He, too, had lands to claim. Shouldn’t he build a house or something? He had the storage container holding the plans and materials for the hermitage. He could set that up before he left, maybe. Then there was Olivia to consider and the rest of the humans from their colony . . .

“How does this look?” Kethelket interrupted his thoughts, and Victor saw they stood in a wide-open gravel and dirt field outside the camp’s fortifications. Several other soldiers were scattered around the space, sparring or working on maneuvers, but he and the one-time prince stood in a large, empty area.

“Perfect.” Victor slipped Lifedrinker out of her harness and stretched his back and neck, limbering up.

“Are you going to stay that size?”

“You want me smaller?” He grinned. “Or bigger?”

“If you’re going to go big, perhaps I’ll need some teammates.” Kethelket let his eyes drift over the soldiers on the practice grounds. Victor shrugged, watching and waiting to see what the old sword master would decide. Kethelket lifted his fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle, waving to a group of four soldiers. When they stopped their sparring and looked up, he gestured for them to come over. They hurried to comply, all four jogging toward them and saluting Kethelket and Victor as they slid to a halt in the dusty gravel. Kethelket nodded to them and jerked his thumb at Victor. “We’ll practice fighting a much stronger opponent as a team today. Victor, sir, will you do us the honor?”

“Yeah, of course.” Victor smiled, then severed the connection to his Alter Self spell, sighing with pleasure as his full potential unlocked. He stretched to his near-ten-foot height, and his muscles rippled with renewed energy.

“Is that all?” a familiar voice called from behind him. Victor turned to see Chandri dropping down from the stone perimeter wall, crunching over the gravel with her long spear in her hands. She was painted for war, as usual, but she was also dressed for it, wearing a shiny steel helmet and breastplate that Victor hadn’t ever seen on her before. “I remember you being bigger when you went berserk!”

“Oh? You want me to berserk?”

“Seems only fair if six of us are going to fight you.” She circled Victor as she approached, moving near Kethelket. “You don’t mind if I help, sir?”

“Oh? Do you want to spar? I’m not sure we’ve met, yet you speak as though I should know you . . .”

“Kethelket, this is my old friend, Chandri.” Victor sighed and shook his head at her. “What are you doing? You don’t know the drills or formations the soldiers . . .”

“I’ve been practicing with the troops back at the pass. I know the maneuvers and formations. I won’t get in the way, sir.” She directed the last to Kethelket, and Victor frowned again. Was she trying to prove some kind of point?

“Chandri, are you . . .”

This time, she did speak to him, “I’m just trying to get better, sir. I’m officially enrolled in the ninth cohort. I joined up with the reserves. Captain Sarl placed me with the Red Boyii Unit.”

“That’s true, sir,” one of the other soldiers said, a tall Ardeni woman wearing brown, chitinous armor. “She’s in my brother’s unit.”

“Huh. Well,” Victor shrugged, “enough standing around wasting time. I need some exercise.” With that, he reached into his Core and summoned a thick rope

of rage attuned Energy, casting Iron Berserk. As he exploded in size, he swapped Lifedrinker to his left hand and lunged forward, swiping at Chandri's with his open right hand, sending her sprawling, tumbling through the gravel and dirt. He turned to the other soldiers and Kethelket, and he roared, his voice like a peel of thunder. Two of them nearly dropped their weapons in surprise. Not Kethelket, though; the old sword master burst into motion, moving like a gust of wind-blown smoke as he circled behind Victor, slashing at his hamstrings with his two named blades.

Victor laughed and rolled forward over one shoulder, shaking the earth and sending more soldiers stumbling. When he bounded to his feet, he saw Chandri was back up, wiping bloody dust from under her nose and off her chin. She scowled darkly, but he saw an eager gleam in her eyes as she charged at him with her spear. Victor laughed again, beckoning her and two other soldiers as they leaped forward, weapons lifted high.

He kept fighting with his open hand, using Lifedrinker only to defend himself, knocking away weapons or waving her about to give himself space. He laughed and laughed, slapping soldiers and friends left and right. It wasn't a mean-spirited laugh, more one of pleasure and genuine joy seeing his much smaller allies get up again and again to come at him. When Kethelket landed a brutal cut to his calf and Victor stumbled, the soldiers cheered and renewed their efforts. Victor felt his cheeks stretch with joy as he tossed Lifedrinker aside and fell to his knees, grappling with them all.

He didn't try to hurt anyone but wasn't gentle, either. He sent them flying, tumbling, rolling, and flopping through dirt and gravel. He smacked them with his open palm, stunning them, bloodying them, but always showed it when they got a hit in, cutting him or saving one another with a heroic parry or attack. They carried on like that for at least an hour, and Kethelket gave Victor a dozen good cuts in the process. Victor didn't care; his body was so sturdy and his healing so rapid that he hardly bled.

Some of the other soldiers landed hits on his armor or helm, mostly because Victor didn't try to defend against those blows, and once Chandri capitalized on Victor's distraction as he dodged away from a lightning combination by Kethelket and managed to drive her spear nearly four inches into his thigh. He wailed in mock agony, and Chandri laughed as the soldiers cheered. After everyone was scraped, bloodied, and filthy from repeated tumbles through the gravel, Victor held up his hand and shouted, "Enough, enough!"

"What?" Chandri cried, utterly covered in blood-caked dust. "We're just starting to get the knack of it . . ."

"Hold on," Victor said, rising from his knees to stand at his full, absurd height. He severed the connection to his Iron Berserk, then cast Alter Self, reducing himself to something more like seven feet tall. He stepped over and picked up Lifedrinker, then summoned his Globe of Inspiration. "That was a good warmup, but now I'd like to get in some weapon practice. I won't use any abilities, and your team can attack me two at a time. Anytime one of you needs a rest, you must tap one of the onlookers' shoulders, and then they can take your place." He grinned and held Lifedrinker before himself in two hands. "Who's first?"

