

Victor BK6: Ch51

Book 6: Chapter 51: Motivations

Victor sat beside Chandri on the stone wall Sarl's engineers had built around the encampment. They were facing the mountain where, in the darkness, Victor could make out the dim lights of the twin keeps guarding the road up to Hector's base of operations. After their lengthy sparring, when everyone, including Victor, had let off a good amount of steam and the soldiers moved off to perform their evening duties, Victor had pulled Chandri aside and asked if he could speak with her. Now they sat, looking into the darkness, Chandri quiet, perhaps uncomfortable, and Victor unsure of what he'd wanted to say.

After a few moments, he cleared his throat and pointed toward the dim lights up on the mountain. "Can you hear it? The river roaring down the falls?"

"Of course. It's a big river, but not so big as the Rill Catcher. I've seen bigger falls west of Gelica, toward the frontier."

"Yeah. I guess you're right. I've seen that river, too, but not the falls. Where I grew up, there weren't any big rivers; I lived in a desert. Sometimes, when it rained really hard, the washes, as we called them, would flood and pour through the desert like rivers, but they usually dried up in a day or two."

"Do you miss it? Home?"

"Yeah, of course. Mostly, I miss people. My grandmother especially. I've learned a lot about spirits and my ancestry, though. I know she's in here." Victor thumped his fist against his chest. "And out there." He gestured toward the distant, twinkling stars. "I'm sure we'll meet again someday, though probably not in this life."

"I remember you asking me questions about how we Shadeni are always talking to our ancestors. It's interesting to see you take it even further. I've heard about your sacrifices and how your ancestors take action through you. For weeks, everyone at the pass talked about how you fought off an entire army, breathing fire and shouting for your ancestors' glory."

Victor turned away from the stars to look at her face, her magenta eyes dark in the shadows. "Is that why you came here? The stories of our victories?"

"Well . . ." She frowned and folded her arms, covered in bloody, dusty scrapes. Victor felt a twinge of guilt at how rough he'd been with her and the other soldiers, but they'd seemed to enjoy it at the time. Besides, it was good for them to feel how a giant opponent might toss them about, wasn't it? "To be honest, I'm not sure. I felt like . . . I felt like I was missing something. I was spending my days watching children and teaching them to hunt. I know it's an important task, but Challa knows as much as I do, and she's matured a lot lately. I think having

Deyni look up to her has helped in that regard. Anyway, I've felt angry, and I don't know why, but I knew I wanted to see you, and I wanted to help somehow."

"Hmm." Victor nodded and rubbed his chin, feeling a little nervous. If they'd heard the tales of his exploits back at the pass, had they also heard that he and Valla were together? She wouldn't be here to try to rekindle any sort of . . .

Chandri interrupted his racing thoughts. "I don't think I regret rejecting you back when you stayed with us, Victor. I think I regret deciding I wanted a simple life, though. How could so much change in a few months? I'd been sure I wanted to continue our old way of life, following the same hunting migration my father and his fathers had followed for a hundred years. Now we're in a new land, fighting wars, joining with people I'd never imagined would be so close. Everything highlights how simple I'd been, how short-sighted." She paused, tsking and shaking her head, but before Victor could respond, she kept talking.

"I was angry with you initially, and I know how irrational that is. Was it your fault you were born with such potential? Was it your fault you were molded from a lump of iron into a blade by the crucible of your hardships? Those are Tellen's words—he and I had a good, long talk before I left to join this army. I think a part of my heart was angry with myself for limiting my future with simple dreams, for not at least entertaining the idea that my future wasn't with the clan, living as a huntress. Still, it's hard to see so much change and not feel some heartache. Where will we hang our midwinter ribbons this year? What trees will fill that role? The Blue Deep is too far. What about in spring? Will we still have a feast to welcome the spirits of the small creatures? Many of our old ones have died, and I worry that traditions will be lost."

"I get that . . ."

"I know you've suffered loss, too. I also know that I'm not making sense! In one breath, I talk about how I'm angry that I limited myself, and in another, I lament the loss of tradition."

"There aren't easy answers, Chandri. I can't promise that things will be better here, but that's what I'm working for. Once we drive out these invaders, your people will have a part of this new land to call their own. You won't have to look over your shoulders any longer. The animals you hunt and the land you nurture will be your own. Your traditions will survive, especially if there are more like you who value them."

"I know that's your dream, Victor. I hope you're right, and I think it will bring me joy to see my father, Thayla, and the others build something permanent. I hope it

will make things easier for me as I leave to know they've done so, that they'll be here."

"Ah!" Victor was beginning to understand. "You've decided to leave?"

"Yes. I want to help the effort to claim this land, and then I intend to travel and adventure. There are lands beyond these marches, beyond the mountains and the sea. I'm going to explore, Victor! I know there are other continents and other unclaimed lands. I want to return to the town my father settles with maps and tales of places and people that no one in the Ridonne Empire has seen or heard of in hundreds of years."

"A lot of history has been lost because of those guys, the Ridonne. Have you seen Valla?" Victor intended to talk about the Ordeni and Rihven, but Chandri's eyes told him he'd misstepped.

"Your lady love?" She chuckled, but Victor detected a bitter note in the laugh. "How could I not? She's a goddess walking among primitives."

"Hey!" Victor couldn't help himself. He reached out and grabbed her chin, turning her face to his. He stared into her eyes as he spoke, "Don't be stupid, all right? If your face wasn't smeared with dusty, bloody war paint, you wouldn't look half so scary . . ." He grinned, flinching back, hoping she'd take a swipe at him because of his stupid joke, but she shook her head, and he saw tears forming in her eyes. "Come on! That was a joke! I'm trying to lighten the mood here. You know she's had a lot of racial enhancements, right? You could . . ."

"I could what? Do you know how many racial enhancements our entire clan has come across in my lifetime? One. One that Tellen tried to get Old Mother to consume, but she refused, saying it was better used on a hunter. So, we had a festival with contests to choose the recipient, and my cousin Rorrin won. Guess where he is now."

"I don't . . ."

"Dead. Killed by a boyii alpha while he sought a vision from the spirits." She sighed and slapped her hands on her leather-clad thighs, stirring up a cloud of dust. "Forget it, Victor. I appreciate you talking with me. I know you have a good heart, and I want you to know I'm not angry with you. I'm just angry. I need to do something meaningful, and that starts with helping to finish this war. Will you let me be? Will you let me seek my own destiny?"

"Of course, I . . ."

She hopped to her feet with a grunt. "That's all I want. Thank you for taking the time to speak, Legate." She snapped a perfect salute, her fist sending another puff of dust off her chest, and then she turned and hopped off the wall, leaving Victor sitting there feeling dumbfounded. After a while,

he stood up and wandered around the camp, observing soldiers performing evening tasks, sitting around cookfires, or rushing to and fro, likely working on tasks vital to Sarl's planned bombardment of the citadel gates in the morning. Eventually, he made his way to his travel home, and when he went inside, he wasn't surprised to find Valla still talking with Lam and Edeya. They sat near each other around one end of his dining table.

"There he is! Were your ears itching?" Lam smiled when she saw him coming in from the foyer.

"You were talking about me?"

"We were wondering how serious you were about the assault in the morning," Valla said, standing up and walking to meet him.

"What do you mean?" He held open his arms so she could hug him more easily.

Lam provided the response, "If the trebuchets work and break the gates, will you attack?"

"And if they don't, will you break them yourself?" Edeya added.

"You guys think I can?"

Valla pulled away and looked up into his face. "Is that a question meant to confound us? If we say yes, are we encouraging you? If we say no, will you take it as a challenge?" She winked at him and turned back to the table, pulling his hand to bring him along.

"I don't know. It's been a while since I had a good fight, and I'm getting antsy. The more time we give someone like Hector, if he's anything like Belikot, the longer he'll have to prepare something surprising. I feel like we should take the citadels so he can't stage some kind of surprise. If we hold them, or at least the first one, it will be a much stronger position. Also, I don't like Hector in charge of that bridge; what if he broke it?"

"I told you," Lam said, nodding. "Sarl, though he prepares his bombardment for the morning, is of the opinion that you mean to wait for Rellia and Borrius to bring the full legion here."

"I do intend to wait for them, but I'd rather wait from within one of those fortresses."

Lam nodded, pounding her fist on the table. "And then we could launch a full-scale assault on the mountain!"

Victor smiled at her enthusiasm, but it was half-hearted. He pulled out a chair, and Edeya poured a glass of some kind of chilled wine for him. He sat there, sipping it, while Valla and Lam began a conversation about siege engines, their effectiveness against warded structures, and the different times they'd seen them put to use. He nodded, made encouraging sounds, and tried to follow the conversation, but he kept thinking about Chandri charging that wall with the other soldiers. He kept thinking about how quiet Hector had been. He felt like he was missing something.

It was still relatively early when he pushed his chair back and said, “I think I’m going to turn in. Maybe I’ll do some cultivating and try to clear my head. I’d hoped some exercise would do it, but my brain is still pretty damn busy. Don’t mind me.”

“I’ll come with you . . .” Valla started to stand, but Victor shook his head.

“Nah, I won’t be good company. You should invite Kethelket over for his opinion on the siege. He has a couple hundred flying troops, after all.”

Lam chuckled. “Well, of course, we were going to talk to him. I’m surprised he’s not here already—did you hurt him on the practice field?”

“Nah.” Victor smiled a little ruefully. “In fact, I think he got more solid hits in than I did. Anyway, tell me how it goes when you finish up.” He leaned forward and kissed Valla’s forehead.

“You’re sure you don’t want company?” Valla stood and took his hand, following him as he walked toward the dimly lit staircase.

“No, I have some things tickling my brain that I need to figure out. Some quiet is all I’m after.” He squeezed her fingers and started down the steps, happy to hear her turn and call for Edeya to “go find Kethelket.” Something was bothering him, but the problem was that he couldn’t tell if it was all in his head. Maybe he was being paranoid. Still, he kept replaying his conversation with Victoria over in his mind; who had mentioned Spirit Walking first? She had, right? Something about him having to battle the veil star on the Spirit Plane if he wanted to be rid of it. “Then she said I shouldn’t try . . .” Victor growled as he opened the door to his bedroom.

No matter how hard he tried to stop, he kept thinking back to Belikot. He kept remembering how everyone said not to mess with him on the Spirit Plane, to build a troop of heroes to dig out his lair and face him that way. Victor had ended the matter by ignoring them, by using his prodigious gift with spirit-attuned Energies to crush him in the Spirit Plane. Hadn’t Old Mother encouraged him to do so? Growling, Victor sat down on the rug in the empty area beside his bed. How much time and how many lives had he saved by handling Belikot in such a way? Was he irritated because his pride had been questioned or because he felt like Victoria was scheming somehow? Why did he feel that way?

Victor unstrapped Lifedrinker and held her on his lap. “She doesn’t want me in there. She doesn’t want me to see what Hector is doing up there on that mountain.”

We should hunt! Let your enemies quake, knowing you are on the prowl!

“Yeah,” Victor growled. “I think we should.” He reached into his Core and severed the connection to his Alter Self spell. The stone flags under the rug didn’t complain as his mass surged, and he expanded, occupying a much more significant portion of his bedroom. He took long, deep breaths and tried to calm

his mind. He wasn't sure he was doing something clever, but it felt right—how could he ask his troops to begin an assault at dawn when they had no idea what to expect from Hector? What if he had another massive horde of undead up there, just waiting for his army to become entrenched in a battle?

They needed intel, and he couldn't risk more Naghelli, not when he was perfectly capable of taking a look around. Hadn't he already proven he was powerful enough to match Hector's death casters? Hadn't he slaughtered Victoria's ghostly guardians and thrashed her into submission? "Yeah. I think it's time I got my eyes on Hector and gave him something to worry about." Victor reached into his Core and pulled out a strand of inspiration-attuned Energy, pulling it into the pattern for Spirit Walk.

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Victoria's eyes snapped open, and she smiled, unable to contain her glee. She'd glimpsed Victor's spirit, blooming into being on the Spirit Plane like a bonfire among candles. She'd immediately fled, long before he might have taken note of her presence. As she continued to grin, wringing her hands in excitement, her guard scowled at her from within the dark folds of his cowl, but she ignored him. He might have a solid resistance to her charms, but he was utterly blind where her spirit walking was concerned. It hardly took a trickle of Energy for her to send part of herself into that realm; her phylactery kept her partially anchored to it at all times.

Her little ruse with the tether she'd had Victor sever had done a good job of building trust, showing a false animosity between her and the dark prince. That and the "assassination attempt" had served to convince all of these fools to lower their guard, at least enough so she could work around their watchful attention. Meanwhile, her connection to her phylactery and, through it, to Hector had been her saving grace. Just a tiny trickle of Energy was all it took to contact him. To convey news of Victor's armies and warn him about the champions who sought to slay him and halt his imminent dominion over this rich world.

What a simple matter it had been to ensconce herself among these mortals! When Eric's man, Porter, came running, weak and near death, a bloody stump where his powerful arm had once been, Hector had made the plan, and Victor had fallen for it every step of the way. Hector's idea to place her in the Obsidian Keep, the next obvious target of Victor's assault, had only been the first step. Oh, Victor was strong and a cunning fighter, but not cunning enough. She chuckled, ignoring the glare of the guardian standing near the tent's exit. She'd learned so much about Victor, first from battling with him, then from listening to the tales spun by his followers. They worshiped him like a god among men, and in that worship, she'd found his downfall.

His rage, glory, and fear were apparent; she'd felt them for herself. The tales from his lieutenants and even the soldiers' gossip had filled in the rest of the story—justice to hunt down the wicked, inspiration to help his allies learn, and courage to bolster them in the face of even the most awful and terrifying of foes. It was a potent mix of attunements, but nothing that couldn't be prepared for. She'd whispered her news to her lord; she'd told him all she'd learned, and now Victor was on the Spirit Plane, and she knew what he was doing there.

"What a fool," she chuckled, grinning at the guard as he stepped forward, hand on his sword hilt.

"Silence!"

Victoria smirked and settled back in her chair. All it had taken was a hint, a mere mention of the Spirit Plane, and then feigned concern, “No, no! You mustn’t go there! Hector is too strong under the veil star!” She almost laughed again as she remembered how the titan-blood had bristled. That was another thing his worshipful troops loved to speak about—Victor’s pride. It wouldn’t matter if they never mentioned it; she’d tasted it herself. Still, she’d heard the story of Belikot and played Victor like a harp, strumming the chords of his downfall.

“Well,” she said, standing from her chair, “I think it’s time I introduce myself . . .”

“Silence!” the guard yelled, and the tent flap opened, admitting the other two, each with an exposed blade.

“No, I think not. My name is Catalina, consort and confidant of Prince Hector, the rightful monarch of these lands, and I’m afraid my patience has expired.” She unstoppered the flow of her death Energy and, as the guards burst into lightning motion, slashing her with their wickedly sharp blades, she exploded into cool mist, wrapping herself around them, pulling them close, draining the heat and life force from their bodies.

Book 6: Chapter 52: Despair

Catalina floated above the bodies of her guards, full to bursting on their life Energy. They’d certainly provided much-needed nourishment! What a toil it had been to remain pleasant and demure all these weeks while existing on the dregs of a months-old meal! She allowed a tendril of her misty form to seep under the tent flap, scanning the area. As she’d hoped, it was well dark, and mist had begun to encroach on the army’s encampment despite their glow lamps and fires. Victor would need to claim one of the citadels if he meant to keep Hector’s mist at bay, and there was little hope of that now.

She could feel it, the mounting pressure of Hector’s will. Soon, his crypt ghouls would pour down that mountain road, over the ridgelines, down the slopes, and over the walls, poor, pitiful Sarl had worked so hard to construct. She almost laughed aloud, thinking of his surprise as this little camp was overrun and their great hero was brought low by the Prince of Heart Rot. “Now, to find that blue-winged, simpleton of a girl.” Catalina allowed her misty form to flow and merge with the tainted tendrils of fog clinging to the cold soil outside her tent. She drifted through the camp, picking up snatches of conversation as she peered into clusters of soldiers and drifted toward the command tents.

“. . . first thing in the morning.”

“Then we’ll get old Troff to carry it, ‘cause my back’s had enough . . .”

“. . . this mist, it gives me . . .”

“. . . the Legate will show ‘em . . .”

“Makes me wonder about them lights . . .”

Catalina swept past the last cluster of soldiers stationed near the inner perimeter of the camp, and, as she flowed between two large, vaulted tents, she paused in the shadows, her form nearly invisible as she clung to the cold, grassy soil, observing the green jade house where Victor had once

imprisoned her. She was sure she'd heard passersby mention the commanders were meeting there tonight. Had they already left, or was this a good place to wait for the girl?

She didn't have to wonder long. Not fifteen minutes after she'd arrived, the two "Ghelli" women who kept Victor's counsel stepped out of the home. The tall, older one with golden wings led the way, while the younger one, Catalina's target, followed close behind, her slender hand gripping the taller one's elbow. They laughed and spoke loudly as they departed the home, moving toward a cluster of narrow but high-ceilinged red tents. Catalina silently followed.

"Wonder what's gotten into Victor. He seemed kind of morose," the one with the pale blond hair said.

"He's probably trying to think of a way to justify charging alone up that mountain," the blue-winged one said with a trill of high-pitched laughter.

"You don't give him enough credit! Look at all he's done for our efforts here!" Lam tsked, but she also chuckled, signaling at least tacit agreement with Edeya's teasing.

They paused before one of the tents, and Edeya asked, "Will you sleep?"

"Aye. We should get rest if we're to be of use when the bombardment starts. Who knows what insects might stir when we begin kicking that mound."

"Okay." Edeya leaned into the slightly taller, older woman, and, as though she'd expected it, Lam pulled her into an embrace. She kissed the top of Edeya's head and then pushed her back so their eyes could meet.

"I was proud of you tonight. Your smiles toward Kethelket seemed genuine."

"My ancestor begins to learn, I think. It was hard at first, but I think her nature is deferring more and more to me."

"As Victor said it would!" Lam laughed.

"Yes, yes; I need to give him more credit." Edeya smiled and added, "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow." With one more gentle squeeze of her shoulders, Lam released Edeya and turned to meander toward a campfire where several lieutenants stood drinking steamy liquid from mugs. Catalina shivered with anticipation as she watched Edeya lift the tent flap and step inside. She flowed over the ground toward the shadow-decked rear of the tent and pushed a tendril under the heavy canvas, peering with her magic sight inside. She saw the beautiful girl standing beside a comfortable, pillow-bedecked bed, removing her armor, piece by piece, and placing it upon a wooden stand.

She was half-finished, down to an undershirt and her silvery greaves, when she spun, peering into the shadows at the deep folds of her tent where it touched the ground, as though she could feel Catalina's presence. "Ugh, that mist!" She turned to a flickering lamp near her bed, an actual lamp with a flame, not a glowing Energy stone, and turned the knob. The fire dancing on the fuel-soaked wick jumped, and Catalina had to withdraw further to keep her misty form from being revealed. "Better," Edeya said, returning to her task, unbuckling the straps holding her armor to her thighs.

Many of the soldiers had procured fire-based lamps. Catalina had heard them speaking of their effectiveness against the clinging, death-tainted mist. It was true; a fire was far more a hindrance to the death fog than glowing Energy. Nevertheless, the little fiery lamp wouldn't save this wretch. Catalina surged under the canvas, bringing her entire form into the tent. Then, while Edeya was still bent, loosening her greaves, she expanded into the center of the tent, sending a thick tendril of nearly corporeal mist around Edeya's face and neck, squeezing tight, jerking her back, fully into her cold embrace. At the same time, she pinched the flame of her lamp, throwing the tent into darkness.

"Well, girl?" she hissed, a whisper of death itself, "Where have you put my necklace? The one with the beautiful lady?" Edeya tried to speak, tried to claw the mist away from her face and neck, but her fingers passed through Catalina harmlessly. She summoned a torrent of stormy Energy, but Catalina wrapped around her tighter, folding her cold, wet, misty form around the girl, pulling her Energy out of her before she could form it into an attack. She wasn't a weakling, this beautiful girl, but she was no match for Catalina. Dozens of levels separated them.

She peeled back a bit of her grip on the girl's mouth and neck, still holding the rest of her tightly, wrapped up like a warm, pulsing meal. Her glowing flesh and ruddy cheeks had turned ashen. Her brightly sparkling, blue dragonfly wings were dull and lusterless. Catalina hissed a graveyard breath into the girl's ear, "Fading so quickly? No, no, love, not before I have my answer."

Poor Edeya could barely utter a whispered, "Wha . . . what?"

"The amulet, girl. The one that gave you shivers. The beautiful woman?" She could see it in her memories, could see her cringe from it, could feel her fear, even now. An image came to her of a pearl-inlaid box. Catalina jerked her gaze toward the bed and the bureau beside it. There! Still holding the girl tightly, she sent a tendril of her misty form flowing toward the beautifully crafted chest of drawers and the delicate box atop it. As she threw the lid back, she felt it, felt her, pulsing and throbbing within, waiting for Catalina's touch to release her.

"Thank you for keeping her safe, girl." Catalina shifted to support her head, forcing her eyes upon the figurine as she lifted it from the box. "She's one of my patrons and hungers for release. I promised her a feast, and she's unhappy with the wait. Watch now! You can be the first to feel her kiss!" Catalina's whispery voice purred as she caressed the limp girl's neck with a tendril of her ethereal form. She pulled a thick coil of death-attuned Energy out of her Core and sent it

through her into the effigy, summoning her malevolent mistress for a night of slaughter. It was time for chaos to ensue amid these hapless natives.

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Victor climbed the volcano as it rose, magnificent and smoldering, into the twilight sky of the Spirit Plane. There were no keeps, bridges, or roads here, only the rough, creviced slope and the eerie green light high above, tinting everything with its malignant glow. The mountain was more prominent on this plane, more alive, and definitely angry. Victor could feel its wrath bubbling deep beneath his feet.

At first, as he strode toward the foothills and lesser slopes, he'd made good time, but now, as the incline grew steep and the smoldering peak seemed further and further away, he began to wonder if some dark magic was at work, much as it had been in the Black Keep when he'd tried to climb the walls. He'd learned his lesson there, so he didn't waste time—he focused his mind on his destination and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, willing himself to traverse the spirit lands as he always had, devouring the distance between himself and his goal.

It wasn't with any surprise when, in hardly any time at all, he found his steps on more level ground, and he saw the stony crags that bordered the volcano's ancient caldera. He turned and looked out on the twilight lands, unable to move or even breathe, when he beheld the glorious vista behind him. Everything shimmered with that strange, ethereal twilight nature that seemed to infuse the Spirit Plane. The stars and moons above were bright and impossibly close, and as Victor's eyes tracked the enormous, glittering starscape toward the distant horizon, it seemed like the planet's surface merged with space.

He could see plains and forests and seas shimmering in the reflection of the starlight. He could see ribbons of sparkling rivers and glistening clouds of moisture, rich with the essential Energy of the planet, laid out like thick, fluffy carpets here and there over the valleys and woodlands. He stared for a long time, and then he noticed the flickering green light on the nearby slopes, tinting the rocks—Fanwath's very bones—and his anger and pride began to stir anew. With a low growl, he turned back to the caldera and the sickly mist clouding the interior. He reached into his Core, summoned a rope of glory-attuned Energy, and brought his banner into being, bathing the area in its glittering, golden light.

He stepped toward the volcano's rocky crown, and by the time he'd taken three strides, he was the size of a titan, simmering with and radiating rage. The green tint was gone; now he saw things in a haze of red rage, lit brightly by the powerful shine of his banner. The spiked, rocky ridge had seemed daunting before, but now it was child's play to traverse. He hopped over boulders larger than vehicles or even homes. He vaulted ridges an ordinary man would need to climb with ropes, and in no time at all, he was over the top, sliding down a steep, rocky slope into the dense, roiling, death-attuned mist.

His banner drove it back for a hundred yards, and Victor, encouraged by his easy progress, leaped and slid down the slope. He held Lifedrinker's spirit form in one mighty fist, ready to visit his rage upon the Death Casters and their creations that must surely lurk within. Soon, the slope leveled off to rough stone, the leavings of ancient eruptions, no doubt, and Victor increased his pace, jogging

deeper and deeper into the caldera, frustrated by the mist that hugged the limits of his light, making it impossible to gain any perspective on distance or see any sign of what lurked further ahead.

That eerie green glow suffused the mist around and above him; his banner created a ball of light that pushed it away, but it hung so heavy in the air that it was like he was traversing the inside of a massive, sickly cloud. Where was the veil star? Shouldn't he be able to see a brighter spot? He made the mistake of turning in a circle, hoping to see some sign of the star, a hint of the center of the caldera, but as the mist swirled and writhed around his light, he lost his sense of direction, the ground was the same rough basalt, pumice, and other dark stones in every direction. He saw shards of obsidian and a few larger clumps of rocks, but he hadn't memorized them before turning, and now his senses were frustrated.

Growling, Victor bunched his legs and leaped straight upward, soaring into the air, his bright banner ripping through the fog above him. Even at the apex of his jump, though, he was surrounded by the mist, and when he came down, the ground was different, and he was further disoriented. Closing his eyes and cursing briefly, Victor wracked his brain for a clue. He gathered up a thick band of inspiration and summoned his coyotes; if he couldn't find his way through the mist, perhaps they could. They came into being, bursting out of pools of white-gold light, yipping, howling, and immediately pacing in circles around him.

“Find me that pinché green star, hermanos!”

His coyotes howled and yipped, crying their weird, nervous sounds as they launched into action, charging into the mist. Victor twisted his hand on Lifedrinker's haft, waiting to sense something from them, closing his eyes to maintain his connection better. He felt them, clouded by the death Energy, but still there, as they ran in ever-widening circles, trying to find what he sought. He might have stood there like that for five minutes, or it could have been five hours. The Spirit Plane was strange in that regard, and the mist and his disorientation made it worse.

Eventually, though, it came, a feeling of excitement and encouragement, and Victor felt his successful coyote like a beacon in the dark, a lighthouse guiding him on. He leaped into action, charging toward the coyote, sprinting headlong into the mist, blasting it away in a wide cone as his banner's light preceded him. In just minutes, he burst through the last wall of the fog, and there was his coyote, sitting atop a mound of frozen magma, staring at the veil star where it hung over the empty center of the volcano's basin. Victor could see dark openings in the ground, leading down into volcano—ancient lava tubes that still steamed and smoldered here on the Spirit Plane.

“Good boy,” Victor said, brushing his hand over the coyote's furry neck and head as he strode past it, staring at the veil star, scanning the ground around it for any sign of Hector or his apprentices. Not a soul stirred, and the light pulsed balefully as though daring him to approach. It was massive, hanging at least a hundred yards over the top of the caldera, smoldering like a green bonfire rolled into a ball and sent aloft to blaze its deathly glory into the night. It was bright, too bright to stare at comfortably, so Victor looked down as he approached, wondering how he was supposed to destroy the thing, for if Hector wasn't here to challenge him, Victor intended to do so.

As he strode toward the center, to the smooth spot under the veil star, Victor began to notice formations of shaped stones—pillars, carved, round stones, and half-moon shapes arranged in a circular pattern beneath the star. He hurried toward the nearest one, and as he drew close, the cruel, sickly light became burdensome, even for him. He found himself shielding his eyes as he slid to a halt near the first cluster of weird artifacts, his rage waning and his strength fading under that harsh, baleful gaze. Standing there, he began to note runes and sigils carved into the shaped rocks.

Determined to do some damage and perhaps banish the foul star before retreating to regather his strength, Victor grabbed up one of the rune-covered stones and threw it over his shoulder, putting all his titanic might into the act. The stone was heavy, heavier than it should have been, and cold blue Energy flashed and smoked through the air as he threw it. “Hah!” he roared, kicking one of the rune-covered pillars over, watching as it fell to the hard rocky ground and split in half with another flash of death-attuned Energy.

The caldera began to vibrate, shaking beneath Victor’s feet, and he held Lifedrinker high, roaring his fury and determination. Had he ruined the spell? Was it so easy to bring that numbing, ghostly light out of the sky? Something didn’t feel right. Something in the pit of his stomach began to ache, and he felt a deep, horrid surge of ennui, a kind of sickness of the spirit that made him want simply to sit down and rest. He looked up at the star, squinting to see what he’d done, but it looked the same. Then he felt his coyotes’ spirits wink out, one by one, their manifestations banished by something.

Victor felt slow and sluggish, not just physically but mentally. It took him far too long to realize his coyotes had faded due to his low Energy. His berserk was gone, his banner, too, and now the cold, sickly mist was closing in on him even more tightly. When he turned and started to try to walk away from the veil star, he saw what had caused the ground to rumble. In a loose circle around him, a dozen more pillars had risen from the ground, and, atop each, a smaller version of the veil star burned, though each modulated its pulsing light differently. They hurt to look at; their weird pulses seemed tuned to wring him of strength, to wrack his mind with torturous patterns.

Victor looked into his Core and saw his powerful, blazing orbs of attuned Energies, now shrunken, cold balls, just tiny flickers of smoky Energy tendrils keeping them alive. It seemed that as soon as Victor’s Core generated more Energy, it was pulled off and dispersed. He was devoid of power, brought low by this sickly star and its echoes that surrounded him. Despair began to claim him as weakness found its way into every muscle of his body. He wanted to sit, wanted to collapse into a heap and pull his knees to his chest as the waves of nausea and fatigue continued to wrack him. “What have I done?” he groaned, though even that was almost too much work, just a frail whimper slipping past his lips.

Book 6: Chapter 53: Hope and its Absence

Lam spied a group of soldiers standing around a camp stove, warm mugs steaming in their hands, and, feeling a little cozy in her heart from Edeya’s parting hug, thought she’d stop by to have a sip with the troops. Grinning, she walked that way and already had her favorite mug in hand when she stepped up. “Something good in the kettle?”

“Tribune!” the first to notice her sputtered, trying to salute while still holding a hot drink.

“Relax! At ease, everyone. It’s a chilly night, and the warm drink looked appealing. We’ve a big day tomorrow, so I thought I’d have a drink before sleep. Do you mind?”

“Of course, Tribune.” A young Ardeni woman bent to pick up the steaming kettle and poured it into Lam’s mug. She had interesting tattoos on the back of her hand and wrist, visible because she’d rolled up the sleeves of her uniform.

Lam smiled, blowing on the warm liquid to cool it, catching a whiff of hot cider and something spicy. “What’s the significance of that tattoo, the one with the broken wall?”

“Oh, that’s one our unit got after the Ridonne attacked our encampment!” A different soldier said, this one a burly Shadeni man. He pulled aside his unbuttoned uniform shirt to display the same tattoo on his chest.

“Ah, I’ve quite a few commemorating battles, myself.” Lam took a sip of the cider, enjoying the sweet and spicy mix. “Carry on! What were you all talking about?”

Another man chuckled, a wiry, bald-headed Ardeni with a long, jagged scar running the length of his forehead. “Well, it’s a little embarrassing, ma’am, but they were all teasing me about how one of the new recruits beat me to a pulp with a quarterstaff this afternoon.”

“New recruits?” Lam raised an eyebrow.

“Well, not so new anymore—they the Legate recruited back at the Sea Keep.”

“Oh, aye, I’ve heard good things about them, watched ‘em drilling with you all. Seems they’re fitting in nicely.” Her words opened the floodgates as the unit started sharing their experiences working with the humans from Dark Ember, and Lam listened with a smile, enjoying her stolen camaraderie. She was about half done with her cider when a shiver ran up her spine, so sharp and cold that she almost dropped her mug. She turned to look behind her, sure some shadowy nightmare had come for her, but saw nothing except an empty path and, a couple of dozen paces down it, Edeya’s dark tent.

“Ancestors! Did you feel that chill? I hope a storm’s not coming,” the young woman with the tattooed wrist said. Lam didn’t turn to respond; she was still staring at Edeya’s tent. Something about the shadows and mist clinging to the ground nearby bothered her. The fool girl should have a lamp burning—all the soldiers had been admonished to sleep with a flame nearby while this close to Hector’s territory. She tilted her mug, draining the rest of her cider onto the ground, and then sent it into her storage ring.

“Thanks, soldiers,” she said, still facing away. They all hurried to wish her a good night and thank her for her company, but the words fell on deaf ears; Lam was focusing on Edeya’s tent, a dark feeling gripping her heart. Was she seeing

things? Was she jumping at shadows? Perhaps, but Edeya wouldn't mind her poking her head in to check on her. As she approached the tent, the chill in the air seemed to intensify, and Lam felt an irrational panic, a fear that something terrible was happening. She looked to the sky and glanced at the mountainside cloaked in darkness, but nothing save the chill in the air supported her mounting dread.

Nevertheless, almost unbidden, her heavy hammer appeared in her hands, and she began to pull Energy out of her Core into her pathways. Her wings shed more motes, sparkling in the dark, banishing the fog that tried to cling to her ankles as she drew near the tent. Her breath plumed in the air, and realizing that, she knew her perception of the chill wasn't in her head. Lam heard something, then, a dark, sibilant whisper that lifted the fine hairs on the back of her neck. With doubt driven from her mind, she leaped the last few feet to the tent and yanked the flap to the side. "Damned roots!" she cried when she took in the scene.

Edeya hung in the air, gripped by thick ropes of sickly mist. Her eyes were white, the color drained from her irises, her face ashen, her mouth agape as a horrible rattling breath choked out through the constricting tendrils. Lam was so shocked by the sight of her distress that she almost missed the horror that hunched in the darkness at the back of the tent. A slender figure with ropes of shadowy hair falling around a pale face with blood-red eyes. As her eyes adjusted and her shimmering wings pushed back some of the darkness, Lam took in the creature and found that she was a woman. She stood in the darkness, pale breasts wreathed in that dark hair, fingers tipped in long, black claws like knives, fangs dripping blood on her chin as she grinned wickedly and ran her tongue over her lower lip.

Lam's fear fled from her as fury boiled in her heart. She screamed in outraged anger and sent a torrent of Energy into her hammer. Lifting it high, she brought it down, smashing the shadows with the weapon's projection—a golden maul the size of a draft roladii that crashed into the ground, ripping the mist to shreds. The hammer's impact rolled through the tent with a shockwave that upended furniture and sent rugs, splintered wood, and Edeya's many little treasures flying. The explosive Energy of the spell disrupted whatever held Edeya aloft, and she fell, flopping to the ground, utterly still.

The darkness-clad woman stood tall and cackled as Lam's shockwave rolled harmlessly over her feet, past her long naked legs, and tore through the back of the tent. Lam was already furious, but the laughter drove her to further madness. Her wings hummed as they sent her flying forward, hammer high, a deathblow aimed at the woman's smiling face. She hurtled through the air, closing the distance to the center of the tent in a fraction of a second, but there her momentum halted; those thick mists that had held Edeya wrapped around her, stopping her like a butterfly in a net.

"Fool," a hissing whisper said into her ear, and then Lam realized her error; the tall naked woman wasn't alone. The prisoner, Victoria, was in the mist—no, she was the mist.

#

Victor slumped to the ground, dropping his axe, but not before he desperately tried to sever his connection to the Spirit Plane. Just as he'd held Victoria there, however, something held him. Was it the veil star? The smaller, pulsing echoes of it? Was it Hector flexing his will upon a weakened opponent? Victor couldn't tell, and that knowledge deepened his despair. A sensation unlike anything he'd felt in a very long time began to seep through him, chilling him to the bone—hopelessness. Weakness and a loss of drive pervaded his being.

It happened so suddenly and with such finality that Victor was stunned by his new frailty. How long had it been since he'd felt weak? How long since he'd felt the world was closing in on him, that he was doomed and alone? The suddenness of it was the worst thing; he hadn't had a chance to mount a defense, to rally his will, to fight back with his prodigious rage and lust for glory. Where was that lust now? Where was the anger? He was bereft, stripped bare, a hollow husk of himself. What had he thought he'd do, charging into the seat of a Death Caster's power? What had he expected would happen when he confronted that baleful star of death-attuned Energy? Was he a god? Was he even a true hero? "No," he spat.

Victor buried his face in his hands. What could he do? Bathed in the sickly, terrible light of the veil star, he wracked his mind, feeble as it felt, for an answer. He had trouble thinking about who he was, let alone what he could do in this predicament. He was just a stupid kid. How could he think he could face a powerful necromantic lord from a distant world? Was he a match for a being who'd gathered his power over centuries? He was in a trap, a trap he'd walked into like the idiot he was. Still, angry as he knew he should be, he had trouble stirring up the emotion. Naturally—the trap was draining his anger. Was that how it worked? Victor struggled to bring his mind back to the point he'd almost made.

"How . . . what worked?" Even his voice was weak, soft, and hoarse, a bare whisper that struggled to emerge from his lips.

Despite the frailty of his voice, an answering whisper came to him on the wind, "Child. Soak in the light of my star. Reflect on your worthlessness. As I slay those you love, remember that you are the cause. In a decade or century, perhaps I'll pull you forth from your prison and make you a thrall, and we can reflect together on your failings."

Something cold and wet tickled Victor's cheek as he absorbed the words. It took his sluggish mind several seconds to realize he was crying. How strange, he thought, that he could feel such horrible despair and loss but not any anger or fear. Something tickled his mind again, and he knew he'd almost had a brilliant thought. Another wave of despair ran through him, though, pushing the idea away. What had the voice said to bring the moisture to his eyes? "Oh," Victor moaned as he remembered the words; Hector was going to kill everyone he loved. "Valla," he sighed, unable to muster the strength to vibrate his vocal cords.

#

"Victor!" Valla cried, leaping out of the bed. When she'd come to the room and found Victor in his meditation pose, unresponsive to her words, she'd figured he was conducting a Spirit Walk. He'd done it many times in her presence, so she knew the look of it. His face was always the same, serene and untroubled, and he never responded to words or even jostling shakes. When he'd moved against the Black keep, she'd learned all too well that he wouldn't wake from any

stimulus she could provide. Still, it didn't worry her; his many spirit trips had dulled her to any risk involved. So, with a kiss on his forehead, she'd gotten ready for bed and climbed under the covers. That was when she'd felt the change.

The air had grown cold, and Valla had felt something almost like a vacuum or void tugging at her Core, pulling at her Energy. As she leaped out of her covers, she saw that Victor had turned ashen and wan, the color gone from his vibrant flesh. Moreover, he was the center of the chill, and the ever-present, throbbing furnace of his Core had faded. His powerful spirit-attuned Energies had fled, and their sudden absence was still pulling at her own. "Victor!" she cried again, running to him, grasping the sides of his head, jostling him, trying to get him to open his eyes.

He didn't respond, of course, and Valla felt herself being pulled as though she could be drawn through whatever void had taken his spirit. Crying with despair and fear, she let go of him and took a step back. "Victor! Wake up!" Desperately, she looked around the room. Where were his companions, his steadfast coyotes? Where was his great bear? Where was the heat of his dominating spirit? Something terrible was happening, and she had no answers. Would a healing drought work? With flickering hope, she dug one out of her ring and rushed forward again, tipping it into his mouth. It dribbled from the corners of his lips, and she clapped her hand over them, trying to tilt his head so the precious fluid would roll down his throat.

As he reflexively swallowed, she backed up, still feeling that horrible pulling sensation. She watched and watched for two long, painful minutes, and when he didn't move or react, she snatched up Midnight and sprinted past him, running through the house toward the front door. She didn't know who could help her, but she had Kethelket in her mind; he was old and had seen many horrible things. Perhaps he'd know what to do. When she burst through the door into the night air, she wasn't prepared for what she found.

Chaos reigned around her. Pale, naked creatures ran amok, hunched figures bereft of hair with long faces bearing glowing red and yellow eyes. They opened their yawning mouths filled with fangs as they leaped upon soldiers who desperately battled for their lives and the ground the ninth cohort had claimed. Shrieks, screams, and bellows filled the air. Fires burned as spells thrown by the defenders ignited enemies and tents alike. Smoke added to the sickly fog to make Valla's eyes water as she stared, mouth agape. Her hopes of finding help for Victor were dashed as she realized the camp was being overrun.

Scowling grimly, she drew Midnight from her sheath and felt a spark of hope ignite in her chest as her blade sang her song into the darkness. Wearing nothing but her nightgown, Valla lifted her glorious sword, spread her wings, and launched herself into the air. Victor was a hero, and he'd have to look after himself for now. The Glorious Ninth was under attack, and they needed her.

Once she was aloft, the cold wind tickling her feathers, she saw the scene more clearly. Dark shadows rushed down the hillsides, pouring out of the citadel, swarming the wall with their mad leaps and frenzied battle lust. They weren't ghouls like she'd seen before, but something worse. She focused on a clump of the creatures overwhelming the defenders at the center of the wall and called down a lightning strike, pouring a good fraction of her air-attuned Energy into it. With a crack of

thunder, blue Energy exploded in the pack, sending a dozen creatures flying and giving the defenders a chance to press the attack.

Valla scanned the air and saw the orange and ochre glow of Naghelli wings all over, doing their best to aid from the air, fighting the horde of undead savages. Were they ghouls? Were they lesser vampires? Whatever they were, the Ninth was struggling, failing to hold the line at the wall, and packs of the creatures were rampaging through the camp. Valla summoned her helmet from her ring, pressed it onto her head, and, trailing the silky layers of her gown, she lifted Midnight and dove for the largest group.

#

Gradually, Victor's mind turned back to the despair he felt, to his depression at the thought of losing Valla, Edeya, Chandri, Lam, Kethelket, Sarl, and all the soldiers he'd come to appreciate. With the study of that despair, he wondered, again, why he wasn't afraid. Hadn't he always feared being alone? Why wasn't he angry? Shouldn't he be furious at himself, at Hector? Finally, his sluggish mind held onto the thought long enough for him to make the connection. Naturally, he couldn't feel those things when this trap was dragging his Energy from his spirit Core—his spirit Core that fed on those emotions.

After he realized that, he shook his head. Didn't he already know that? What was the point? Why did it matter? Finally, after going over the thought ten or more times, he realized what he'd been trying to bring into his conscious thought—he could still feel despair and love, but not his attuned emotions. His glory was gone, his inspiration, his fear, his anger—all gone. Briefly, despite the dullness of his mind, he managed to contemplate forming a different Energy—justice or courage—but how could he? He needed Energy to weave, and he had none. As soon as some formed in his Core, it was gone.

Again, he fell into a wallowing well of self-loathing. He thought about his stupid mistakes, his lifetime of failing in one way or another, and he capped it all off with a reaffirming whisper, "Without my Energy, I'm nothing." When he heard the words aloud, however, something stirred in his heart, something related to glory but different, something that had been held down by his loss of that bright, wonderful Energy but not wholly banished—his pride. "I'm not nothing," he whispered, and then, mustering everything he had in him, he managed to make his vocal cords rumble in a faint growl. "I'm Quinametzin."

At the words, the thing in his heart grew hotter, and then he realized it wasn't in his heart but in his chest. His despair and the weakness he'd felt as his mighty Core was depleted had been so overwhelming that he'd forgotten his breath Core. Even so, shouldn't he have felt it? Shouldn't he have realized he still had Energy within him? As the heat grew, his mind became less sluggish, and Victor realized something: The trap had depleted his breath Core, too, but it couldn't stop it from replenishing. "But how," he breathed, and then the ball of magma in his chest flared again.

Victor closed his eyes and focused his inner eye upon his magma breath Core, and though it was dim, smoldering weakly, it burned. He exhaled and took his first, truly deep breath since he'd fallen into despair. Sure enough, hot tendrils of roiling red-orange Energy, carried by his breath, flowed into his magma Core, charging it further, brightening the furnace in his chest like a bellows in a forge. Victor took another deep breath and followed the trails of those ribbons of fiery Energy, and now that he'd identified them, he could see their long, wispy tails leading away into the magma tubes that opened beyond the ring of his veil star prison.

As the heat spread through him and the chill of his Energy-deprived titanic form faded, he found his thoughts coming more quickly and sharply. The emotions tied to his spirit Core might have faded and might be eluding him, but his breath Core held a different kind of smoldering rage, and he could feel it echoed in the mountain beneath him. The veil star prison was keeping him in, was blocking his regeneration of Energies, but it couldn't block the furious wrath of the mountain beneath it. It was like trying to put a wine cork on a fire hydrant.

Now that he could think again, Victor put his mind to work—what could he do with his breath Core? Could he pull its Energy into his pathways and into his Spirit Core, changing it into rage-attuned Energy? What if he could? What would being enraged do for him? If he could recover enough, perhaps he could force his way out of his trap. Maybe he could battle this prison with his will. He shook his head, doubtful. He'd had a full Core when he came in and lost it so quickly that he'd never had a chance to fight. If he converted his magma-attuned Energy to rage or any other attunement, he'd just lose it again.

Could he force the magma-attuned Energy into his pathways and then use it to cast a spell? Could he berserk with it? Was that a thing? Could elemental Energy be used to alter one's state? He'd never seen any "fire berserkers" or anything like that. He glanced at his status sheet, and doubt grew heavy in his heart. Even if he could manage the spell, it would be a shadow of his normal Iron Berserk—his magma Energy had a maximum value of five hundred, whereas his spirit Core topped twenty-one thousand.

Growling and inhaling, savoring the hot magma-attuned Energy as it entered his lungs, Victor grabbed hold of Lifedrinker and stood up. If he could do that much, could he fight back? Could he break this trap? Victor stepped toward the veil star and started gathering his breath, preparing to exhale, sending his magma Energy out with his breath. He stopped, though, noticing something different. The fog around him had thinned. When he looked past the smaller veil stars, shielding his eyes from their painful, pulsing patterns, he saw thick, hot vapors rising around the nearby magma tubes, and the deathly mist was retreating from the heat.

"Oh?" Victor looked at his feet, imagining the roiling lake of magma in the center of the mountain. He closed his eyes, and with all his might, he sucked in an enormous breath, willing his lungs to keep filling, willing the magma in the depths to come to him, to fill his Core and expand it. With an explosion of heat and warmth, he felt his Core expand and stretch, and then, like he'd broken bands strapping it tight, it surged to new heights, and more Energy came into him.

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Breath Core Cultivation Drill – Basic.*****

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Base 6.*****

Victor looked at his status sheet, saw his breath Core Energy had risen to six hundred, and lifted his head to the baleful, pulsing star and roared. As his voice faded, sucked into the misty air high above his head, he felt an echoing rumble from beneath his feet, and Victor began to breathe, returning to his new cultivation drill with a savage purpose. "Time to wake up, big brother."

Lam felt the icy, numbing grip of Victoria's misty tendril begin to pull the Energy from her Core, and she raged against it. She fought the pull with everything in her, desperately struggling to keep the Death Caster from overwhelming her with her insidious will. She pulled and thrashed, willing her Energy to stay in her pathways, knowing the mist would pull it from her if she cast a spell. In her struggles, she caught a glimpse of Edeya lying insensate, devoid of color, by her feet. Even her wings had lost their azure luster, and there were no beautiful motes of blue Energy anywhere in their transparent, fragile membranes.

The tent was in shambles, half collapsed, many of the furnishings blown out, through or under the fabric by her explosive attack. She might have gotten herself caught, but at least she'd knocked Edeya from that vile bitch's misty clutches. The other one, the tall, demonic woman, regarded her thrashing, watching as Victoria worked to subdue her. "You waste time, Catalina," she hissed in a voice that sounded like a chorus of shrieking children. "Shall I take my due?" She reached a long arm, tipped in needle-sharp black claws, toward Lam. Her voice brought tears to Lam's eyes, and she thrashed and struggled more, fighting with everything she had to keep her Energy in her Core, resisting the insidious pull of the mist.

"She's mine!" Victoria hissed. Lam fought hard, barely able to wonder if she'd heard the demon right—was her name really Catalina? Where had she heard it before? "Long have I lusted for her golden Energy. Long has she tormented me with her vibrance. Come, sweet, relax, and succumb to my embrace. I'll always keep a part of you alive within me."

"Foolish child," the beautiful, horrible woman said. "Do you not hear the commotion? Finish your meal quickly, then. I will begin my own feast." She stood tall, lifting her skeletally thin arm high, pushing the lopsided canvas of the tent away from her as she turned away and began to work free of the failing structure. Lam grunted, sweat streaming down her brow, dripping from her chin, as she was held motionless. Her sweat was proof of her efforts, for it was frigidly cold in the tent surrounded by the Death Caster's mist. The tall, demonic woman only took two steps before, in a gust of cleansing air, the entire tent was ripped away from the ground, lifted into the air by the fluttering ochre wings of several Naghelli.

Like a snake striking from its hole, the naked woman leaped into the air, wrapping her long arms around one of the Naghelli, bearing her to the ground, and biting into her neck. The Naghelli didn't even have time to cry out as the demon drank her life force and Energy. A crowd of soldiers and other Naghelli fell on her, but Lam lost sight of the mad melee that ensued as Catalina redoubled her efforts, squeezing with her mist and jerking her left and right. "Succumb, fairy woman! Succumb!"

"And why should she, witch?" Suddenly, Kethelket was there, dancing through the freezing tendrils that made up Catalina's misty body, slashing his two named swords left and right, shredding the misty arms, eliciting screams of pain and outrage from the Death Caster. Lam felt the grip on her neck loosen and fall away, felt herself falling to the ground, and she caught herself, dropping into a

squat. She snatched up her fallen hammer, spared Edeya's insensate form a single worrying glance, and then leaped into action, bright, golden Energy exploding through her pathways.

Kethelket had driven Catalina back, forcing her to pull her misty tendrils in, solidifying herself further so she might have a chance to parry those wicked twin blades. She moved with unbelievable speed, surging left and right, forward and back, up and down. Kethelket was more than a match with his shadowy Energy. He drove her back, further and further away. Lam followed their duel, and, seeing a pattern, she brought down a hammer strike directly where Catalina next retreated. The Energy poured out of her Core as she gave it everything she had, and a massive, dense hammer-shaped construct fell from the heavens, spinning as a thrown warhammer might, and smashing into Catalina, driving her to the turf in a ground-shaking impact.

Kethelket, in a blur of shadows, darted into the spray of dirt, fog, and shattered camp equipment, his blades flashing in brilliant arcs, ripping the now-physical form of the Death Caster to shreds. Lam heard her wails, ear-piercing, horrible sounds that threatened to render anyone nearby deaf. She clapped her hands to her ears, her hammer falling to the ground, and stumbled over to Edeya. Chaos had erupted around her—soldiers screamed, magical attacks exploded everywhere, wild, rainbow lights flashed in the night sky, and the thunder of thousands of feet pounding the ground rumbled under her knees as she fell beside her friend's pitiful figure.

"Edeya!" she cried, "Edeya!" She gripped her face, shivering at the chill of the flesh. Was she too late? Was she dead? Tears burst from her eyes, running down her cheeks as a sob of impotent rage and despair constricted her throat. Why hadn't she checked on her just a little sooner? Desperately, she summoned a healing draught from her ring and tipped it into Edeya's colorless lips. The liquid pooled against her teeth, running from the corners of her mouth. Lam pulled at her chin, letting the potion into her mouth, but nothing seemed to happen.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over her, and she looked up to see the dark Naghelli Prince. "The witch didn't die. With my third eye, I saw her tether pulsing with her death Energy. She must have a phylactery up on yonder mount."

Lam was too stupefied by her grief, too stunned with guilt to register his words. She hugged Edeya's cold body to her chest, lifting her limp, too-light form from the soil and hugging her tightly. Had she really loved the girl so much? The answer was in the stuttering skips of her heart and her desire to stop breathing. If Edeya had fled this world, then what was the point of anything? What was the point of all the wealth she'd built, all the battles she'd won? What was the point of founding a new country away from the Ridonne nobility when she had no one to love, no one with whom to share it?

Through the blur of her tears, she saw the shadow, Kethelket, loom closer, and he said, with an urgent note in his voice. "Her wings!" Lam sniffed and blinked her eyes, clearing them enough to look down at Edeya's limp, colorless wings, and, as fresh waves of despair threatened to constrict her throat further, she saw, briefly, a tiny flicker of sapphire light. It was so dim and fleeting that she doubted herself, wondering if it had been a trick of the light. As she stared, though, another flickered in a different spot, gone before she could focus on it. Kethelket straightened, already

turning away. “She yet lives, though barely. Get her to a safe place—I must face the demon that wreaks havoc among the troops. Make haste! Enemy soldiers assault the walls. See if Victor has yet emerged from his home!”

#

Lesh sat in his hiding spot among the hills, watching the camp below. Many nights had he followed Victor’s army through the fair, soft lands they sought to conquer. Many nights had he contemplated showing himself, asking about their giant hero, about his uncanny ability to breathe fire and his unstoppable physical might. He’d seen him conquer enemy after enemy, seen him descend into depths swarming with powerful undead, only to come up days later, unscathed. Lesh had abandoned his quest from the System and, along with it, any thoughts of returning home. How could he face the War Council in Garspire? How could he face his father? How could he face Yassa?

That last hurt the most. While the others pained his pride, the loss of Yassa crushed his heart. Nevertheless, his decision had been made. On that fateful night when he’d seen the titan-blood breathe fire that would be the envy of an elder drake, he’d known—Victor was not a man he would kill but a man he would follow. Was it fear? Was it inspiration? Lesh wasn’t sure, and to claim one or the other would be dishonest. Regardless, he refused to entertain the idea of challenging that man who’d done nothing to impugn his honor, threaten his home, or lay claim to his freedom—he wouldn’t let the System twist his hunger for power into something dishonorable. So, he’d bided his time, watching, waiting, seeking the right opportunity to approach.

He wanted to speak, to sound out his thoughts as he often did while alone. He was quiet, though, knowing the titan’s dark-winged watchers were out there, seeking any danger to their camp. It seemed they were preparing to begin their assault on the undead stronghold. Shouldn’t he approach before then? Shouldn’t he give his aid here before it was too late, before it was over, and he came scrounging around like a carrion hound to the slaughter? Not in the dark, however. No, he’d approach with the dawn’s light, offering his services to break the defenses of those high keeps.

Would the titan even want him? He’d grown more and more powerful, and so had his mate. Elder wyrms! Lesh shook his head, remembering her shimmering wings and impressive figure as he’d watched the two ride into camp. She was no Yassa, but she was something special. Well, Lesh might not be ready or willing to challenge Victor, but he was mighty in his own right. He’d make a good case for himself, and when the time came to assault those walls, he and Belagog would make a name for themselves among these people.

Lesh’s inner dialogue grew silent as he saw something strange on the hillside. His yellow-tinted sight made short work of the darkness, piercing even the dense layers of life-draining mist clinging to the hills. He looked for the dark-winged watchers sent by Victor’s general into the slopes. Their wings had patterns of Energy that stood out like beacons, burning silver-white in his enhanced vision. It made them easy for him to avoid, and Lesh made it a habit to mark their locations each night, drawing a mental map of his surroundings. Something new had happened just now, though. Those watchers in the hills had disappeared; the glow of their wings winking out had drawn his attention.

He stood, still hooded in his obscuring cloak, and peered, sending a touch of Energy into his pathways, enhancing his vision further, into the distant hills, staring at the spot where he’d last seen

the scouts. He almost missed it, taking the movement as mist shifting on the wind, but then he looked closer and saw that, clinging to the shadows and fog, a line of pale, feral undead creatures were creeping down from the heights. He followed their line upward, catching glimpses of their column in gaps between hills, slipping through groves of gnarled trees and dropping down sheer rock faces. When his eyes finally came to rest on their source, a bend in the high cliffside above which roared the mighty falls, Lesh knew the truth—there was a tunnel behind those waters, and it was spilling forth thousands of the creatures.

Lesh threw back his hood and picked up Belagog. “It’s time we made an appearance, brother.”

#

Victor could feel the fury of the volcano beneath him. The ground rumbled, the air grew warm, and Hector’s deathly mist had been almost wholly cooked out of the caldera. All he’d been doing was pulling on that hot magma-attuned Energy, drawing it into his breath Core, compressing and packing it in until it grew too full to contain, and boom, his breath Core expanded, gaining a new rank, making room for more and more Energy. He could tell he was on the brink of another gain, another expansion of his breath Core as his lungs filled to bursting with air, and he sucked in those hot, potent vapors, driving them into the swirling ball of magma in his chest with every ounce of his will.

Like a damn breaking, his Core expanded, and he felt a flare of heat course through his body—he was veritably glowing with the Energy by now.

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Breath Core Cultivation Drill – Improved.*****

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Base 9.*****

He couldn’t believe how quickly he was making gains. It felt like he’d only been at it for minutes, but he knew it had to be longer than that. As he started another cycle, impressed by how much more Energy he could pull using the improved cultivation drill, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Was there a faster way out of the caldera? Could he destroy this trap with the flames in his Core? He’d seen how quickly the trap had drained him; it might not be able to contain the Energy coming from the volcano, but wouldn’t it be able to suck away his measly nine hundred points of breath Energy?

And then what? If he drained himself again and left his body with no Energy, how long would he wallow before he began to recover? How much time would he lose trying to fight for a simple thought or to move his Energy-starved body? No, his breath Core was fueling him, a titanic form grown powerful and accustomed to twenty times that much Energy. He was thinking; he was doing something; he couldn’t risk that by blowing off his painstakingly gained progress.

He funneled another deep breath of hot Energy into his Core and heard and felt the burning magma furnace beneath him ever more intimately. It was waking. Its anger was stoking. Victor didn’t know what would happen if he could get the magma to start flowing or even go so far as to make the volcano erupt. If it happened here, on the Spirit Plane, would it be echoed on the Material Plane?

Would he destroy Hector's army? Would he kill the Glorious Ninth? Victor shook the worry from his mind—he had to do something, or he'd be trapped here forever, and right now, waking the magma beneath him felt right.

“Come on! One more!” he growled, pulling in another massive lungful of hot, smoky air. He didn't know what would happen when he pushed his breath Core out of the “base” levels, but he hoped it would be more than a simple hundred-point boost. He didn't have an attribute that improved his breath Energy like will and intelligence did for his spirit Core, so he did the only thing he knew how—he gathered the rich, powerful magma-attuned Energy from the volcano and he packed it in, folding, layering, compressing it with his will, building that breath Core up. He watched as the red-orange fury of it grew brighter, orange-yellow, yellow, yellow-white—pulsing, throbbing, straining. “Just a little more!” he growled, inhaling, compressing, expanding his lungs until they hurt.

He was making a draft, a vacuum almost, prodding the hot Energy to flow quicker and quicker up from the depths. The veil stars were still there, throbbing their green light at him, but he felt them less and less. The volcano's Energy was overwhelming them. Could that bastard, Hector, feel what he was doing? Was he worried? “Or is that pendejo too busy killing my friends?”

The thought came to him on a wave of red fury, and Victor realized his vision was tinted slightly red as he pulled another massive breath of magma-attuned, hot air into his lungs. As he packed the Energy into his breath Core, he turned his gaze to his spirit Core, hoping to see his rage recovering, but it was still dim, still flickering with wisps of Energy that faded as soon as they formed. Where was this rage coming from? The ground rumbled beneath him, and his chest answered with a rumbled growl of his own. “You're pissed off, eh, hermano? Me too!”

As he finished compressing the last of his current magma Energy haul, Victor leaped to his feet and shouted into the smoky, green-tinted darkness, “Come on, brother! Wake up and fuck this shit up!” Victor could feel it in his bones, in his blood, in his flesh—the heat of his magma Core was boiling over, ready to burst, and it had deep echoes of rage in it. Could he use it like rage? Could he turn his breath Core inward? As he contemplated, he automatically started another cycle of his breath Core cultivation drill. He pumped his lungs like a bellows, expanding, contracting, expanding, siphoning the magma-attuned Energy from the hot air he brought in and exhaling vast plumes of smoke.

The heat in his chest intensified. His Core, a ball of white-hot, compressed magma, was ready to blow, the pressure so intense that it dwarfed the last few expansions he'd managed. He was certain something momentous was going to happen when he broke through. It almost felt like it would destroy him. If his other Core was full, rich with Energy, he might not feel the expansion of his magma Core so acutely, but as it was, it felt like he was building a bomb in his chest.

With each cycle of his drill, the Energy in the air grew thicker. The heat grew more sweltering. The smoke obscured more and more of the sickly green light. He felt the ground rumbling, felt the

torrents of magma-attuned Energy swirling up out of the lava tubes. “Come on!” he screamed and began another cycle. The Energy flew into him, almost more fire than air as he sucked it in. It was so thick and dense with power that it took him longer to pack it into his Core than it did to process the breath.

As he compressed the air in his lungs, bearing down with all his might, forcing the Energy into his Core, he stood there, red-faced, body clenched in a mad, tight-fisted pose. When he finally broke through, advancing his Core to the next tier, he exhaled with a ground-shaking roar, and a plume of fire exploded out of his mouth.

#

Valla found her rhythm fighting among the hairless, naked, savage ghouls. She danced among them cloaked in lightning-laced wind, her wings adding a new dimension to her fighting that made her death-incarnate to the feral creatures. She whirled, dashed, and leaped, her wings cracking the air to grant her more speed, manipulating the elemental magic of her Core, lashing out with lightning and iron-charged Energy, knocking aside slashing claws and ripping through pale flesh.

Midnight was like a bolt of lightning held tight in her fist, exploding through the air, shattering pale bodies, cracking against skulls, claws, and bones with claps of thunder that stunned her opponents. When she felt they were crowding too thickly, she’d flex her mighty wings and jump, soaring above their heads, only to come down riding the wind like an angelic avalanche of lightning and metal. Her silky white gown was torn, soaked in blood, but not her own. It flowed on the wind, presenting itself as a target for claws, but as the foolish undead sought to swipe at it, Valla cut them apart with her deadly blade.

She was fighting outside the northern gate, serving as a magnet for the hordes of monsters making their way out of the hills. There were thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands, but she couldn’t be bothered to count, couldn’t be bothered to care. She was busy dancing and killing, slaughtering them by the hundreds. Her distraction had given the defenders on the ramparts time to retake their ground, to hurl the vicious undead out of the camp. Now, they were raining death upon the incoming horde. Lightning, fireballs, arrows, stones—any kind of missile you could imagine—fell from the air, slaughtering the monsters wholesale.

In the back of her mind, Valla wondered where Victor was, where Kethelket was. Why was she the lone hero, holding back the horde, giving the army time to mount their defense? She shook her head at the thought, angry with herself—she wasn’t alone. The heroes of the Ninth were all over the wall, performing feats that would humble the decorated champions of the Ridonne Empire. She was doing fine; the mountains of dead around here were a testament to that. They could win, they could . . .

A horrible shriek shook the night, echoing through the darkness, stunning everyone, even the undead, into stillness for a heartbeat. Valla tracked the sound, looking into the sky, and that glimmer of hope, that flicker of confidence, began to fall apart in her heart. A skeletal nightmare soared through the darkness, descending toward the encampment. It looked like a wyrm, a hundred times the size of Guapo, with skeletal wings pumping the air, catching the wind with membranes of sickly green magic. Worse, atop its head, perched between two massive horns, rode a black-robed demon of a man wielding an enormous spear and wearing a crown of red lightning.

Book 6: Chapter 55: Victories and Defeats

Kethelket followed the trail of bodies further into the camp. He could hear the rallying cries at the walls, the horns bleating their frantic alarms. He knew the camp was under attack from the outside as well as within, but he couldn't turn from his quarry. He'd shouted for his people to take flight, to aid from the safety of the black, fog-filled sky. Already, he'd lost too many—poor Divinia, snatched and drained by the creature he now pursued, Velnar, Brosk, and Evedelia, the guardians slain by Victoria, and who knew how many others Kethelket had yet to find. As he pushed his way through the wreckage and chaos, he saw evidence of plenty of slaughter, though none of the victims bore the dark wings of his kind.

The creature, demon, evil woman—he didn't know what to call it—seemed to prefer disembowelment as a means of quick murder. Kethelket ran down a bloody path strewn with entrails and pale bodies. He could see clusters of defenders here and there, torn, broken, ripped apart like caricatures at a child's party. Whatever the thing was, it was strong. His pursuit brought him toward the north wall, and he could guess the thing was heading for the gate. Did it hope to open them? He supposed it made sense. The camp had sturdy fortifications. They were well dug in. A flash of shadow in the corner of his eye sent a jolt of adrenaline through him, and Kethelket exploded into shadow, streaking away from flashing claws as they ripped the air where he'd been.

“A quick plaything?” the creature's voice grated on his ears like nails over bone. A dozen voices vied for control of those vocal cords, and the chorus was mind-wracking. Kethelket didn't wait for an invitation. He streaked through the air, his vision gray and white from the expansion of shadow-attuned Energy through his pathways. Gevel and Uthac were angry, hungry for the blood of this slayer of Kethelket's kin. They lashed out, quicker than thought, and carved twin gashes along the demon's naked ribs. An answering rake of claws caught Kethelket's shoulder, and he burned some more Energy, streaking through the shadowscape to lessen their bite.

He moved, in a semi-incorporeal blur, around the tall, gangly creature, aiming to assault her from behind. Up close, he was disturbed by the incongruous nature of the monster—her face was beautiful and bore a pleasant smile, while her body was all sharp angles and claws, too-long limbs, corpse-like flesh, and hair that hung in long, damp strands, heavy with the blood of those she'd already slain. Kethelket drove Gevel into the woman's lower back and hacked Uthac into her knee. Gevel bit deeply, and a spurt of dark blood followed as Kethelket pulled him out, but Uthac rebounded from bone, the impact painfully jarring.

Kethelket expected a quick response; he'd see how the creature could move. He'd already shifted to shadow and was streaking away when the nightmare whirled and clawed. Her movement was fast enough to catch the tail end of his passage, and Kethelket cried out as his concentration was shattered by pain. Somehow, she'd torn those long, black claws through his shadow form and broken his spell. He tumbled into the side of a tent, collapsing the canvas and rolling through it. Though fiery aches told him he'd been badly cut from his lower back down to his left knee, he leaped into motion again, ripping Gevel in a slashing upward parry, knocking aside the creature's follow-up attack.

With everything he had, he launched a masterful combination of hacks, stabs, feints, and parries, driving forward into the frenzied flurry of claws and insane, multi-voiced laughter. They battled that

way for mere seconds, but those seconds stretched into hours, days, and weeks in Kethelket's mind. Every slash, every parry, every riposte became the focus of his lifetime, the pinnacle of everything he'd studied for. A hundred years of swordsmanship, three times that many studying combat with other weapons, building his Core, learning to use the shadow Energy instinctually—everything came down to that moment, that furious exchange that was over before most people would have realized it had happened.

When Kethelket stepped back, the demonic woman fell at his feet, her heart punctured, her throat cut to the bone, and her entrails drooping from a gaping wound. Kethelket stood over her, victorious, and then he fell to a knee, planting his two swords in the cold, damp soil to prop himself up. He'd felt her claws part the soft flesh of his neck, felt them puncture his side, driving six inches into his vulnerable organs. He knew he'd choke if he breathed, so he didn't. He held his breath and watched the darkness closing in on his vision. He willed it away, furious that his body would give in before he'd seen the foul light go out of his enemy's eyes.

As the darkness shrank away from his furious will, he refocused on the woman's face, watching those lips spew blood as she tried to breathe, watching as she heaved and shuddered, fitfully scrabbling at the cold earth with her long fingers, trying to pull her failing body closer to him. Kethelket couldn't breathe, but he refused to stay on his knees before her. Holding onto the hilts of his swords, he slowly, shakily, regained his feet, staring down at the creature, watching its struggles fade. Only then, when it shuddered its last breath, did Kethelket pull a healing draught from his storage ring and tip it into his mouth.

#

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Improved 1.*****

As the smoke and waves of hot air washed over him, as the release of Energy flowing hotly through his lungs and igniting in the air just past his mouth began to fade, Victor read the System notification and then looked at his Energy status:

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Improved 1

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 8

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9

Breath Core Energy:

2000/2000

Energy Affinity:

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

Energy:

15/21864

When his breath Core had been “Base 9,” he’d had 900 Energy. Did that mean he’d simply gained 1100 from the level up, or had he gained the usual 100, and then his total had doubled? He shook his head—no way to tell until he did it again. “I don’t have time for this.” Victor twisted his hands around Lifedrinker’s ghostly Spirit Plane projection, but the axe was silent, just as she had been since the trap had been sprung. Was it draining her, too? Was it cutting her off, somehow?

Victor looked up at the veil star, pleased to see it obscured by waves of hot, stinging smoke. The lava tubes looked like giant incense burners, the black smoke pouring out of them laced with tiny, flickering motes of fiery ash. He was doing something. That much was certain. Something under his feet was waking up—the magma-attuned Energy was so heavy and thick in the air that he barely had to breathe to pull it into his Core. The more prevalent it became, the more Victor felt its secondary effects; he found it easier and easier to find the anger in his heart, the fury he knew he should be feeling toward Hector. Before, the thought of Valla and the others in danger brought him only despair. Now, anger surged within him. He felt his teeth grind, his vision tint red, and a deep-seated desire to find Hector and put an end to him.

If the anger in the air could do that for him and allow him to feel the emotion the veil star trap was blocking from his Core, could he use that? He’d built up his breath Core significantly; could he use that Energy to kickstart his rage? To summon enough into his pathways to cast Berserk again? If he did that, would it be enough to break the hold on him? Could he break free of his prison? The idea felt good, but as soon as he looked more closely at it, he knew it would fail. He’d been berserk when the trap was sprung, and he’d had a hell of a lot more than two thousand Energy. As soon as he managed to cast the spell, his spirit Core would be drained, and the spell would fade.

No, if he wanted any spell to last, it had to be fueled by his magma-attuned Energy. “But my pinché spells are meant for spirit Energies!” Victor growled, thumping his clenched fist against his forehead. As he stood there, anger grinding his teeth, frustration making him pound his head over and over again, something of a lightbulb went off in his brain. There had to be more to this magma-attuned Energy than the elemental aspect. He could feel it, the fury of the mountain beneath him, the smoldering anger in the air. More than that, he could use it. His brain was working because of it. Thanks to that Energy, his back was straight, and he wasn’t wallowing in the dirt. Rather than self-pitying defeat, he felt angry.

“Okay, hermano, if you’re pissed off and your anger is thick in the air and in my breath Core, then why the hell can’t I use that?” Victor closed his eyes again, turning his gaze inward to the smoldering, throbbing heart of his breath Core. It was apparent that the volcano’s Energy was spewing forth much faster than the veil star and its smaller twins could siphon it off. Hector’s trap had meant to deprive Victor, a single person, of his magma-attuned Energy. It wasn’t a match

for the mighty, angry spirit under his feet. That idea got Victor thinking. Was it a spirit? Was the mountain alive, or was it just a natural generator for the kind of Energy he could feel? Victor felt like it was more than that. Something was angry under him.

Looking closely at his breath Core, he focused his will and pulled a tendril of that Energy out, studying its smoldering, pulsing flow as he pushed it around in the pathways of his lungs. Just as he'd instinctively known, he could see the Energy was multi-faceted. Entwined with the amber glow of the fiery Energy was a tendril of deep crimson. It echoed the appearance of his rage-attuned Energy so closely that Victor couldn't help but recognize it. He supposed some might think it was just another brand of fiery Energy, a complexity to the magma that separated it from other, purer forms of elemental fire Energy. Victor knew better.

Victor slowly began to inhale, pulling a steady stream of the volcano's magma-attuned Energy into his lungs, sending it into his breath Core. At the same time, as the Core swirled and pulsed, he pulled that tiny thread of red, furious Energy out of it, separating it from his magma-attuned Core and slipping it into his pathway, out of his lungs, and down, into his spirit Core. Once that thin thread of Energy felt the tug of his rage-attuned Core, it began to siphon, and he didn't have to try any longer.

Grinning madly, he continued to pull the mountain's Energy into his lungs, feeding it to his breath Core and watching as the ribbon of red, furious Energy rippled down through his pathways into his spirit Core. His dim, cold rage Core began to smolder like an ember given a breath of wind. He saw the Energy sucked away, like crimson smoke, into the trap Hector had created, but as he continued to pull Energy into his lungs, that ribbon kept flowing, and it was slowly gaining ground—the Core was getting brighter.

If he weren't busy inhaling, following the cultivation drill he'd figured out for his breath Core, Victor would have howled with excited, bloodthirsty excitement. He could feel the heat of his rage truly begin to take shape. He'd only been at it for a few moments when suddenly, System messages flashed in his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Breath Core Cultivation Drill – Advanced.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Spirit Core Cultivation Drill – Advanced.*****

Victor's insane grin spread wider, and his immense, rhythmic, chest-expanding inhalations took on a maniacal, frenzied pace as the messages encouraged him. He'd been on the brink of improving his Spirit Core Cultivation Drill for months but never broken through. Now he'd skipped "improved" and gone straight to "advanced." Was this what he'd been meant to do? To see the reflections of his spirit Energies in the elements around him? He'd always cultivated from his own emotions, but apparently, that was only part of the equation.

Victor continued to watch his Cores with his inner eye. His breath Core was full, growing slowly brighter, his input of magma-attuned Energy faster than the outlet of red, angry Energy he was sending into his spirit Core. His rage Core continued to grow, continued to get brighter and brighter.

What was his goal? What would he do? If he stopped cultivating the magma Energy in the air, his rage Core would just be drained again. Could he berserk and still cultivate? Could he . . . Victor frowned as an idea came to him, something that he should have seen the moment he realized he could harvest rage from the magma Energy.

If he could pull rage out of his breath Core into his pathways and down into his spirit Core, why couldn't he pull that rage into a spell? He could do it. He could cast Berserk with his breath Core. He wasn't sure it would work the same, but it was better than doing nothing. Nodding to himself, still sucking Energy out of the air, he took that thread of red, furious Energy and, rather than stopping it from flowing into his Spirit Core, he pulled it back out into his pathway and wound it into the pattern for Berserk, just as he'd done hundreds of other times.

As the spell took shape, snapping into place, he felt the pull on his breath Core intensify. The spell was compensating for his depleted spirit Core, pulling on that long thread running through his pathways. Iron Berserk was a hungry spell, brutal in its demands for instant Energy, and that thin thread of angry red Energy wasn't enough. As it pulled, a thick rope of orange-red magma-attuned Energy flowed out of his breath Core, into his pathways, into the spell, and then Victor erupted with mad, fiery Energy.

#

Lam burst into Victor's home, charging down the short hallway to the dining area with Edeya in her arms. "Victor!" she screamed. "Valla!" She gently laid Edeya on the table and put her ear to her lips, confirming she was still breathing, though her wispy puffs were hardly breaths. "Victor!" she screamed again, desperate fear and frail hope adding a note of panic to her voice. She charged down the steps, down the hallway to Victor's wide-open bedroom door. "They must be out fighting." Nevertheless, she went through the door, wanting to be sure, and then she saw him.

Victor sat on the rug, huge and pale as ash, the air cold around him. His eyes were closed but jumping around behind the lids. He breathed fitfully, strangely, and Lam thought she could hear some weird, muttered, unformed words in his throat. "Victor! Wake up! Victor!" She ran to him, grasped his massive shoulders, and shook him. He was stiff and so bound with muscle, it felt like she was trying to shake a tree. She moved around to face him and, winding back her arm, slapped him full across the face. He hardly moved. "Rotten roots!" she cried and ran from the room, returning to check on Edeya.

The frail, pale Ghelli was the same. The only hints she was alive were the occasional tiny motes of color in her wings and the faint, wispy, shallow breaths puffing between her colorless lips. "Why won't the healing draught work?" Lam knew the answer; her body wasn't hurt. It was her spirit, and the one person she hoped might be able to help her was similarly lifeless. Something was happening elsewhere. Something was happening in that place of spirits Victor often spoke about. If he was under assault there, if Edeya had been taken there, then Lam could only do her best to give them time to finish their fights. She had to help protect the encampment.

#

Valla crashed and tumbled over the ground, tucking her wings, charging them with air-attuned Energy to protect them and herself. Gusts of wind sheathed her, made her light, and added a great distance to her tumbling, sliding progress. The skeletal dragon, for that was what Valla had decided the terrible, monstrous mount had to be, had smashed her with its tremendous, spiny tail, knocking

her aside as she might do to a rodent. Hector had brought the beast down onto the wall. The thing had gripped the ramparts with its roladii-sized talons and ripped them apart. Men and women had been smashed, sent flying, or torn to pieces by the horrific show of power.

Valla had tried to attack, had leaped into the air, streaking toward Hector, aiming Midnight like a lightning-charged headsman's blade at his neck, only to be smashed by the dragon's tail as Hector spun the creature. He'd laughed and roared, firing bolts or red lightning at defenders while the great, dead dragon snapped up soldiers and crunched them into a paste in its fleshless jaws. Valla finally came to rest against a gnarled tree trunk, and she unfolded her battered wings and wearily climbed to her feet. She was a hundred yards from the wall and could see the battle clearly.

Hector and his pet were too much. They'd leveled most of the northern wall, allowing the ghouls easy ingress. The dragon shrugged off the feeble-looking ranged attacks of the defenders—arrows did nothing, and fireballs failed to ignite. Lightning might hurt it, but not the tiny bolts thrown by the beleaguered defenders. She saw stinging ice shards, hurled earthen balls, and even freezing rains—none harmed the gigantic, green-glowing, skeletal mount. Its wings tore through entire units, sending broken men and women flying. Its jaws and claws were instant death, and though some Naghelli tried to attack Hector directly, he blasted them from the air with those horrible red lightning bolts.

“We have to flee,” Valla muttered, with little hope of making it happen. How could you run away from a creature like that? What about the thousands of savage ghouls? They were too fast. “Some might live.” Valla didn't voice her unspoken, cowardly thought—she could escape. Scowling, angry that the notion had even entered her mind, she gripped Midnight's hilt and stalked toward the horrible melee. She breathed deeply, steeling her mind, finding her focus, staring at Hector, carefully timing the lurching momentum of the giant mount. When she was sure of herself, she channeled most of her remaining air-attuned Energy into a mighty Lightning Strike, seeking to reduce the damned Death Caster to ash.

Just as Hector threw a red bolt of lightning into the air, sending yet another Naghelli hurtling to the ground trailing black smoke, Valla's bolt of blue lightning exploded out of the dark sky, poleaxing him. His arms flew wide, and he vibrated for a long second with the surge of powerful Energy. A ragged cheer broke out from the entrenched soldiers as the Death Caster slumped and the bone dragon's animating green Energy faded. Just as Valla felt herself begin to breathe, just as she felt there might yet be some hope for them, Hector jerked his head up, his red, lightning-bound crown flared to life, and the dragon whirled, suddenly full of life again.

Valla spread her wings, lifted Midnight, and, in her shredded, bloody nightgown, she screamed, “Come on then!” The bone dragon bunched its legs and leaped, snapping its tremendous wings hard enough to send soldiers and ghouls flying. Hector and his mount soared through the air, ready to flatten Valla with those enormous talons. She didn't plan to stand still, however. Valla cracked her own wings, launching into the air.

If she couldn't kill Hector, she could perhaps give the Ninth some room. She could lead him on a chase. Maybe, just maybe, she could keep him busy until Victor finally woke, finally came to help. With those thoughts in her mind, she pumped her wings like she never had before, streaking

upward, urging the Energy in her pathways to aid her flight. That's when she realized her miscalculation; her air-attuned Energy was nearly depleted. More, the dragon was faster than she'd thought. She felt it closing on her almost immediately. Valla cried out with effort as she furiously worked her wings. Her weary body tried to obey her, but all too quickly, she heard Hector's high, screeching laughter and then felt the bony talons of his mount closing around her.

Book 6: Chapter 56: Volcanic Fury

Valla thrashed and struggled in the terrible grip of the skeletal dragon. Its talons were hard and unyielding, and her arms were pinned uncomfortably by its grasp. She could feel the rough texture of the bones, and her racing mind took a moment to wonder how old they were. Where had Hector dug up this ancient construct? Panic and despair made her thoughts erratic as she struggled to win free. She still gripped Midnight, though the blade was awkwardly pinned to her side by the grip of the massive bones. She tried everything she could to win free, even burning most of her remaining Energy to summon her Steel Tempest, hoping the whirling winds and slashing, razor-sharp bits of metal would aggravate the dragon, making it loosen its hold.

Her efforts were for naught. Drained, weak, struggling to breathe, she wondered if this was the end. Would Hector, still madly cackling above her, command his undead beast to crunch her in its great, toothy maw? Would she never see Victor again? Her stomach lurched as the dragon plummeted toward the ground, and Valla still had the presence of mind to wonder if it took a great effort to keep the monstrous mount aloft. Tears streaming from her eyes, pulled out by the whistling wind, Valla watched the ground rapidly approach, bracing for the beast to smash her against it with a forceful landing.

Though her descent ended in a spine-thrashing wrench, she didn't get pulverized into the ground; it seemed Hector wasn't done with her yet. The dragon took a lurching step, holding her above the ground, and Valla had just enough time to wonder what she could do to break free before a colossal, deafening crack resounded through the bony claw grasping her, and the dragon spastically released her to tumble onto the ground. Valla knew an opportunity when she felt one and exploded into motion, pushing the dregs of her wind-attuned Energy into her pathways, then into her wings. She jerked them with a snap and leaped up, streaking into the air.

She had time to hear a deep, bellowing voice roar, "You dare to ride my ancestor's bones?" Then, another cracking impact echoed through the night, and Hector's red lightning flared in Valla's peripheral vision. She spun and pumped her wings, gaining distance, sure she was being pursued, but after a moment, when no grasping talons or snapping jaws came for her, she turned to look back and down at what had saved her. She saw a figure, small now that she was high in the air, but even the dragon looked small from there. No, the dark, hulking man had to be big and strong, for she watched as he smashed away a grasping skeletal talon with a huge, strangely pulsating cudgel.

Hector's skeletal mount reared back and then lunged forward with its great, fang-filled maw, aiming to snap Valla's rescuer in half, but the nimble, black-clad figure leaped backward, smashing that cudgel with its weird, throbbing, resonating Energy against the dragon's bony chin. He used the giant skeleton's

momentum to drive himself back, away from the deafening clack of those snapping jaws.

Valla didn't know who the man was or where he'd come from, but she wasn't about to let his distraction go to waste. Her little flight and the dragon's pursuit had brought Hector more than a mile away from the encampment into the wilderness, and that meant the Ninth might have a chance to regroup and throw out the undead, especially if Victor snapped out of his trance and helped them rally.

“So, let's help this stranger and keep Hector busy.” Valla lifted Midnight high and dove, using the pull of gravity and her uncanny ability to ride the wind to streak down. She bared her teeth, eyes narrowed against the wind, and though she was silent, Midnight began to howl, eager to clash with Valla's black-robed tormentor. The stranger continued to harass the dragon, and Valla saw him shrug aside not one or two but several of Hector's lightning strikes. The red bolts of blasting, cacophonous Energy slid off him like drops of hot oil on a stone. Hector failed to notice Valla until she was almost upon him, but, at the last second, he threw up his left arm, and a dome of blistering red Energy snapped into place between them.

Valla barely altered her course enough to avoid smashing into the dome, but she managed, and as she streaked by, she hammered that shield of sizzling Energy with Midnight. The blade struck with such force that, though she refused to let go of her hilt, the bones in her hand and wrist vibrated painfully together. Still, the impact had an effect on Hector, as well. The shield flared like a miniature nova, and Valla knew she'd cost him dearly in terms of Energy usage. She continued her glide, aiming for a low hill a few hundred yards beyond the dragon. Exhausted, arm aching, Core nearly drained, she came to a running, stumbling halt.

Turning back, she saw the colossal stranger more clearly now that she was on the ground. He was unlike anyone she'd ever seen. He was similar in size to Victor now that he'd awoken so much of his titanic bloodline—probably nine or ten feet tall. What she'd taken for dark armor turned out to be scales grown on black flesh; he looked like a man who was half drake or wyrm. He wore clothes, but not many—dark leather leggings that ended just below his knees, no boots, for his feet were big and bore heavy talons, no shirt, and no armor other than his natural scales. A dark, weirdly shadowy, light-shifting cloak hung from his shoulders, whipped to and fro by the wind of his and the dragon's movements.

The stranger continued to growl insults and challenges at Hector, swinging his pulsating cudgel in powerful, arcing parries, batting away the dragon's repeated attempts to grasp him in its claws or maw. “Put those bones to rest, undead scum! Face me on the firm soil!” Though a massive man, he was still too small to stand firmly and pound away at the dragon; its swiping blows sent him sliding or scabbling every time he knocked them aside. Nevertheless, he was impressively resilient, shrugging off Hector's magical attacks and confounding the bony dragon's attacks.

Valla looked to her Core, saw it very slowly recovering, and, growling with frustration, lifted Midnight, snapping her wings. If she could only harry Hector with her sword, then that was what she'd do. This time, she didn't spend the effort gaining altitude; she pumped her wings and flew

straight at Hector, hoping his Energy was running low. If it was, she didn't find out—Hector saw her coming and pointed one pale, long-fingered hand her way, and a bolt of red lightning struck her full in the chest. Valla screamed and flew off course, stunned by the jolt of electricity, her white, bloody gown charred black and trailing smoke as she crashed to the ground.

Some instinct or reflexive contraction of her wings saved her from breaking her limbs; she wrapped those massive, shimmering appendages around herself and tumbled like a lopsided ball over the ground, flattening shrubs, sliding over loose gravel and dirt, and rolling down into a gully. She lay there, stunned, for several long seconds, and then she felt the ground shake and knew the skeletal dragon was coming for her. She was exhausted, burned, and bloody. Her Energy was spent, but still, she lifted her sword, arm shaking, and tried to sit up. The ground rumbled and shook again, and she braced herself; the dragon must be close, about to slide down the slope and smash her.

When she heard the stranger shouting and cursing distantly and heard the similarly distant clack of the dragon's jaws, she frowned. Had she imagined the ground shaking? Could the giant skeleton make the stones jump from such a distance? Valla struggled to her knees, using Midnight to brace herself. Then the ground lurched, and she fell onto her face. Distantly, she heard a different noise, like low, rumbling thunder that went on and on. Valla stood, shaky, bloody knees struggling to support her as she wondered what new nightmare was about to be unleashed.

#

As the pattern for Iron Berserk absorbed the potent, furious magma-attuned Energy, combined with the thread of rage coming from his spirit Core, Victor's vision tinted crimson, and fury boiled in his blood like it hadn't in a very long time. If he'd had the presence of mind to think about it, he'd compare his blind, thoughtless anger to the way he'd felt in the early days of his rage Core, back when he'd fought for the Wagon Wheel. The absolute dominance of the emotion was so overwhelming that every thought fled his mind. As his body expanded and hot, red-orange flames ignited along his shoulders and arms, he lifted his fire-filled eyes to the sky, opened his mouth, and roared.

His voice was the fury of the boiling, hidden depths of the world, his breath the smoky fire of the mountain's heart. When he stomped toward the green light that had tormented him, the ground cracked under his feet, and orange flames licked the stones where he stepped. He felt something in his hand and lifted it high—a burning brand topped with white-hot metal shaped like a crescent moon, screaming her fury, a match for his own. Victor wanted to kill that green light, wanted to smash it in his hands, bite it, rip it, grind it into nothing. It was out of his reach, but he wasn't beyond trying to leap for it.

He stomped closer, but then an answering fury echoed beneath his feet. The ground lurched, and hot, volatile Energy poured out of the round tunnels all over the mountaintop. Victor breathed it in, sending it into his Core without conscious thought. His transformation used it, fueled itself with that Energy. Again, he roared into the green-tinted, smoky night, and this time, his black, cinder-filled breath caught fire, bursting upward in a cloud of rolling crimson flames. As he stared, something

like squiggly worms danced across his blood-red vision, but he snarled and slapped at his face until they no longer bothered him.

He was power incarnate, destruction given form, and he wanted to fulfill his purpose. Rather than focus on the big, floating green light, he turned to the smaller ones. Roaring, cloaked in flames and black smoke, he charged the nearest one. His shoulder smashed into the enormous stone pillar upon which it sat, and he exploded through it like it was made of matchsticks. The green, pulsating veil star winked out as the rune-inscribed stone pillar crumbled and shattered into dust and fragments. The destruction felt good, and Victor whirled to the next pillar, charging it, smashing it, and howling as the ground rumbled again and another hot surge of magma-infused Energy pumped into the air.

Victor knew only fury, only the mad need for destruction, and he took it out on the only things within reach. He smashed the other pillars, one after another, and when he finished, the ground lurched, the mountain roared, and explosive, steamy smoke blasted out of the lava tubes. At one with the volcano's fury, Victor, nimble beyond reason, rode the rumbling, tilting ground like he was born to it. He stood at the center of the caldera, eyes focused on the hated veil star, and he screamed his fury. He could feel the mountain wanting to answer him. He could feel the furious thick Energy in the air, and he sucked it in with each breath. With each exhalation, plumes of smoke and sparks flew.

Staring at that green, pulsing orb in the sky, Victor began to pump his lungs like a bellows, sucking in breath after breath, holding the Energy he harvested on those hot winds until he thought he'd burst. His body swelled with it, and his veins burned with it, standing out on his red flesh like yellow-white rivers of lava. His eyes burned incandescent with the heat of the Energy in his pathways, turning the world a brighter shade of crimson, blotting out the green of the veil star, making it a wispy pale light that he needed to extinguish. When he couldn't bear it any longer, when it felt like his flesh would crack and his bones would explode, Victor roared out that pent-up Energy, sending it forth on a plume of black, smoky breath. It ignited with a whoosh that sucked the oxygen out of the air for a hundred yards around him.

Bright yellow magma exploded from Victor's breath, straight up in a fanning plume that fully engulfed the veil star. Victor's rage dimmed markedly as that tremendous burst of magma-attuned Energy was ejected from his body, and he leaned forward, gasping for breath, Lifedrinker loose in his grip. He felt the ground bucking under him, rolling up and down like rocky, earthen waves. The volcano had felt his outburst, and it wanted to answer him. Victor looked up and saw the veil star was dim, sputtering, and weak.

He was still furious, still felt the anger in the air influencing him, but he'd lost that single-minded madness for destruction with the expenditure of magma-attuned Energy. He glanced inward and saw his spirit Core recovering—every one of his attuned orbs of Energy was growing brighter or, in the case of his fear, darker. The stink of death-attuned Energy was gone; nothing but smoke and heat filled the air around him. The volcano would destroy whatever shreds of the veil star might survive his attack.

Victor took one more look around his one-time prison, and then, before something might happen to stop him, he focused his will and ended his Spirit Walk. With a gasp, he returned to himself, falling forward onto his hands. It was disorienting at first to find himself gripping the thick pile of his bedroom rug. As his senses recovered, he lifted his face and blinked. “Valla?” He leaped to his feet, glanced around the room, and saw it was empty. Victor turned to the door but paused to clear the System messages hovering in front of his eyes, dismissing them one by one as he glanced over them.

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Improved 2.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new spell: Volcanic Fury – Basic.*****

*****Volcanic Fury – Basic: Prerequisites: Affinity – Rage, Fury, or Hatred. Affinity – Magma. You channel the fury of the fiery depths. While affected by this transformation, you are immune to fire-based attacks, your magma-based abilities double in effectiveness, and you benefit from the effects of Berserk: Double strength and speed, increased resilience, and powerful regenerative capabilities. Be cautious, for the fury of the volcano knows no bounds—reason and compassion will flee before its heat. Energy Cost: Minimum 1000 – scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

The notifications were good news, and he wanted to read them and savor his accomplishment, but he had yet to learn the costs of his imprisonment. He didn’t even know how long he’d been held on the Spirit Plane. Had Hector’s taunting whisper been just that, a taunt? “Come on, chica.” Victor picked up Lifedrinker and started walking up the hallway, dreading what he was about to find. As he climbed the steps, he summoned his helmet from his storage ring and placed the heavy, dense armor on his head. When he stepped onto the upper landing, his eyes fell on a still, pale form lying on his dining table.

“Edeya?” He hurried to her, gripped her tiny wrist in his overlarge, warm hand, and leaned close to her face. She looked dead, and the thought of it nearly stopped his heart. He felt his fear begin to bleed out of his Core into his pathways, but then, like a tiny fluttering vibration, he felt her pulse. It was slow and soft, but it was there. “Edeya!” He pressed his big palm over her forehead, cupping her entire scull in his hand. Closing his eyes, he said, “Come on, hermanita. Come back to me. Wake up.”

Eyes closed, Victor turned his gaze inward, starting at his Core. It burned brightly with Energy as it rapidly recovered from his ordeal. He followed his pathways outward, and when he looked away from his body into Edeya, he saw the answer: A sickly blue tether stretched away from her into darkness.

“Those pinché motherfuckers did something to you, huh? I’ll fix it, little sister. Hang in there.” Victor let go of her, turned, and growling with renewed fury, he twisted his hands on Lifedrinker’s haft as he stalked toward the door of his home.

As soon as he stepped out, his senses were nearly overwhelmed. He smelled smoke, blood, guts, and the rotten, unmistakable stench of the undead. He saw flashes of light—fire, Energy bolts, lightning. He heard shrieks, roars, screams, sobbing, growling. Under it all, he felt the ground shifting and rumbling as, just as he'd feared, the volcano began to wake. Victor summoned his Banner of the Champion, and he cast Iron Berserk. He wanted to explore the strengths and benefits of his new transformation, but right now, he needed control, and he needed to be able to think.

As his banner's light burst into fiery glory and he expanded in size and potency, he looked around, wondering why the noise seemed so distant. His answer came to his ears with the sounds of horns blowing—the command to charge. He turned to the north, and there he saw a concentration of spell Energy flying through the black night. Nodding, he lifted Lifedrinker and ran that way, intent on helping the troops. He'd covered half the distance when a terrible, gut-wrenching shriek shook the night off to his left, and, in the light of a massive red lightning bolt, he saw the nightmare form of a gigantic undead dragon.

Victor altered his path, aiming for the dragon. Perhaps it was simply the size of it that awoke some desire in his Quinametzin heart to fight the strongest opponent. Perhaps it was something else in his heart, sensing that Valla was there and that she needed him. Perhaps it was the red lightning and the distant echoes of unnatural laughter that reminded his subconscious of the voice that had taunted him on the Spirit Plane. Whatever the reason, Victor knew his battle lay there with that gigantic undead beast.

Book 6: Chapter 57: To Wake the Mountain

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As Victor raced through the camp, building up momentum, planning to leap the fortification between himself and the distant, gigantic form of the skeletal dragon, he berated himself for being a fool. It was obvious the camp had been overrun at one point, obvious the soldiers had managed to rally, but not without cost—bodies were everywhere, scattered among the piles of pale, naked, ghoulish undead. How much of this assault had been due to his entrapment? Would Hector have sprung this assault if Victor hadn't Spirit Walked into the caldera? As if it could hear him thinking about it, the volcano rumbled again, sending him sliding into an overturned wagon.

The stumble brought his thoughts back to the present, and he growled, shaking his head. "Focus!" He sprinted several steps, bunched his legs, and leaped over the rough stone wall the soldiers had spent the last week building. When he landed, sliding over the hard-packed, gravel-strewn ground outside, he caught his first full view of the gigantic draconic skeleton and the battle it waged. In a flash of red lightning, his sharp eyes caught sight of Valla's silhouette, flying in an arcing dive, trying to hit the cloaked figure atop the dragon's horn-crowned head. She was rebuffed by a curved shield of red Energy, sent spiraling to the ground and tumbling into a nearby gully.

The sight of her going down cleared Victor's mind, driving out all thoughts, leaving behind only a hunger for battle, a thirst for vengeance, and a deep, pulsating fury at the idea that this worm would dare to harm the woman he loved. As he burst into motion, his gigantic, powerful legs driving him into a mad sprint, he was sure Hector would turn his mount to pursue Valla, to finish her while she was down. He jumped a narrow, scrub-filled gully, and when he mounted the last hilltop between himself and his foe, he realized another

combatant was on the field. A huge, powerfully built man was standing toe to toe with the giant skeleton, smashing aside its swiping claws and snapping maw with a rod-like cudgel, its impacts resounding with thunderous cracks.

The dragon skeleton wasn't as big as the elder wurm Victor had helped to slay on Zaafor. It wasn't even half as large, but it was massive. Even in his full titanic aspect, Victor doubted he could manhandle it, but if that man, big as he was, could stand against those swipes, Victor knew he could do better. "Come on, beautiful!" he growled, lifting Lifedrinker high and furiously pumping his legs into a sprint. He was channeling Sovereign Will into his strength and agility. He wanted to move quickly and powerfully and had a target in mind.

As he closed the last hundred yards, his opponent utterly oblivious to his approach, Victor focused on the joint where one of the dragon's wings met with its spine. Victor was fast when he sprinted. His strides devoured the distance, covering half a dozen yards at a time. As soon as he felt close enough, he channeled rage into an Energy Charge and exploded through the air, ripping a furrow in the rough scrub and grass. He and Lifedrinker impacted the skeletal dragon with such a thunderous crash that it rumbled over the countryside like a bomb going off.

He'd kept his focus on his target, and when he hit, Lifedrinker sank into that joint, cleaving into the bone, sending fragments flying like razor-edged daggers. Victor felt the Energy being sucked out of his Core, summoned by the spell to protect him from the horrific forces generated by his violent impact into the airliner-sized pile of animated bones. His Core was ready for it; brilliant, furious Energy expanded in a ball around him, and he felt none of the devastating concussion. The same couldn't be said for the skeleton or its rider.

Lifedrinker's edge served as a focal point for the ruinous energies unleashed by Victor's charge. They entered that gap and, having found purchase, expanded between the bones into the cavity of the skeleton's animated ribs, blasting them apart. The dragon's wing burst into its thousands of component pieces, flying in every direction. Its spine rippled with the impact, dozens of gigantic vertebrae ripping through the air, and, riding the shockwave of Victor's freight train charge, the entire skeleton tumbled sideways down the hillside, the sickly green Energy animating its wings and bones flickering, fading, and winking out as Hector fell, bouncing onto the ground.

"Well-timed, titan!" the hulking, club-wielding stranger hollered, though Victor hardly registered the words; he had eyes only for his tumbling enemy. Lifting Lifedrinker, exulting in her furious war cry, he leaped after him. Hector didn't lie still, waiting for him. More of the bright red lightning-like Energy Victor had seen him flinging about burst into existence around him. It shimmered and flashed, a tremendous whirling maelstrom of destruction that spun around Hector's darkly cloaked form for a dozen feet in every direction. Victor didn't care, and neither did Lifedrinker. She erupted into molten fury at the proximity of their foe, and Victor ran straight into that maelstrom of lightning.

If he'd been expecting to shrug it off, Victor might have learned a lesson. He hadn't been, however. That would have required thought, and Victor wasn't thinking about anything other than reducing Hector to a pile of bloody chunks. When he entered that red whirlwind, the lightning surrounding Hector seemed to pause in its flickering random discharges. The lightning hung in the air for a

fraction of a second, brightening to the point of painful brilliance, and then, in unison, a hundred different bolts exploded into Victor's chest.

Victor had yet to see Hector's face, but he dimly heard his echoing, maniacal laughter as his vision went black, his body went numb, and he lost all sense of direction, tumbling through the air. He didn't even feel it when he crashed to the ground, sliding through the dirt, his helmet and armor scraping over rocks and prickly, rough scrub brush. Victor lay insensate for several long seconds, and Hector's laughter grew increasingly mad as he recloaked himself in red, sparkling Energy, lifting himself into the air, hovering as easily as a person might float in placid water.

If he'd thought Victor vanquished, he must have been disappointed when, with a thump that resounded through the ground beneath him, Victor's heart began to pump, no longer stunned by the electrical burst of Energy. As light flooded his eyes, Victor was immediately cognizant of the heat around his waist, the furious ticking of his dragonsteel belt—it had absorbed its fill. Still flat on his back, Victor looked up, saw Hector floating toward him, and then heard the crunch of gravel as heavy feet stepped close. He glanced to his left and saw the tall, hulking stranger, noticing for the first time that he was covered in dark scales and that his face was reptilian with a short snout and bright yellow-green eyes.

Victor noticed how horns swooped back along the sides of the stranger's head as he glanced down at him. "Get up, titan. This isn't over."

"No shit," Victor growled. He flexed his core muscles and lurched to his feet, staggering a little. The lightning blast had broken his concentration, extinguishing his banner and his berserk, but he felt fine, if a little numb. Hector still hovered twenty feet in the air, maybe three times that distant, facing the two large men. He'd stopped short at the reptilian man's approach, and when Victor regained his feet, his laughter died down.

"So you broke free of your prison, hmm?" His voice reverberated in the air, hollow and grating, almost like it echoed out of a metal pipe. "No matter. I can still feel the veil star, so you failed in that regard. You'll learn you're no match for a true Death Caster, pitiful Berserker."

"He dares to mock you? After you freed the spirit of my ancestor with a single blow?" The stranger's words rumbled, deep and powerful, and Victor could hear the fury beneath them. He thought about what he'd said—did he mean the dragon skeleton? Was he related to dragons? He eyed Hector and his cloak of lightning. Would it strike so powerfully a second time? How big were his reserves of Energy? Surely, he must be running low on that caustic lightning. Victor glanced at his Core and saw that most of his Energies were full, that his rage was recovering quickly, perhaps fueled by his frustration.

Movement caught his eye behind Hector, and he saw Valla limping up the slope, Midnight gripped in one hand. One of her wings was held askew, and he thought it looked injured. The sight of her like that, dressed in bloody white rags, limping, injured, clearly on her last dregs of Energy, Victor felt his fury stoking to new heights, and he began to channel it into his pathways, ready to cast Iron Berserk again. Hector, too, had noticed Valla and turned toward her, lifting a hand high. Victor bunched his legs, ready to leap at him, ready to interrupt whatever attack he meant to deliver, but then the ground shook more violently than ever, and Victor stumbled, falling to a knee.

The stranger completely lost his footing, sliding and tumbling for several feet, and Valla, too, fell, slipping out of view back down the slope she'd just mounted. Hector might have pursued her, might have turned his lightning on Victor or the stranger, but, along with the rumbling of the ground, a plume of orange, fiery magma erupted from the high slope of the volcano. It sparked into the night like a fiery geyser, showering down, backlighting the high citadels. The magma flew through the air, falling to the slope, gathering in clump-like pools not yet thick enough to flow. "You can kiss your veil star goodbye, asshole!" Victor shouted, gripping Lifedrinker and stalking toward the death-wielding wizard.

Hector had frozen at the eruption, but he whirled at Victor's taunt, turning to face him as he stomped forward. "Fool!" he screamed, and for the first time, Victor saw his face through the shadows of his robes and the glare of his red-lightning crown—he looked like a human man, pale with sunken, black eyes and flesh so thin and stretched that Victor could see the contours of his skull and the rictus grin of his exposed, black-gummed teeth. His death mask said it all—he wanted Victor dead, and he intended to kill him, but he had to deal with an emergency.

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When he felt Hector gathering a massive torrent of Energy, Victor lifted Lifedrinker and pulled her back, ready to throw her, but Hector's flight was more abrupt and quicker than he'd expected. He streaked through the air in a flash of red sparks, flying like a bottle rocket straight toward the top of the waking volcano. "Pinché motherfucker!" Victor roared, then sprinted to where he'd seen Valla fall. He found her at the bottom of the slope, tilting a healing draught to her lips. Blood, soot, and tears streaked her face, but she smiled when she saw him approaching.

"I knew you'd come."

Heavy footfalls told him the stranger was approaching. He turned to him just in time to see his draconic, fang-filled mouth snarl out a curse, "Shit-eating undead. He fears the volcano will demolish his portal and his source of strength, that green star."

Valla clambered to her feet while Victor regarded the stranger, turning to follow his gaze toward that venting tendril of lava on the side of the volcano. "Thank you for your help, stranger. I might have been in dire trouble if not for you and that mighty weapon."

"Belagog enjoys a good challenge." The man lifted his rough, metallic cudgel, and Victor could see how it throbbed with Energy.

“I have to go up there. I can’t let him recover. I can’t let him calm the volcano. I can finish waking it.”

“No! Victor . . .”

“I have to, Valla. This attack is my fault. I got stuck in the Spirit Plane by that fucker. Please help the troops rally, gather the survivors, and get away from here.”

“We can help you, titan,” the stranger said.

Victor shook his head. “No. No one can help me with this. I’m going to be mad with rage. Nothing will be safe near me.”

“But you can control your rage . . .”

“No, Valla, this is different. I’ll explain later, but I have to hurry. It’s going to take me a few minutes to climb that slope, and I don’t want that asshole to have any more time. Please! Get the troops to safety. Trust me.” Victor turned to the big, draconic warrior. “Thank you . . .”

“Lesh’ro’zellan. Lesh.”

Victor felt a wave of gratitude to the giant fighter. Had he really saved Valla? He held out his hand, and the man took it in his rough, calloused grip. His hand was nearly a match for Victor’s in size, and the two men nodded, locking eyes for a minute while they squeezed against each other’s might.

“Victor, is there no other . . .”

“I have to do this, Valla. Get Edeya out of the house before you pack it. Please! Go now!” He turned and started walking, getting ready to cast Volcanic Fury. He didn’t know exactly how it would work, but he knew that if he wanted to encourage the volcano, if he wanted to keep Hector from somehow stopping it from waking, he had to let it feel his answering fury. He’d taken two steps before he felt Valla grab his elbow and pull, forcing him to turn toward her if he didn’t want to send her sprawling.

Her eyes were pooled with tears, and she practically screamed at him, “I don’t know what happened, where you were, but I need you to know that I was desperate to help you. I . . . I didn’t want to leave you but the others . . .” She shook her head, grimacing at her struggle to find the right words. “I want to help!”

“I’m sorry, Valla, but the best help you can give me is to save these people. I care about them, and if I know you’re saving them, I can focus on stopping Hector!” He started walking again, and she kept hold of his arm, running beside him.

“How will you get free if you wake that volcano? How will . . .”

“Valla!” Victor stopped, grabbed her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. “The volcano is not going to harm me. I promise you that much. Let me get up there and fuck this asshole up, please!”

“I love you!” she said, almost like she was pleading, and Victor couldn’t help his hardened, angry heart from melting a little. He grabbed her into a hug and squeezed her tight, his arms enveloping even her wings. She sobbed, “I want you to return. You have to survive!”

“I’m not planning to die!” Victor kissed the top of her head, still smashing her into a hug, then he let go and began to jog up the slope, and this time Valla didn’t follow. When he’d made a dozen long strides away from her, he formed the pattern for Volcanic Fury and let it pull the Energy out of his Cores.

#

Valla stood, watching Victor run up the slope toward the gravel and dirt road leading up to the first citadel. He’d just reached the crest of the first low hill when she felt a surge of Energy, felt his aura break loose of his constant hold, and, as she reeled from the weight of it, she saw him expand, growing into his titan-sized form, but something was different. As his mass more than doubled, as his corded muscles bunched and piled atop each other, his body exploded with red-orange flames. He stood, limned in fire, drops of magma falling to the ground around him, scorching the rocks, burning the grass and scrub.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker high, and her metallic head burst into answering red-hot brilliance. He arched his back, arms wide, and screamed a furious, horrible challenge at the mountain. His voice rumbled and echoed over the hillsides, crashing off the high rocky slopes and cliffs. Valla was distracted, at first, by the warcry, but then she saw that Victor had turned back toward her. He stared at her for a long, terrifying moment, his eyes burning like white-hot flames, smoke flowing out of his nostrils as his chest heaved and pumped. The worst part of that gaze, of those blazing orbs, was that she saw not a single hint of recognition in them. She didn’t dare move, fearing that he’d change course and fly down that hill, intent on ripping her to shreds.

As he seethed and stared, fire dripping off his hands, the ground burning under his feet, a distant rumble shook the hillside, and the magma flow high on the mountain erupted again, showering the night with its orange glow. Victor turned away from Valla and, on seeing the eruption, roared his fury again and began running up the slope, loping over the near-vertical climb like it was nothing. “That was scary,” Valla hissed, her voice shaking.

“He’s awe-inspiring. I haven’t felt that cold bite of fear in my heart since I was a hatchling.” The stranger’s deep voice rumbled beside her, and Valla turned quickly, startled by the stranger’s—Lesh’s—proximity.

“Thank you again.” She turned to the encampment. “I have to do what Victor asked.”

“And I will aid you.” Lesh turned, looking over Valla’s head toward the distant signs of battle. “The dark-winged warrior, the one with twin blades, has led the

soldiers in an offensive, driving back and crushing most of the remaining undead.”

“You can see so far?”

“Aye. I fear you’ve lost many soldiers this night, but if the titan can destroy the undead base, their lives will have been well spent.”

Valla frowned, not liking the gigantic fighter’s pragmatism. “I’ll fly ahead. I have to get my friend out of our travel home before we hurry away from here.”

“Yes. I’ll run quickly behind. Best if I stay with you so the soldiers know not to attack me.” He nodded, his dark eyes bright in the darkness. Then he turned back to the slope where Victor still climbed, a bright, humanoid torch leaving a trail of fire, and he added, “We have enough time to flee. He’ll be a few minutes making that climb, and then we don’t know how long it will take him to succeed in his task. Even so, I’ve seen many a volcano in my day, and this one is old and sluggish. We’ll win free of danger. Go now! I will hurry behind.”

Valla nodded, stretching her wings, relieved to feel only a slight stiffness; the healing potion had done its work. She snapped them downward, sending Energy into her pathways, and soon she was soaring upward and then, almost immediately, angling down to glide toward the glimmering jade travel home. She’d just begun to descend when another rumble shook the night, and a new plume of lava erupted from the side of the mountain, this one higher, nearly at the caldera. Seeing it, Valla realized most of the green-tinted fog was gone.

She could see clearly all the way to the summit of the high, volcanic mountain, and much more easily, she could see the citadels outlined in orange light from the rapidly gathering lava high on the slopes. As her eyes fell on the first, closest of the keeps, she saw its gates were burning, smashed open. Victor had already broken through. “Go, love. Go with speed and vengeance and destroy them all,” she breathed, spiraling down to land outside the travel home. “Destroy them all and hurry back to me.”

Book 6: Chapter 58: Caldera of Madness

Through the hazy, red fire of his fury, Victor could see figures on the long, arching span that crossed the raging waters. He didn’t care what they were doing. The idea that they might be planning something nefarious to break the bridge or send him tumbling into the waters didn’t enter his mind. He had a singular goal—find the pendejo who flew away from him, who fled their fight, and smash him to a pulp. He ran, loping on long, powerful legs, leaving a trail of smoking, burning footsteps. Fire flickered in his wake whether he traversed grass, dirt, or stone. Lifedrinker buzzed with anticipation, hunger, and glee; she was ablaze, a partner in his fiery rage.

When Victor mounted the bridge and began to sprint toward the distant figures, an Energy Charge might have been an apt choice, the right thing to close that gap in a hurry and put an end to whatever they were doing. Unfortunately, Victor’s singular mindset, driven by the rage boiling

through his pathways, didn't leave room for other spells. When the stone beneath his feet lurched, and gunshot-loud cracks erupted in the stone, he didn't panic, didn't react other than to pump his legs harder. When the arch shattered ahead of him, the stone crumbling down into the abyss, falling to the white-capped river, he watched the group of robed figures plummet to their doom, a sacrifice for their undead master.

Maybe if he weren't so enraged, Victor would have reacted differently. Maybe he would have turned and tried to outrun the crumbling stone. Victor didn't slow, however. Engorged by rage and fire, he pushed harder, and when the falling curtain of stones was right before him, he bunched his legs and leaped for the far side of the gap. Whatever mad strength powered his burning, titanic form pushed his Titanic Leap to new levels, and he soared through the air, a smoking comet hell-bent on destruction. He crashed onto the intact portion of the bridge near the far edge. Showers of sparks, droplets of magma, and black smoke burst into the air with his impact. In two heartbeats, Victor was pounding up the ramp away from the fallen span toward the second gateway citadel.

Just as he had when he charged the first tall keep, Victor focused on the gates and ignored all else. Arrows burst into flame as they touched his form. Firebolts and lightning glanced off him, insignificant as the thrall-like subordinates who threw them. By the time he smashed into the high stone gates, he must have been running more than sixty miles per hour, and, with a lowered shoulder, he impacted them with the ferocity of a hurtling granite boulder. As he shattered the Energy-enhanced crossbeam, the crack was so loud that it echoed up and down the mountain like a bomb blast.

Victor hardly slowed as the gates slammed open, and dense fragments of timber and stone exploded away from him, ripping through the puny defenders crowding the gatehouse tunnel. He steamrolled through them, moving too fast, his form too large, his Energy too hot and caustic for them to withstand. They burst into flames as he approached, screaming their silent screams. Victor barely acknowledged their existence—some kind of skeletal warriors in ragged armor lined up with zombies, shamblers, and ghouls. They were nothing more than an impedance, like brambles on a path, something to stumble on before he found sound footing and exploded forth again.

In moments, Victor had cleared the second citadel and was racing up the road, climbing toward the top of the mountain, his giant, grumbling brother. He knew his prey was up there. He knew the Death Caster was doing something Victor wanted to stop, but he didn't care. The only thing he really wanted was to see him ripped apart, reduced to several hunks of smoldering ash. He rounded a corner in the road, and a wall of ice sheeted up from the ground before him. Dense, frozen Energy radiated from it, and Victor didn't have time to slow, didn't have time to jump. He lowered his shoulder and pushed on.

He felt the cold sapping his heat, felt it pulling the hot magma-rich Energy out of his pathways. He felt the fire limning his form dim, and the white-hot flames in his eyes fading, but then he hit the ice. It resisted him for a fraction of a second, but Victor bunched his legs and drove forward, a rage-fueled locomotive hell-bent on ripping up the track. The ice began to crack, and then it was all over—Victor burst through it in a shower of spraying shards, and his heat flared back to life. His vision brightened, his form burst into flame anew, and he powered on. He caught sight of a blue-robed figure kneeling on the side of the road, his skeletal hands gripping his head in agony. With a mad laugh, Victor swiped his blazing axe through the undead Elementalist, cleaving his skull in twain.

He saw a curve ahead, realized the road switched back and forth, and, impatient to get to his quarry, he faced the mountainside and jumped, clearing twenty yards of slope to land higher up the road. Victor was too mad with battle lust, too engorged by fire and fury to think about his Energy reserves, but if he hadn't been, he would have noted that his rage-attuned Energy was slowly burning down, and his magma-fueled breath Core was more than half empty. He didn't, though; it wasn't even a flicker of concern in his mind.

Victor continued apace, leaping to avoid long switchbacks several more times, and soon, he was nearing the mountain's top, the volcanic caldera. Luck was with him that night, for when he rounded that last bend, he came close to the lava flow that had erupted from the mountain's side. When he grew near, he felt the fury in the air. He felt the kindred heat and anger of the mountain beneath him, but sharper, richer, thick enough to breathe, thick enough to channel almost passively into his breath Core. As he felt that decadent power flowing into him, as he felt the rumble under his feet and heard the mountain's anger, Victor paused to lift his head to the sky and howl madly into the night.

His voice, deep at first, then rising into a wild ululation, echoed off the stones, reverberating back and forth through the many canyons surrounding the tall, high-sloped mountain. Smoke and cinders escaped his mouth as he screamed his madness, and the mountain heard him. It bucked wildly, but Victor moved with the motion instinctually, not bothered in the least. The lava flows that had already burst from the mountain's ancient shoulders geysered forth again, and Victor heard the distant sounds of more destruction above him. The mountain was waking, and those in the caldera were feeling its wrath.

He pulled back his lips, revealing a hungry, savage grin limned in black smoke as he leaped into motion, pounding up the slope, aiming for that rough, stony rampart behind which he knew the caldera valley opened up. He saw fortifications around the road, battlements, gates, and even siege equipment, but it was all scattered and abandoned. He didn't bother smashing the gates. Instead, he kept running and leaped over the wall, only twenty feet high. At the apex of his flight, he saw a glorious view of the caldera valley, and what he saw brought more mad laughter out of him.

Unlike the version on the Spirit Plane, this material version of the caldera was packed with structures—towers, walls, and buildings of all shapes and sizes. He didn't laugh because he saw them; he laughed because they were crumbling, and fires were everywhere. He saw crowds fleeing through broken, cobbled roads, scrabbling around collapsed stone buildings, and hordes of undead furiously working to dig rubble out from around the wreckage. What spurred his madness the most, though, was the scene at the center of the caldera.

Hundreds of robed figures knelt in a circle around the high, flickering, dim veil star. Beneath it, on a stone platform, sat a dark rip in the fabric of reality. Victor wasn't in a state of mind to contemplate the meaning of the weird rend in space, but something told him that his quarry might try to escape through it. Even in his madness, he knew the kneeling magic-users were working to keep the green light ablaze and that it was somehow connected to that shimmering doorway to another world. As he crashed to the ground, sliding down the gravel and dirt of the roadway, he bunched his legs and sprinted toward the distant scene.

Thousands of undead and living thralls were between him and his target, but he paid them no heed. If they got in his way, they'd die like those in the citadels. If they fled before his approach, they

might live long enough to feel the volcano's wrath. Either way, Victor didn't care. He was tall, more than eighteen feet in his titanic form, and he saw over the buildings to the caldera's center.

He saw a long line of figures forming, many carrying heavy bags and some bearing children in their arms. His eyes were good, superhuman in their fiery glory. He could see through the darkness as though it were noon with a bright sun in the sky. He could pick out faces among those distant figures and see that they weren't undead, not all of them, but Victor didn't care in his state. Enemies were trying to flee him, servants of the bastard who'd tried to kill people he cared about. Dim visions of Valla's face floated through his mind, snatches of memory when they'd been in bed together, fought together, laughed together.

The images were almost abstract in their vagueness, but they were enough to stoke his rage, to remind him that these people and creatures ahead of him had tried to kill someone he cared about. Moreover, the air in the caldera was so thick with magma-fueled Energy, so heavy with the volcano's fury, that he felt like he was swimming through it. He could feel it flowing over him, brushing his skin, fanning the flames that flickered and lashed out behind him. He could taste it in every breath. He could feel it pour into his breath Core, stream into his pathways, and ignite, joining his rage-attuned Energy to power his Volcanic Fury.

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He grew hotter and hotter, more and more furious as he charged into the caldera. He began to lose focus even on chasing Hector, began to look for things near at hand to destroy. When he jumped over a fallen tower, and the volcano shuddered again, sending an arcing spray of magma into the air on the far side of the caldera, he paused and screamed again, his mouth forming mangled, nearly inarticulate words, "Come on, hermano!" He glimpsed a crowd of undead digging away at some rubble and couldn't help himself from charging into them, laying about with Lifedrinker.

He was so large, his furious heat so potent that they withered before him, falling back, scrabbling to get away, but he pursued, hacking, kicking, grabbing, and throwing them until all were dead or scattered out of his sight. The green veil star pulsed, catching his attention, and when he looked at it and saw it was brighter than before, his eyes burned so intensely that anyone watching him would have looked away in pain. Victor began to rant as he charged toward the veil star, words that made no sense, noises that probably wouldn't have been considered words to anyone listening.

He didn't know what he was saying; he didn't care. He was trying to vent some of the fury that boiled in his veins and pathways. He was trying to release some of the pressure. He indiscriminately swung Lifedrinker left and right, sometimes chopping her into wood, sometimes into stone, and sometimes into a foe. She screamed and screamed, just as furious as he. She was white hot with fiery fury, and when Victor burst into the clearing around the veil star, he lifted her high and threw her at it. It wasn't a planned attack. It wasn't something he'd ever have done if he was himself, but he wanted that thing dead, and so did Lifedrinker.

The idea of "killing" the veil star wasn't a rational one. It wasn't something Victor would think to try if he had a shred of reason in his mind. Still, Lifedrinker didn't object, and his throw was true—she flew like a smoking, white-hot comet, ripping the air in concussive shockwaves that thundered

over the flat, stone clearing, sending the more frail of Hector's wizards sprawling. When she hit the veil star, Victor saw, in his red-tinted madness, the green glow shrink to a tiny point, eclipsed by the blazing heat of Lifedrinker's flames, and then it expanded, rolling out like an inflating ball of dense green energy.

The globe of green and fiery Energy expanded to something that looked to be a good fifty feet in diameter, seeming to suck the noise and light out of the caldera. As the green Energy shifted more and more to yellow-white, as it became more and more a roiling ball of fire, everything was still. Everyone was quiet for a pregnant heartbeat, and then the massive ball of roiling Energy exploded, washing the center of the caldera in fiery, white-hot flames. Victor arched his back and roared, watching the fire roll toward him, stomping toward it, hungry for its touch.

As the flames engulfed him, he felt Lifedrinker in them and knew she'd won her battle with the veil star. Whatever it was, whatever had hung in the air up there, she'd pierced it, and she'd overcome it. Of course, the explosion and the fire did nothing to quench the furnace in his heart nor in that of the volcano. Victor rushed forward through the flames, hands clenching and unclenching, eyes mad with the lust for violence. The volcano bucked and shook, more lava flows erupting out of the stony ground, and some part of Victor knew it was done—the volcano was waking, and nothing would stop it.

He charged among the hundreds of robed Death Casters, snatching up those who still moved, those who'd shielded themselves from the veil star's destruction. He threw them, used them as weapons, smashing them about, ripping them limb from limb. He shrugged off magical attacks, nothing fazing him. None of Hector's apprentices, at least those still gathered there at the center of the volcano, had anything near enough power to penetrate Victor's furious constitution or to leave a wound that his magma-filled blood wouldn't instantly heal. All they did was further infuriate him, further drive him into a berserker frenzy as he sought the true target of his wrath.

As he ripped the arms from a screaming, ashen-faced mage, he looked through the mist of blood toward the central platform where the rip in space still hung. He saw Hector's people wildly charging through, saw tall, powerful figures trying to hold some of them back, and, though he couldn't contemplate their intentions, Victor saw them as a better outlet for his frustrated rage. He leaped toward them, coming down among a crowd of fleeing people. Victor snatched a woman up and, as she burst into flame, threw her at the front of the line, smashing her smoldering corpse into one of the tall guardians of the gateway.

The man, dressed in black plate that might have been familiar to a rational Victor, might have reminded him of the reavers he'd slain weeks earlier, tumbled backward, bouncing over the stone dais. At the same time, his companion slammed the visor down on his helmet, lifted a massive black-bladed, two-handed sword, and charged straight at Victor. The people fleeing screamed and cried, running to and fro in a panic, trying to get away from Victor, but having nowhere to go—madness had overcome the caldera, geysers of flame were exploding everywhere, the ground was rumbling and shaking, and the air was thick with ash and smoke.

When the sword-wielding giant, a good four feet shy of Victor's height, reached him, hacking down with that mighty blade, Victor caught it in his left hand and squeezed. The blade bit his flesh and opened an outlet for his fiery blood. It ran down the blade, turning the black metal orange with heat, and the warrior cried out inside his helmet, letting go as the leather-wrapped hilt burst into flame.

Victor pounded his right fist down on that helmet, smashing his head with a sickening series of wet crunches. When the warrior collapsed, Victor stepped forward, resting his foot on his chest.

He eyed the rip in space as the corpse began to smoke, and the metal armor began to glow with heat. Had his quarry gone through already? The only thing stopping Victor from madly charging through was a feeling in his gut that his foe was still here, a deep-seated desire not to be fooled into going somewhere where he'd lose track of him. Absent Hector to fight, he had to find an outlet for his rage, so he furiously scanned the platform for a target, and that's when he saw, just beyond the portal to another world, a floating, spinning stone, dimly glowing with gold and silver runes.

Victor stalked forward, crunching the corpse, now ash inside hot metal, and angled himself around the rift, getting a better look at the floating stone. Something deep in the back of his mind said, "System." Was this the source of the portal? Was it something else? Victor pulled back his lips, exposing his insane grin as he took a deep breath, inhaling until he felt his lungs would burst. If Hector wanted to hide, he'd take out his frustration on this thing. Maybe if he could break it, the portal would close. Just as he was about to exhale, to bathe the floating stone in the magma fury of his breath, a tremendous crack of thunder shook the air, and a massive bolt of red lightning hit him in the shoulder, sending him stumbling toward the rift.

The ground lurched as the volcano continued to wake, and Victor might have fallen, might have rolled right into that gap through time and space, but he was awash with Volcanic Fury. He was brother to the mountain, and he walked along the bucking ground as though it were placid and flat. He avoided the rift and turned to see where his enemy was. His shoulder was sore, but he could feel it rapidly healing; Hector's lightning was powerful, but a single bolt wasn't enough to stop him or, really, to even give him pause.

Hector rode the air on a cloud of charged air. It crackled with red electricity, and as he swooped by, firing another bolt of lightning at him, Victor saw Hector's pale, rictus face beneath his blazing red crown. The sight renewed his fury and reminded him of why he was there. Something deep in him woke up at the proximity of his foe—something with a stiff back and pride that wouldn't be quenched by fury alone. Who was this worm floating around, daring to taunt him with tickles of lightning? Who was this man who'd threatened the friends and loved ones of a mighty Quinametzin?

Victor took two steps away from the rift and stooped to pick up Lifedrinker from where she'd fallen, her blade buried in the stone. As soon as he pulled her free, she burst into flames again, and he heard her seething whisper in his mind.

Come, love! Let us lay waste to this fool and bask in the glory of the volcano's fury!

The words were sharp and spoke straight to his soul—the only way he heard them, for Victor's ears buzzed with fury. His mind could focus only on his hatred of the man floating about above him. He stood before the rift, staring at Hector, clenching and unclenching his fist on Lifedrinker's haft. He could feel his rage building, could feel his bones and flesh igniting with it. How much could he take? How much of the mountain's horrible temper could he absorb before he burst?

Hector swooped toward him, streaking like a Roman candle, and Victor swiped at him, forcing him to veer away. Had he been trying to get past him? Trying to enter the rift? The idea of his foe running away, disappearing through that hole, was so upsetting that Victor felt his rage cool slightly as his mind raced for a way

to keep him here. Could he close the rift by breaking the stone? Could he break the stone? Lifedrinker was a powerful weapon, but Victor knew she was nothing to the System. Would he risk her by smashing her against that System stone? He felt his rage cool further as his thoughts raced, and then Hector hit him with another red thunderbolt.

The burning shock shook him enough to knock the thoughts out of his head. Hector raced forward again, clearly trying to swoop past him to the rift, but Victor wasn't stunned, just refocused. He squared off with the Death Caster and lifted his axe. Hector jerked away, streaking off into the caldera at the last instant, clearly afraid of Lifedrinker's bite.

Throw me again, love!

Lifedrinker's hungry plea rang through Victor's mind, and he almost did it, almost listened to her, but he had another action in mind and was too stubborn with rage to turn away from it. He stared at Hector, watching him, inhaling, breathing deep into his belly, pulling Energy into his breath Core just as he'd done on the Spirit Plane. He pumped his lungs in and out, gathering the Volcano's furious magma-fueled Energy, packing his pathways with it, and letting it seep into his blood, flesh, and bones. As Hector swooped around, ready for another pass, gathering red, crackling lightning on the tip of a dark scepter, Victor's grin grew, and the madness overtook him again. He laughed, and yellow flames licked his lips, sending black smoke into the air with the sounds of his insanity.

Book 6: Chapter 59: Escape

Rather than attack or try to charge past him, Hector stymied Victor's desire to fight by hovering a good twenty yards away and shouting, "Fool! You've conjured ruin upon us all! Let me leave, and you can rule over this wasted land!" Victor didn't reply but shifted, putting himself squarely before the portal. His grin widened, and, as he exhaled, black smoke tendrils drifted out of his nostrils. The message was clear—if Hector wanted to flee this world, he'd need to remove Victor. In wild frustration, Hector jerked back his head and screamed, his crown of red lightning sparking and dancing with Energy, creating an arcing feedback loop with the black scepter that Hector raised aloft. With a grimace of desperate determination, he raced forward, blasting Victor with a torrent of arcing, writhing crimson electricity.

Victor was full to bursting with magma-attuned Energy. His Core was overflowing, on the verge of another expansion. He'd stretched it to its limit with his lungs, inhaling the heavy, thick Energy of the volcano, cultivating as he stood there, waiting for Hector's next attack. As that blast of arcane, thunderous Energy arced out of Hector's dark scepter, he took it full in the center of his chest. It burned and pulsed and would probably have stunned or killed a lesser foe, someone not so maddened with his own fury and the echoing, long-slumbering rage of a mountain. As it was, the powerful blast only served to contract Victor's lungs further as he exhaled a plume of hot air so thick with Energy that it misted the air more like a liquid than a gas before igniting with woosh.

The jet of superheated magma-infused fire sucked the oxygen out of the air as it engulfed Hector, cooking through his cloud of charged red Energy. The Death Caster screamed and gathered up all his reserves to save himself, cloaking himself in a red, crackling shield and girding his flesh and bones with cold, blue, death-attuned Energy, clearly something he'd been holding back. Victor tracked him as he descended to the ground, still spraying forth a plume of magma. The Energy coming from his mouth was dense and thick and hot, but it wasn't aflame; it didn't burn until it was several inches from his lips. From there, it streamed like a demon's firehose, bright with destructive power, unrelenting as it coated his foe, slowly burning through his defenses.

Victor had made incredible gains with his breath Core in a brief span of time, all thanks to the Volcano's radiated Energy. It was that heat, that magma-fueled rage in the air, that allowed Victor to send forth a plume of destructive force that would otherwise be beyond his young magma Core. More than that, his Volcanic Fury doubled his potential, extending his breath and increasing its potency. All that said, he only had so much; he couldn't maintain his Volcanic Fury with an empty breath Core, and some instinctive self-preservation wouldn't allow him to breathe it dry. After blasting Hector for several seconds with fiery destruction, Victor stopped and, heaving with the effort, began to suck air into his lungs again, restarting the cycle that would send Energy into his Core and then into his pathways, extending his Volcanic Fury's duration.

Hector was crouched low, his arms above his head. Victor had watched his magma-based fire destroy Hector's crimson shield of electricity, and he'd watched as Hector fought to sustain himself by expending a massive amount of cold, grave-scented, death-attuned power. Though he was hell-bent on destruction, his enraged mind incapable of clever quips or convoluted planning, he understood that Hector was spent, that he'd nearly exhausted himself. He wouldn't be flying out of reach anytime soon. Victor lifted Lifedrinker and, on long, powerful, titan-sized legs, he stalked toward his prey. He grinned, a burning, fiery smile that spread from ear to ear, exposing flame-licked teeth as a low, rumbling growl built in his gut.

Hector stood, backing rapidly away from the much larger titan, his arms high, sputtering blue wisps of smoky Energy tendrils gathering on his fingertips. He couldn't go far. Behind him, the mountain had shaken open a rift in the ground, and hot billows of black, smoky air drifted up from it. Victor's growl intensified as his mouth began to salivate, dripping from his toothy grin in orange, fiery droplets to sizzle on the rough, blackened stone. He was savoring the moment, his fury hot and smoldering, ready to feel the satisfaction as Lifedrinker split the Death Caster from neck to crotch.

As though she could see the images playing through Victor's mind, Lifedrinker began to hum in anticipation, vibrating and bucking in his hand as he lifted her high. When he was just two titan-sized strides away, Hector lashed out with spectral, blue, misty claws. They flickered and faded in the hot air, hardly scratching Victor's neck and groin. Hector had aimed for his softest, least armored body parts and failed to make an impact; the Death Caster was truly spent, and his remaining Energy affinity was ineffectual in the magma-thick air. Victor lifted Lifedrinker, and, too mad to form any words, he grunted savagely, swiping her downward.

His blow should surely have destroyed his enemy; Lifedrinker's smoldering edge was wide enough, and with Victor's strength behind her, she would have cleaved him in half lengthwise. Something strange happened, however. Billowing steam rose from the ground and materialized out of the hot air, clouding Victor's view. A high-pitched screech resounded, echoing weirdly through the vaporous air, but not before Victor ripped Lifedrinker downward, aiming to destroy Hector utterly.

She rippled through the steam, sending it whirling away on superheated winds, and before he could stop the downward chop short, she bit into the stony ground with a tremendous crash and an explosion of basalt shards. Hector was gone.

Victor whirled in time to see a familiar ghostly form. Victoria hovered near the rift, and before her, condensing into flesh from the hot, moist air, was Hector; somehow, she'd transported him in her foggy tendrils away from Victor's destructive blow. Victor's fury soared to new heights. His vision darkened to murderous crimson so dense that he felt he was swimming in blood. He roared his frustration, fire erupting from his mouth, the flames limning his shoulders and arms torching upward in white-hot tendrils. He focused on Hector and ran, lifting Lifedrinker high again.

Victoria didn't stick around to watch; she spun and, trailing a cackling laugh, soared through the portal. Hector wasn't a fool; he could see his destruction written on Victor's face. Only two steps from the rift, he leaped for it, and despite Victor's explosive speed, his mad surge of muscular, rage-driven power, he was just shy of catching the Death Caster before he hit the weird tear in the universe. Victor screamed in wild, frustrated fury, continuing with his diving charge, hacking Lifedrinker at Hector's leaping form despite knowing he would come up short.

Hector wore a desperate grin, almost like he couldn't believe he was still alive, that he would escape. As his outstretched arms hit the rift, though, they were rebuffed. He came up against the tear in space and stopped short like he'd hit a solid wall. Victor, unable to comprehend what had just happened, didn't care—he finished his diving chop, and Lifedrinker buried herself in the center of Hector's spine, splitting through his torso and pinning him to the stone platform as she bit into it. Victor slammed into the stony ground beside Hector's much smaller form, still gripping Lifedrinker. He twisted her left and right, growling in savage pleasure as Hector screamed and wailed, thrashing his arms and legs.

Hector's lips twisted into a grimace, and he wheezed a defeated curse, "God damned System." Then Lifedrinker's ministrations rendered him incapable of speech, and Victor was too furious for words. The only sounds beyond the bubbling of lava, the rumble of the mountain, and the weird hissing crackle of the rift above them were Victor's growls and Hector's desperate mewling gasps. Lifedrinker bucked and throbbed, pulling the dregs out of Hector's Core. Victor watched through a deep, crimson haze as the Death Caster's pale, drawn flesh began to blacken and crumble from his bones in a fine, powdery ash.

The anger in Victor's heart throbbed with each beat, and as he watched his nemesis crumble into dust, he felt a deep, profound satisfaction. He'd destroyed his enemy, answered the challenge to his bloodline, avenged himself against the man who'd trapped him, and redeemed his failure, his mistake that had enabled this man's foul attack on his friends and soldiers. When nothing was left of Hector other than a pile of black ash, a hissing, sizzling pop

resounded through the air, and Victor looked up in time to see the rip in the air disappear in a brilliant flash of white light.

As the mountain bucked and throbbed, he stood to his feet, and, still engorged by furious magma, he was barely able to comprehend the System messages blinking before his eyes, one of which had been there for several minutes already:

*****Transport Refused: A System invasion commander may not flee the field during combat.*****

*****Congratulations! Challenge of Conquest Completed! You have put an end to the invasion from the world of Dark Ember. Prince Hector of Heart Rot is no more. The enemy stronghold will suffer imminent destruction. Should you survive, claim your reward at any other outpost System stone. Rewards due: Colony Stone and a Chest of Conquest.*****

Victor glanced at the text, flicking the messages away in his rage-addled state. He turned to look around the caldera. Nothing in sight lived. He saw flowing magma, jets of superheated black smoke and steam, and trembling, lurching stone in every direction. The air was dark with smoke, though he thought he could glimpse some brighter light in one direction. He wasn't sure why, but he began to laugh as he loped that way, fearlessly stepping into magma, riding the roiling, heaving ground as though he was born to it. He could hear the angry rumble of the mountain beneath him, could feel it ready to burst.

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“Yes!” he roared, his voice thick with wild, mad laughter. “Yes! Shout your fury to the world, hermano!”

#

“Gather the dead as we run! Put them in your storage containers,” Valla screamed, looking up to the billowing clouds of black smoke and thick orange lava flows beginning to pour from the distant volcano. The sky had grown light with the dawn, illuminating the destruction all around the remnants of the ninth cohort. She'd never seen a volcano before, didn't know what it would be like if it erupted, but something in her knew they had to get further away. She led by example, dashing from body to body, throwing them into her storage rings. The soldiers did the same, and she could see Kethelket's people flitting on their dark wings up and down around the scattered battlefield and broken encampment.

When she'd picked up at least a dozen corpses and didn't see any others nearby, she gathered Edeya's still-unconscious form into her arms and channeled Energy into her wings, flapping them to bring her aloft. “To the west! Rally to the west!” she screamed, and though she wanted to streak away, riding the wind to a distant hilltop far from the volcano, she held herself back, watching the poor, beleaguered soldiers still afoot, trying to hurry away from the enraged mountain. She couldn't get an accurate count in the messy, sporadic line, but she didn't think there were more than a few hundred.

Less than half of the cohort and the reserves had survived the night, but judging from the System message she'd just seen, at least the battle was won. She hoped Rellia and Borrius would be smart enough to heed their instinct, that deep-seated primal desire to live, and get away from the rumbling, angry mountain. Surely, they'd already put many miles between themselves and its

smoldering slopes. Spiraling slowly, using the wind to keep herself aloft without straining her muscles, she looked down at Edeya, still wan, still hardly alive, and she wondered what it would take to wake her. The conquest was over—Hector was dead. Why hadn't she recovered?

Occasionally, she'd swoop low and shout encouragement to the fleeing soldiers. They were exhausted, but they were Energy users, and the Glorious Ninth had plenty of troops in the fourth and fifth tiers. With a grimace, Valla acknowledged the cold truth that most of the deaths had probably come from the lower-tier ranks. These survivors, bloody, filthy, and exhausted though they were, flew over the ground on powerful legs, gaining strength and momentum despite their hard labor—their Cores were recovering.

As their flight lengthened into dozens of minutes, they received another boost as streams of thick, potent yellow Energy began to flow toward them from the distant battlefield. The System had finally agreed that the fight was won and was delivering their reward. Valla knew what was coming and didn't want to be airborne when the surge hit her. She watched as the Naghelli and a handful of Ghelli flyers came to the same conclusion, hurrying to the ground ahead of the rushing, yellow ribbons.

She'd just landed when Lam fluttered down beside her. "I was looking for her! Thank you for bringing her out!"

Valla held Edeya close, offering Lam a fierce smile. "Victor told me to get her."

"Thank the roots he awoke. Whatever he did up in that volcano, it won the day. Do you think . . ." Lam let her words trail away, but Valla knew what she was going to ask—did she think Victor had lived?

"I don't feel like he's dead, but I suppose I can't really know. I hope he can get away before . . ."

Her words were cut off as a river of Energy smashed into her, and a similar one hit Lam. They both cried out in ecstasy, and though she tried not to, Valla dropped Edeya to the hilltop as her arms flew wide, and she lost herself in the euphoria.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 60 Sword Dancer, gained 20 agility, 20 dexterity, and have 16 attribute points to allocate.*****

*****Level 60 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Ordeni Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 70. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.*****

The message awaited her when she fell to her feet and regained her mental faculties. "Two levels," she said to Lam as the other woman staggered to her feet.

"Three!" Lam replied, stooping to pick up Edeya. Valla grasped her shoulder, stopping her short.

"Let me carry her. My wings can ride the wind." She'd seen how the Ghelli flew; they had to flap their little sets of wings rapidly, and she knew it was tiring. Lam, herself, had told her she couldn't fly very far, even when rested.

“Ah. Thank you, then.” Valla stooped to pick up Edeya, and that’s when the mountain exploded. Even where she stood, some six leagues from the mountain, Valla was thrown to the ground. The air boomed with a continuous thunderclap sound that temporarily deafened her. As she struggled to her hands and knees, eyes on the distant peak, the ground bucking and shaking underneath her, she felt the flow of hot, furious Energy rippling through the air, dwarfing the Energies in her Core like grains of sand whipped aloft by a hurricane.

The mountain was ejecting a plume of ash and smoke high into the sky, towering toward the firmament, flashing and rippling with menacing colors—grays, blacks, and, lower down, reds and oranges. The sky darkened as the ash cloud spread, and Valla finally regained her feet. Orange rivers ran down from the mountain’s peak, and she wondered how far they’d reach before the volcano’s fury was spent.

“It feels like Victor!” Lam screamed, and Valla knew what she meant—the fury and hatred in the air reminded her of Victor’s aura when she’d first felt its full weight, though it was a thousand times heavier.

“We need to keep moving!” She bent to pick up Edeya, and as she and Lam retook the air, she could see the surviving members of the ninth cohort had similar ideas; they raced pell-mell away from the mountain toward the distant clear sky in the west.

#

When Victor came back to himself, he was utterly disoriented. He sat up, blinking rapidly, staring at his environment for several long minutes before blurry memories began to fill the gaps in his mind. He sat on warm, ash-covered stone, and, looking around, he realized it was a boulder the size of a small house. All around him was a dim, smoky wasteland. Leafless, blackened trees dotted a nearby hillside, but most vegetation was gone entirely, with nothing on the ground but ash, as far as he could see. A ticking, steaming river of half-hardened lava filled a gully to his left, and the sky was dark gray, barely lit by the faint white orb of the sun overhead.

“Volcano,” he muttered, his throat dry and his voice hoarse. In a series of images and feelings, he remembered what had happened, though it was like looking at a slideshow in his memory, not a movie. Flashes of the roiling caldera, the rift to Dark Ember, Victoria escaping, Hector dying to Lifedrinker’s bite . . .

“Lifedrinker!” Victor furiously scrabbled at her harness, only to find it gone; all of his belongings were gone save his helmet, his wyrm-scale vest, his dragonsteel belt, his bracer with Khul Bach’s shard, and his various storage rings. Panic sending his heart racing, he leaped to his feet. Like a cold shower, relief washed over him when he saw Lifedrinker lying on the boulder behind where he’d been sitting.

“Thank God, chica.” He breathed a deep sigh of relief, running his hands through his hair. He looked down at himself, half-naked as he was, and chuckled, pulling some new pants and boots out of his ring. “Shit!” he patted at his waist, realizing that his older dimensional pouches hadn’t survived. It had been so long since he’d organized his things that he didn’t even know what items he’d lost. Regardless, he knew his most precious belongings were in his rings; he hardly touched the pouches anymore.

Once he’d put on a new pair of self-sizing and repairing leather pants and a pair of sturdy boots, he scooped up Lifedrinker and turned his attention to the System messages that, at some point during his madness, he’d shoved to the side of his vision.

He vaguely remembered the first one:

*****Transport Refused: A System invasion commander may not flee the field during combat.*****

Victor laughed when he read it. He laughed and laughed, slapping his hands together as he imagined Hector’s thoughts when he’d realized he wasn’t going to escape. “That poor pendejo! First, he thought I’d kill him, then he thought Victoria saved him, then the System yanked it away!” Shaking his head in amusement, Victor looked at the next message:

*****Congratulations! Challenge of Conquest Completed! You have put an end to the invasion from the world of Dark Ember. Prince Hector of Heart Rot is no more. The enemy stronghold will suffer imminent destruction. Should you survive, claim your reward at any other outpost System stone. Rewards due: Colony Stone and a Chest of Conquest.*****

“Right.” He turned in a slow circle, looking through the dim, smoky air. He could see the volcano’s slope a dozen miles or more behind him. It no longer shook, and only a half-hearted plume of smoke continued to rise from its peak. The lava flows were still orange near the top but faded as they descended the slopes. “You were pissed, but you shouted out your rage all at once, eh, hermano?” He turned back to the System messages:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 59 Battlemaster, gained 20 strength, 18 vitality, 8 agility, 8 dexterity, 6 will, and 6 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Improved 3.*****

“Two levels and a breath Core rank, huh?” Victor nodded, looking up at the top of the smoking mountain. “Thanks, Hector.” His amusement was short-lived when he thought back further than his victory over the Death Caster. What damage had been done? How many lives had been lost because of Hector’s ambush, because Victor had let himself get trapped? He turned and looked over the ash-covered wasteland, wondering how many of his friends had escaped.

“Valla . . .” He reached into his Core and used some inspiration-attuned Energy to summon Guapo. As he swung onto his back, the Mustang knew where he wanted to go—the System said to collect his reward at an outpost, and the closest one was Sea Keep, west of the mountain. Valla had been on the same side of the mountain. It stood to reason that she and the surviving members of the Ninth would go that way. “Let’s go, buddy.” He slapped Guapo’s shoulder and leaned forward, urging the horse to pick up the pace. Hope and dread battled in his heart as he raced toward the distant sliver of blue sky.

Book 6: Chapter 60: Coming to Grips

Riding on Guapo, it only took a few hours before Victor cleared the area covered in soot by the volcano’s eruption. Even so, the sky remained dark, the sun obscured by the ash in the air, so much so that it felt like he was riding under heavy cloud cover. He might have thought that was the case if not for the gritty, stinging nature of the breeze that blew into his face as the Mustang charged over hills, raced through meadows, and splashed through streams and rivers.

Essentially, Victor retraced his journey from the Sea Keep with Valla, though he veered to follow signs of the Ninth’s passage. On many occasions, he’d spotted their tracks and even passed by more than one campsite, which made him wonder—how long had he been mad with the volcano’s rage? How long had it been since it erupted?

To Victor, it felt like he’d awoken the day after his battle with Hector, but if that were the case, he would have passed the fleeing soldiers by now; Guapo was far faster than they. So, in contrast to his relaxing journey from the sea with Valla, Victor urged Guapo to hurry, and he didn’t stop to rest. The spirit Mustang tore through the countryside, and despite his thundering passage, he hardly left a trail in his wake. Where other mounts might need Victor to skirt a rocky slope, Guapo pounded up it without slowing. While some creatures might need to hunt for hours to find a ford, Guapo tore through placid rivers, even leaping and swimming when shallow water couldn’t be found.

So, it was only midway through the second day of his journey when Victor caught his first glimpse of the sea and, with it, the tail end of the column of soldiers, the straggling remnants of the Glorious Ninth. They were in a staggered, disorderly line, wending their way up the curving gravel and dirt road to the keep. This far from the mountain, the sky was hazy but not heavy with the ash that had blotted the sun, making it a glowering orange ball. Looking east toward the distant volcano, it seemed like a great, cataclysmic storm hung in the air, and he wondered how long it would take for the ash to finish falling.

In no time, Guapo was pounding over the sandy beach toward the road, and some of the soldiers noted the sounds of his thundering hooves. He could see them stop and turn, then shout and wave their arms. Before he knew it, the entire line of rough-looking, beleaguered troops watched his approach. Victor hoped this was only a part of the surviving cohort—it looked like a much smaller group than when he’d last seen them marching.

Guapo rapidly climbed the steep road, approaching the rear of the ragged column, and slowed. As the thunder of the spirit horse’s steps faded, he heard a cheer rise up from the soldiers, and it twisted something in his gut. It took him a moment to realize he was scowling, that he’d let his inner disappointment and guilt show on his face. When the cheer faded, and some of the soldiers stepped

back, uncertainty on their dirty, haggard faces, Victor forced his brows to even out and spread his lips into something like a smile. He nodded to the cluster of men and women to his right and called out, "Are you just arriving?"

"Aye, Legate, sir!" one of the bigger, bolder soldiers shouted. He looked familiar, and Victor chased the memory in his mind, trying to remember if he knew the soldier's name. After a moment of staring, it clicked; he was one of the adventurers who'd approached him outside the Granite Pass just before any of this had started. Victor had sent him with his friends to join the ninth cohort. His frown returned when he wondered if the man regretted approaching him that day.

Reaching deep into his memory, he surprised himself when he asked, "Thed, right?"

"You remember me, sir?"

"Yeah, I do. Glad to see you made it."

"Yes, sir!" He pounded his chest. "Gave them undead a right thrashing. Shame we lost so many, but none went easy! We made them scum pay dearly!" Scattered cheers broke out among the disordered line of soldiers, and Victor took the cue; this wasn't the time to be morose. These men and women were celebrating being alive. Yet again, the Glorious Ninth had come through hell.

"Well fought soldiers. Thanks to you," Victor turned and gestured expansively, from the sea all the way around and back to the keep, "all of this land is ours. The invaders are dead or home licking their wounds, millions of miles away." Another cheer met his words, much louder this time. "Is your captain above?"

Thed frowned and shielded his eyes, looking up at Victor on his massive horse. "I, uh, I'm sorry, sir, but Captain Sarl didn't make it through the fight. Lieutenant ap'Lissa has taken command." He turned and squinted up the hill. "She's at the head of the line, near the gate." The words hit Victor in the gut like he'd swallowed a mouthful of cold stones. Sarl, his oldest friend in the world, the only man who might remember Victor the way he'd been when he came to Fanwath, was gone. He couldn't fake pleasantries after that. He nodded, lips pressed together, eyes distant, unfocused, and urged Guapo back into a canter.

Hearing Sarl was dead had sobered him immensely, and he began to wonder about others. Why hadn't Valla flown out to meet him? Was she dead? Injured? What about Kethelket? He heard soldiers shouting things at him. It sounded mostly like cheers, and Victor wanted to stop and scream at them. He wanted to let them know that he'd caused their losses, that if he hadn't gotten himself trapped, Hector's ambush wouldn't have been half as effective. If he'd been able to meet him and his bone dragon from the start, if he'd been bolstering the troops with his banner, they might have only lost a handful of soldiers in that battle.

He saw Lieutenant ap'Lissa standing before the gate, nodding to her troops as they went by, speaking quietly to other officers, one of whom was writing in a command book. When Victor jumped off Guapo with a massive thud and

dismissed his trusty mount back to the Spirit Plane, she stopped what she was doing and snapped a smart salute. All of them did. Victor wanted to ignore her and rush inside, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. It wasn't her fault that all of this had happened. Instead, he nodded to her and barked, "At ease." He stepped up to her, cutting off the flow of soldiers who all stopped, staring openly at their giant commander. "Lieutenant, I've been unconscious, it seems, after my battle with Hector. How much time has passed since the mountain blew?"

"Nine days, sir!"

"And our losses?"

"There are currently four hundred and sixty-three members of the ninth cohort, including the reserves we pulled in from the pass, and not counting those we left behind as garrison troops."

Victor wanted to exclaim, wanted to cuss, but he wouldn't let the soldiers think he was disappointed in them. How many had they had before the battle? A thousand? He knew the number had swelled far past six hundred with the reserves. "A tragic loss, but you should all be proud." He spoke loudly, ensuring the soldiers gathering behind him could hear. "And the Naghelli?"

"I haven't seen an official report, but we, unofficially, counted more than seventy flying ahead of us. Groups of them flew past a few times, too, picking up wounded and slower troops."

Victor dreaded the answer, wanted to slip past her and seek out the truth of his worry himself, but steeled himself and asked, "Tribune ap'Yensha?"

"She's been here since the first day! She flew back to scout out stragglers and check on us daily, too, sir." Relief washed over him, and it must have shown because the lieutenant added, "She seems quite hale, sir."

"And Captain Kethelket?"

"I haven't seen him, but at camp last night, some soldiers said they saw him flying with the other Naghelli."

Victor had heard enough. "All right. Back to your work; I'll head in." As they all saluted again, Victor stomped into the long gate tunnel and across the bailey to the inner gate. He'd only made it halfway through the yard before, in a flash of silvery, shimmering feathers, Valla hurtled over the inner wall and landed in front of him, smashing into his stomach with a furious hug. He wanted to laugh, joke about her crushing his ribs, but he couldn't find the humor in him. Despite his relief, he felt dour and depressed, and underlying those emotions was his guilt. Sarl was dead because of him. In a sudden wave of panic, other faces ran through his mind—Chandri, Lam, Edeya. He pushed Valla's shoulders, separating her from him so he could look her in the face.

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Tears flowed down her cheeks as she spoke, "I knew you'd return. Some feared the mountain took you. Some speculated you'd chased Hector through his portal. I could feel you, though. I knew you'd show up soon." Her smile was dazzling, her beauty something unearthly, and Victor's angry, sullen heart lightened. Even so, he couldn't stop the words that slipped from his lips.

"I killed them."

"The invaders? Hector? Catalina?" Valla's eyes narrowed, and her broad smile faded when she saw the look on Victor's face and heard the dour tone in his voice.

"No." Victor glanced around at the straggling soldiers working their way into the inner gate, giving him and Valla a wide berth. "No. I killed Sarl and the Ninth. I got myself trapped, Valla. That ambush was my fault."

Valla's left hand darted up to stroke his jawline, and she spoke instantly, without hesitation, "Hush! Don't you dare say that. Without you, how many soldiers would have died in this war? Sarl died a hero, Victor. Don't take that from him."

Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "What about Chandri? Edeya?"

Valla took a steadying breath and then said, "I haven't seen Chandri yet. Edeya is alive, but there's something wrong with her. She was frail, hardly breathing, and we feared she'd die if something weren't done soon, so I carried one of the surviving healers here. He's a Blood Caster and an Artificer; he's stabilized her and ensured her body won't waste away while we try to figure out the rest. Lam's with her in your house."

Victor started walking, and Valla hurried to keep pace, her long fingers gripping his wrist, almost like she feared he'd disappear or leave her. When he stepped into the inner courtyard, he saw a queue of soldiers lined up before the main doors of the keep. "What are they lining up for?"

"Their System reward. Everyone gets a conquest chest if they interact with the stone inside."

Thinking of the soldiers getting rewarded brought to mind the others who'd gotten the conquest challenge but hadn't been at the final battle. "Any word from Rellia? Borrius?"

"They're both fine. Rellia took her half of the cohort to Old Keep, and Borrius retreated to the High Keep ahead of the ashfall."

"Are they all getting awarded, too?"

"Yes! Everyone with the quest! Even those at the pass."

"Shit, that's good." Victor set his sights on his jade travel home and hurried toward it.

"It's proportionate to your contribution. I received a purple chest, and so did Kethelket. Some of the garrison troops only got green or blue chests."

“Green?”

“Seems to be lower than blue.” Valla hopped up the steps ahead of him because Victor had paused. He was too big to enter the home comfortably. With a moment's concentration, he reduced his height to be closer to Valla's, which was still incredibly tall by any human standard. He followed her into the home, but a dark thought had entered his mind. He'd ridden past the surviving soldiers; Valla had been in the keep. If neither he nor she had seen Chandri, didn't that mean she was dead? The idea brought a sick, fluttering lump into his throat, and he found himself holding his breath when he entered his foyer.

Valla tugged on his wrist, but he resisted, and she looked into his eyes again. “What is it?”

“I think Chandri's dead. I passed the soldiers. You . . . you would have known if she was here.” He balled up his left fist and pounded it on his forehead.

“Dammit! She was so full of life, Valla! She had dreams! I know that's stupid—everyone has dreams, but she'd just sat down with me and told me about them.” Victor leaned forward, hands on his knees, and Valla gently stroked the back of his neck. “What am I going to tell Thayla and Tellen?”

“You'll tell them the truth. Wait, though, Victor. I didn't study every face, and some of the first to arrive were the worst wounded, carried by the Naghelli. I haven't seen to them because the healers shoo us away. Kethelket and his people have made several trips to pick up stragglers. I didn't recognize every face, especially covered in ash and blood! She could be here. We'll check after you see Edeya, okay?”

“Is that Victor?” Lam called from off to the right. Victor straightened up, nodded to Valla, and walked into the short hallway leading to his library.

“You in there?”

“Yes!” Lam rushed into the hallway, and Victor immediately noticed something different about her. She was maybe a little taller, but her wings were much larger than before. All four of the shimmering, gossamer wings, though folded and hanging downward, were easily four feet long, and they shimmered with densely packed motes of golden Energy, far more than he'd noticed before. Moreover, it looked like many of Lam's tattoos had faded. Only a few with bright, shining azure ink remained on her forearms. Her eyes were brighter than ever, like backlit emeralds, and seeing her so glorious brought a smile to Victor's lips, banishing some of the storm clouds that had been following him.

“You advanced your race?” he asked, unconsciously touching his shoulder with his left hand, thinking about the tattoo Chandri had given him. It was still there, somehow surviving all of his racial advancements.

“I did! My award in the conquest chest was a ‘cake of heritage.’ It gave me five ranks. Victor, we can speak about happy news anytime. Please, come and look at Edeya! I’m so worried about her.” She turned, and he and Valla followed her into the library. He immediately saw his young friend sitting in one of the puffy, comfortable chairs, staring straight ahead, breathing slowly, hands folded in her lap. She looked pale and fragile, more so than when he’d last seen her, fresh and strong from her racial advancement. She wore a set of silky blue robes, and his eyes were drawn to a silver, rune-etched metal band about an inch thick around her forehead.

“Edeya!” he said, hurrying toward her. He took one of her hands in his and found it warm but limp. She didn’t react to him at all. “The hell’s going on with her?”

“She was catatonic, barely breathing. We struggled to get her to eat or drink anything, and the healer was afraid her body would wither and die. He crafted this crown that gives her some vitality, allows her blood to flow better, and gives her caretaker some control over her body—I can get her to walk beside me, eat, drink, and sleep. I can bring her to the bathroom . . .”

“Ah, sheesh.” Victor ran a hand through his hair, frowning at the blank-eyed woman. “She’s like a robot now? A living robot?”

“Robot?”

“I mean, she doesn’t do anything on her own? What did the healer say? What’s actually wrong with her? Brain damage?”

“We don’t know. When that traitorous bitch escaped . . .”

“Victoria did this?” Victor growled, scowling.

“Catalina. She was lying the whole time—she was Hector’s lover.” At Valla’s words, Victor felt his blood begin to boil, felt both his Cores begin to roil, and it wasn’t until he noticed Lam and Valla had taken a step back that he realized he was radiating hot, furious Energy. With a great effort of will, he dragged his Energy back into his Core and tamped down on his fury. With a deep, cleansing breath, he gently let go of Edeya’s hand and looked at Lam.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I found her in Vict . . . Catalina’s grasp, wrapped up in her mist, pale and dead-looking. When Kethelket drove Catalina off, destroyed her body, he said she didn’t seem to die, that she might have a . . . a, uh . . .”

Valla provided the word she was struggling to find, “Phylactery.”

“Right. When she was gone, I carried Edeya to your home, and she’s been like this ever since. She wasn’t injured physically, not that I could see. I even got her to drink a healing draught, but it did nothing.”

Victor felt a sinking sensation in his stomach as he heard the tale. Closing his eyes, he turned his gaze inward to his Core and followed his pathways into his hand that still grasped Edeya’s. He had no trouble finding her pathway in her palm and sending a tendril of Energy into it. He knew it should have been difficult to do so; he should have felt some resistance. There was nothing there, though, nothing in her pathways to contend with his thin tendril of inspiration-attuned Energy.

He guided it further into her, seeking out her Core. Her pathways were laid out similarly to his, though with more loops and swirls, and it took him a minute to find his way to the cool, pulsing blue heart of her Energy. It was there, alive and full of shimmering Energy, but it wasn’t animated. Nothing moved it. He’d hoped to see the problem there, that maybe Catalina had cut off her flow of Energy. Finding nothing amiss, he opened his eyes and pulled back his Energy with a growl of frustration.

“Do you see anything?” Lam asked, breathless hope in her voice.

“Not yet. Watch me a minute; I’m going into the Spirit Plane.” Victor knelt on the floor, and, taking Edeya’s hands in his, he cast Spirit Walk. He stood up immediately, surrounded by pristine, blue-tinted grass. When he looked around, he saw the smooth slope of the hillside falling away to the glittering, frothy waves of the sea. The water shone with the expansive, infinite dome of stars that seemed close enough to touch. He looked down at the grass in front of his feet, frowning at the spot where Edeya would be if she’d come through with him into the Spirit Plane.

At first, he saw nothing and almost canceled his spell in frustration, but then he caught a glimpse of a faint shimmering tendril of wispy, smoky air. Like a streamer of the Energy he sent to his ancestors when he cast Honor the Spirits. When Victor knelt to study the weird, wispy ribbon, it brought Belikot and what he’d learned about spirit shards and phylacteries to mind. Gently, he ran his translucent fingers through that ribbon, and he felt, fainter than the gentle brush of a butterfly’s wing, a wisp of emotion, of personality distinctly reminiscent of Edeya. Like a jolt of electricity, understanding hit him, and Victor ended his spirit walk and leaped to his feet. “I know what’s wrong with her.”