

## Victor BK6: Ch61

Book 6: Chapter 61: No Time for Blame

“You do?” Lam leaned forward, hope in her eyes. Victor wanted to comfort her, to give her good news, but he felt such an overwhelming sense of frustration and defeat that he had a hard time keeping it out of his voice.

“Yeah. Victoria or Catalina, whatever the bruja’s name is—I’m pretty sure she was capturing Edeya’s spirit when you and Kethelket interrupted her.”

“What does that mean?” Lam pressed, kneeling before Edeya, grasping her hand between hers.

“She took it with her, well, most of it. There’s a sliver of her spirit still in here, a shard.” Victor gently stroked Edeya’s pale hair, pushing a loose tendril away from her face. “It’s what’s keeping her alive.”

“Took it where?” Valla’s voice was hard, hinting at pent-up violence.

Victor groaned and stood up, looking away from Edeya. He felt frustrated and angry, but worse, he felt the warm, painful heat of shame flushing the blood up the back of his neck. He squeezed his eyes shut and, while he spoke, thumped a clenched fist against his forehead. “She slipped past me. Through the portal. She’s back on Dark Ember, I guess.”

“Dark Ember?” Lam frowned and continued to massage Edeya’s hand. “Can’t we call her back? She’s still alive; there’s still part of her spirit here! You said so yourself! Will she recover? Can this fragment be strengthened?”

“I don’t know,” Victor groaned. “God dammit! I should have chased that lying . . .” Victor frowned from Lam to Valla, saw the anger and frustration in their eyes, and knew he couldn’t be the one to act out right now. As much as he cared about Edeya, Lam cared more. As much as he wanted to blame himself for everything, that wouldn’t get her spirit back. “She interrupted me fighting with Hector. She almost helped him escape, too, but he couldn’t go through the portal. The System wouldn’t let him—something about an invasion leader not being allowed to flee.”

“Is the portal gone?” Lam asked, her eyes drifting to the exit as though she’d charge away, up into the volcano, right that second.

“Yeah, it’s gone. Nothing would last through that eruption, but it was closed even before the mountain blew. Screw this.” Victor took Lam’s shoulders in his hands, turning the woman he’d once idolized to face him. “I’ll get her spirit back, Lam, or I’ll die trying.” She stared at him with those glittering jewel-like eyes. She was a woman so beautiful he’d struggled to breathe in her presence when he’d first arrived as a slave to Greatbone Mine. Where once she’d looked at him with pity,

kindness, and encouragement, she now looked at him with hope, a kind of beseeching, searching look in those eyes.

“I believe you, and I’ll help.”

“As will I, Lam!” Valla reached out to grasp Victor’s shoulder with one hand and the back of Lam’s neck with the other. They stared at each other, and it was evident in their eyes what they were saying, even without words; they’d do whatever they could to get Edeya’s spirit away from Victoria, no matter what.

“Victor, claim your reward from the System. I don’t know how it works, but we’ve yet to get the promised colony stone. I think, if we plant it, whatever settlement we build around it will be our capital.”

“And if we have a capital stone, it might open up options for world travel,” Lam said, finishing Valla’s point. “Rellia will be angry if we plant it without consulting her . . .”

“I don’t care.” Victor let go of Lam’s shoulders and turned toward the exit. “If you want, send her a message. Tell her what’s going on. If she has another idea, I’ll listen.” He took two steps, then paused. “Valla, can you show me where the wounded are? I’d like to see if Chandri . . .”

“Of course!” Once again, she took his hand and started walking, tugging him toward the exit.

“I’ll stay with Edeya.” As Lam spoke, Victor looked back to see her sitting in the seat she’d pulled close to Edeya’s. She held the girl’s hand and stared at her face, whispering something only she could hear. He wondered if it was a prayer or a promise.

When they stepped outside into the courtyard, Victor came face to face with Kethelket and, beside him, the gigantic stranger who’d intervened in the battle with Hector and his dragon skeleton. In the light of day, the man was no less impressive. If Victor had never seen the people of Zaafor, the giant Degh, the animalistic Vesh, and the snake-like Yazzians, he might have been more taken aback by the newcomer’s massive, draconic form. With his size currently reduced, even Victor had to look up to meet the man’s gaze. After staring for a half second, he reached out and took the hand Kethelket held out. “I’m glad you made it.”

“As am I, Victor. Your victory and survival won the day. Ancestors! I would have loved to see that battle!”

“I as well,” the big stranger rumbled. Victor let go of Kethelket’s hand and looked at the scaled man, frowning with suspicion. He knew he didn’t have a right to accuse him of anything, but after Victoria’s lies, after learning she was really Catalina and had been playing him all along, he felt it would be stupid to trust anyone blindly.

“I’m sorry, but your name. Did you tell it to me during the fight? I was enraged . . .”

“I am Lesh’ro’zellan, and I hail from the world of Ashenshoal. Simply call me Lesh.” His voice was deep with a kind of guttural edge, especially when he pronounced the Z in his name.

“I know you helped Valla against Hector, so you have my thanks, but tell me, what brings you to Fanwath? Why were we so lucky to have your aid?”

The big, darkly scaled man’s mouth was surprisingly expressive as it twisted into a snarl. He practically spat as he growled, “The System.” Victor watched his taloned hand twist on the heavy, black metal haft of his huge, staff-like cudgel.

“Can you elaborate?”

Kethelket’s nervous fidget and sour expression weren’t lost on Victor as he said, “Perhaps now isn’t the time for that tale, Legate. It’s a lengthy one.”

“Just a quick summary, maybe?” Victor stared hard into the draconic man’s darkly gleaming green eyes. Victor might have expected an answer or a polite refusal, but he didn’t expect Lesh to fall to a knee before him, holding his enormous cudgel lengthwise on his open palms.

“I offer you my service, Lord Victor. As such, I cannot build upon a foundation of lies or deceit. I came here, to this world, to slay you.”

Victor felt something in him break free, something he subconsciously always held in check. Without thought, he severed his connection to his Alter Self spell, surging in size while he ripped Lifedrinker from the temporary loop at his belt. His aura fell around him, heavy and dense with murderous intent. As his muscles bunched and coiled, as Valla stumbled away from him, he loomed over Lesh and growled, eyes red with rage and smoldering heat, “You what?”

To his credit, Lesh didn’t flinch. “I answered a System quest, months and months ago, to come to this world and slay the one known as Victor.”

“You dare to challenge me?” If he thought about it, Victor would have recognized his Quinametzin pride asserting itself. As it was, he was barely cognizant of his ancestral need to be respected and dominate his surroundings. He twisted his hands on Lifedrinker and felt her vibrate with eagerness. Was this a worthy foe at last? He could smell something in the man kneeling before him, something ancient that echoed in his blood memories. “Kneeling . . .” his voice rumbled. Again, something deep in him recognized the respect Lesh was showing, and that recognition gave Victor just enough control to stay his hand.

“Yes, I kneel. Months ago, the thought of it would have broken me. Months ago, I would have sooner dug out my own heart than bend the knee to anyone. That was before I met you, Victor, before I watched you battle a legion of undead. It was before I saw you breathe fire that would have shamed every dragonkin on Ashenshoal. It was before I followed you through these lands and saw the respect your actions demanded. When I measured myself against you, I found myself wanting. Lord Victor, I stood tall on Ashenshoal because strength earns respect there, and I was stronger than any in my clan. I believed myself stronger than those in the capital, Garspire. When I witnessed your might, I knew I must follow you rather than attempt to slay you by underhanded means.”

“And I should believe you?”

“Victor!” Valla tried to interject, but he ignored her, staring at the kneeling dragonkin.

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“I have rejected the System’s quest, forfeiting my reward. To return to Ashenshoal would be shameful, for I will not lie. Nothing matters more to me than my honor, and so I give up my life, my love, my people, and my home. I will follow you, or I will die by your hand.” He lifted his great staff-like cudgel higher as though offering it to Victor, and that angry voice in Victor’s heart subsided, appeased by the man’s obeisance.

“Keep your weapon,” he growled, pushing his rage back into his Core and straining to pull in his aura.

Lesh didn’t move as he spoke again, “Will you accept me into your service?”

His instinct was to say yes, but Victor had newfound doubts about his instincts. Hadn’t he decided Victoria wasn’t a threat? Hadn’t he nearly trusted her to go free on more than one occasion? Hadn’t he refused to let Sarl collar her? Wasn’t Sarl dead now because of his sentimentality and desire to see the good in everyone? Rather than say yes or no, Victor looked down at Kethelket, and the heroic, dark-eyed prince nodded to him. He trusted Kethelket’s judgment, even if he couldn’t trust his own. Still, he had questions. “Why the hell did the System give you a quest to kill me?”

“I have no idea.” Lesh offered nothing more, but his words rang true to Victor.

“It’s not unheard of,” Valla said, “For the System to take an interest in a person. There are stories of heroes, champions of the Ridonne . . .”

Victor didn’t want to speculate right then. He had a million things on his mind, and the System’s apparent vendetta against him wasn’t something he could spare the mental bandwidth on. “I accept your service, Lesh, but we need to talk about what that means. Later though, this isn’t the time.”

The man's draconic face split into a grin that exposed fangs that would've given a Bengal tiger a run for its money as he leaped to his feet. "Thank you, Lord . . ."

"Just Victor."

"Thank you, Victor! What task shall I busy myself with?"

"I'm going to visit the wounded. Can you and Kethelket meet me by the System stone?" Victor turned to Kethelket as he spoke.

"We can," the dark, one-time prince said with a salute.

"Kethelket. Lesh." Victor held up a hand, forestalling their departure. "Thank you for fighting with me against Hector and his people. Thank you for saving the lives of people I care about. It's not lost on me that if it weren't for you, I'd be mourning a great deal more today. I'm grateful."

Kethelket didn't object, nor did he belabor the issue. He nodded and turned, and Lesh followed suit. Victor watched them march up the steps and into the keep, a giant, leather-clad, scale-covered hulk and a much smaller, slender man with moth-like wings glimmering with bright, ochre patterns. He couldn't imagine a more dissimilar pair, but they seemed easy in each other's company. "They've made friends quickly."

Once again, Valla's fingers entwined with his. "After you chased Hector up the mountain, the two of them laid waste to the undead, rallying the soldiers and driving them away from the encampment. I believe a strong bond was forged that night."

"And you?"

"Oh, I slew my fair share." She squeezed his hand. "Come, make yourself smaller again, and let's see if Chandri's in the barracks."

Victor took her advice, recasting Alter Self, and followed her into a different keep entrance and down a short hallway that opened into a much longer one lined with doors. A soldier sat at a desk in the hallway, and she jumped up, face flushed, saluting Victor and Valla. She stood, straight as a board, staring into the wall opposite her desk until Valla said, "At ease, Sergeant. Do you have a list of the wounded?"

"Yes, ma'am!" She turned to the desk and lifted a clipboard, dense with script.

"Who are you looking for, ma'am?"

"A soldier named Chandri. I don't recall what unit . . ." Victor started to say, but the young sergeant perked up and lowered the clipboard.

"She's here, sir! Healer Breeva just approved and administered one of the regeneration draughts for her. She's in the first room on the left." She might have kept speaking, but Victor didn't hear her; his blood had rushed to his ears, throbbing and pounding as he hurried to the door and yanked it open. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it wasn't a room filled with six beds, most occupied by sleeping soldiers. He barely got hold of the door, halting it before it

slammed into the wall. When he, more calmly, peered through the doorway, scrutinizing the beds, his eyes finally found her on the third bed to the left. She was lying on her back, eyes closed, tightly swathed in blankets. Thick bandages covered her forehead and right eye, but the unbandaged side of her face was visible, and Victor recognized her immediately.

When he felt Valla next to him, also peering through the door, he asked softly, so as not to wake the sleeping soldiers, “Regeneration draught?”

“We’ve won quite a few from the System chests. I just looked at her patient notes—Chandri lost an eye, and her right arm was badly smashed. She was on the wall when Hector’s dragon skeleton tore it apart.” She wound her cool fingers around his wrist and added, “We should let her rest. The regeneration magic is powerful but works slowly.”

“Shouldn’t I sit with her?” Victor kept his voice hushed. He knew he should be worried about Chandri, upset that she’d been hurt so badly, but the fact that she was alive overwhelmed those feelings, filling him with relief that was so tangible he could taste it.

“Give it a little time; there’s still much for you to do today, yes? We can sit with her after we have some answers and plans regarding . . .”

“Edeya. The stone. Right.” Victor slowly closed the door. Then he led Valla out to the courtyard and into the central hall where straggling soldiers were still lined up, waiting for their turn with the System stone. Victor stood at the entrance, taking in the scene, amazed by how much the hall had changed since he and Valla had left. The garrison soldiers had been hard at work, it seemed.

Long tables lined both sides of the hall, three on each side, leaving a long central aisle strewn with colorful but mismatched rugs, likely taken from personal storage rings or those looted from the dead wampyrs. Warm light shone down from two Energy chandeliers hanging on the high rafters, and the smell of cooked food wafted from the plates and bowls in front of the many soldiers who’d gathered to eat. The mood was festive, and Victor could see why—these people were celebrating being alive, celebrating victory and a bright future despite their loss of comrades. More than that, every couple of minutes, another soldier received a magical chest delivered in clouds of green, blue, or even golden, steamy Energy.

“There’s Kethelket,” Valla pointed to the Naghelli leader sitting on a bench near the far end of the hall, watching the soldiers interacting with the System stone. Lesh was beside him, though he sat on the hard floor, his legs folded before him, studying a text of some sort. Victor walked toward them, nodding to the soldiers who grew quiet and stared as he and Valla passed. Her wings were folded tightly against her back, and Victor draped an arm over her shoulders, too happy to be near her to care what others thought about propriety.

“I can see from the lack of gloom that your friend lives.” Kethelket held up a mug of something steamy and asked, “Would you like some cider? It’s not something I pulled from my ring; the soldiers found an apple orchard in the hills to the east.”

“Ah! I knew it smelled good in here, but I hadn’t placed the scent.” Victor’s mouth had begun to salivate at the idea. “I’ll go to the kitchen in a while. Maybe after I clean up.”

“Will you claim your prize, Victor?” Lesh asked, looking up from his thick book.

“I’ll wait for the soldiers to finish. Looks like only a dozen or so still in line.” Victor studied the dragonkin momentarily, then asked, “How’d you get here, Lesh? A portal?”

“I used the System stone in our capital.”

“I know there are ways to open portals to worlds without using the System stones, but it’s not easy, is it? We had a powerful friend help us travel here from Zaafor.”

“No, not easy at all. None in my clan have the knowledge.”

Valla sat beside Kethelket and interjected, “Didn’t your cousin say she knew how to open portals? Or was that her powerful friend?”

“I . . . don’t remember. We talked about a lot in a short time. Even if she can make portals, do you think she can open one to anywhere?”

“What’s all this about?” Kethelket asked. “Portal to where?”

Valla turned to him and bluntly summarized, “Catalina has Edeya’s spirit, or most of it. We’re trying to figure out how we can get to her.”

“That’s the girl with the pretty blue wings?” Lesh asked, closing his book and, perhaps unintentionally, growling deep in his chest.

“Yeah.” Victor sighed and scratched his head, running his fingers through his hair. For a moment, he wondered why it was so stiff and clumpy before he realized his sweat had soaked up the ash in the air.

Kethelket took a sip of his cider. “Can you not summon her spirit? Rip it from that Death Caster’s clutches?”

“I don’t know. If so, it’s beyond what I know how to do.”

“Why not go to a hub world?” Lesh asked, his frown deepening.

Valla saved Victor from embarrassment by asking, “Hub world?”

Lesh looked at her with narrow eyes, then he turned to Kethelket and Victor, and when he saw no understanding in either of their faces, he said, “You’ve not traveled to a hub world?”

Kethelket shrugged. “I’ve been locked in a dimensional dungeon for the last few hundred years.”

Victor shook his head, and Valla said, “The rulers of this world have restricted access to the System stone in the capital. We can reach certain worlds from the other city stones, but I’ve never heard of a hub world.”

The draconic man took a deep breath and began a lengthy explanation in his rumbling, rather pleasant baritone, “Aha. Well, if the System gives you a colony or settlement stone, you’ll probably have limited world travel options at first, but I’m sure one of the options will be a hub world. A hub world is like a crossroads, a world where the people have worked hard to meet the System’s requirements to open more and more world connections. They do it in the hopes that their singular focus will facilitate trade and the flow of travelers and wealth, offsetting their neglect of other System options.”

“What other options?” Kethelket had grown very still, clearly intrigued by Lesh’s words.

“Hmm, let me see.” As he paused, Victor saw, for the first time, a tendril of greenish-gray vapor drift up out of Lesh’s snout. “On my home world, the rulers have concentrated their efforts on opening more and more dungeons to challenge us. The central goal of my people is always to improve individual strength and advancement. Every dragonkin lives with the ultimate desire to achieve evolution into a true dragon and, failing that, to have a clutch of strong children starting further along on the path than they were.”

“So, a hub world concentrates on world connections rather than dungeons?” Valla clarified, nodding her head.

“Yes, though there are myriad other ways to spend Energy at a colony stone.”

“No wonder those bastards have held onto power so long,” Victor growled, and he knew Kethelket and Valla would understand who he meant—the Ridonne.

“Uh, yes, well,” Lesh held up his thick book, “you can find knowledge about nearly any topic in a hub world.”

“All right,” Victor nodded, rubbing his chin. He turned back to the stone and saw that only three more soldiers were in the queue to interact. “It’s time I find out what the System decided I deserve as my award.”

Book 6: Chapter 62: Victorious

Victor waited until all of the soldiers who’d been lined up at the stone had collected their prizes and moved away. He’d hoped to be able to interact with the relatively small, slowly spinning System artifact without making too much of a scene, but his hopes were in vain. As soon as he strode forward, the hall grew quiet. People stopped eating, and their conversations lowered to hushed whispers. As he lifted his palm toward the stone, it stopped moving, but he hesitated, looking



toward Valla. He wasn't sure why; he needed to do this, had to find out if he'd be awarded the colony stone, but for some reason, he was nervous.

Valla sat on the bench near Kethelket, both looking small next to Lesh's hulking figure despite the dragonkin sitting on the floor. She looked him right in the eye and nodded, and something relaxed in his chest. Part of him was annoyed by the reaction. He was Quinametzin; why should he care what anyone thought? Was it not his right to claim his award for his contributions during the campaign? Victor growled, driving that voice down, and turned away from Valla, focusing on the weirdly shifting golden and silver runes that seemed to be buried just under the stone's surface. "Okay, System. You want me dead, huh? Well, tough shit, 'cause it ain't happening today. What you got for me?"

When his large, wide palm rested on the cool surface of the stone, the runes all flared for a fraction of a second, and then System messages flooded his field of view.

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You are victorious! Your exceptional bravery and skill have earned you the apex position in the campaign against the invaders from Dark Ember. Your pivotal role in vanquishing the enemy forces, defeating their commanders, and sealing the invasion portal stands unparalleled. For your heroic deeds, you will be awarded a legendary conquest chest, guaranteed to contain a colony stone, allowing you to establish a third System-recognized capital on the world of Fanwath. Do you wish to claim your prize at this time?\*\*\***

"Third?" Victor narrowed his eyes in confusion. Was there another capital on Fanwath? He'd thought Tharcray was the only one. Perhaps his confusion showed on his face because the whispers of anticipation became speculative murmurs, and Victor thought he saw movement to his left where Valla sat. Was she coming over? He shook the feeling off; it didn't matter if there was another capital somewhere. What mattered was that he needed this stone to set up the capital he and everyone else had fought for. There wasn't a menu or anything that he could interact with, so he just said, "Yes."

Nothing happened for a few seconds, and Victor began to reread the System message, wondering if he'd missed something. He'd just gotten to the part about his "heroic deeds" when, with little sizzling crackles, sparks began to pop into existence above the faded blue carpet at his feet. He stepped back and watched as more and more sparks sprang into existence, flashing and crackling. With each spark, a brilliant, shimmering golden cloud of smoke or mist or steam began to take shape. Before he knew it, the cloud had grown large enough to engulf him up to the waist. Excited chatter broke out in the hall as people leaped up from their seats and crowded closer.

Victor stood still, waving his hands through the cloud, unable to feel or smell it; he decided it was simply a visual artifact of whatever summoning magic the System used to conjure up his award. He'd wondered before, but the thought reoccurred to him that he had no idea if the awards the System granted were crafted on the spot from the System's tremendous stores of Energy or if it had awards in some magical dimension, a repository of sorts, and simply sent them forth with a kind of dimensional magic. He added the question to the list of things he didn't know and probably never would.

The sizzling, crackling flashes were new to him. He'd seen the System deliver items in colorful gasses, but never with all those sparks. They sort of reminded him of his glory-attuned Energy, and he began to get excited; was the System tailoring a prize for his particular affinity? It took longer than usual for the golden steam or smoke to fade away, but when it did, the crowd erupted in excited chatter and a smattering of applause—a large, golden, metallic chest sat at Victor's feet. "If size is any measure, you've won quite a prize," Kethelket said. Victor turned to the man, surprised by his nearness, only to find Lesh, Valla, and a dozen others had crowded close.

"Yeah." Victor felt he should say more, but he didn't have the words, and he still didn't feel like himself. He still had that nagging worry about Edeya hanging over him and the lingering guilt that hundreds had died because of his foolishness. With that thought, he clenched his jaw and tried to shake off the gloom—what good was he doing anyone by moping with self-doubt? Rather than saying more or worrying about what everyone around him was thinking, he lifted the metallic clasp on the chest and flung the heavy lid wide, sending it to crash against the back of the chest, straining the ornate hinges.

A cloud of golden steam rushed into the air, and Victor waved it away, peering inside the big, red-velvet-lined container. He leaned forward to look within, and behind him, he heard Valla sternly caution the crowding soldiers, "Stand back. Your legate will share with you what he wills." Victor heard more chatter, questions, exclamations, and further warnings, but he tuned them out as his eyes fell on the objects within. He reached down and picked up the first reward, a folded pile of what seemed to be supple, silky-smooth, black leather. A card embossed with golden, curly, elaborate lettering told him what it was.

He decided he'd put on a show for the soldiers; they'd been through hell, and he owed them at least that much. He turned and held the supple leather aloft and read the card, "Master-artisan-grade hide of a lava king."

All sorts of comments, questions, and exclamations resulted from his pronouncement, such as, "What's a lava king?" "Master artisan grade? Is that the highest?" "It must be magical!" "Is it because of the volcano?"

Victor laughed, sent the hide into his ring, and turned back to the chest. He purposefully ignored the object at the center and reached in to lift out a shimmering red-orange gem. As soon as he touched it, he felt the deep wells of Energy within it, and his magma Core flared and roiled. He held it aloft, turning so all could see it clearly, and read the card, "A legendary-tier magma-attunement gem. Use to enchant a suitably powerful artifact."

"What will you enchant, Legate?"

"Amazing!"

"Ancestors!"

"It has to be the volcano!" The same soldier piped up about the volcano again, and Victor couldn't help the smile that tugged his cheeks toward his ears. The

hype was getting to him. He sent the gem into his ring and reached into the chest again. He tried to grab a shimmering ball of golden Energy, but it wouldn't move, and as soon as he touched it, he felt the power within trying to flow into his pathway. He pushed his will against it and quickly pulled his hand away. It seemed the System would award him with an infusion of Energy, but he didn't want to do that yet. There was something else to examine first. He moved his hand to the right and lifted the next item and its card.

It was a black pouch the size of his fist, and when he read the card, the soldiers erupted in a clamor of disbelief and rowdy excitement, "One million magma-attuned Energy beads." Victor laughed, watched, and listened as the soldiers cheered, joked, and speculated about the amount, comparing it to their much smaller prizes. None seemed bitter, and the smiling faces told him they were happy. Their good humor and excitement made it seem like they were winning the prizes alongside him, and Victor was glad he hadn't taken his awards in private.

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"Two more!" Victor shouted, his deep, powerful voice booming over the noise. The soldiers grew quiet with anticipation, and he reached into the chest and touched the ball of golden Energy, this time allowing it to flow into his pathways. Victor had won Energy in System chests before and earned plenty of infusions after battles. This one was large, but nothing like he'd gotten after slaying the reaver army. It flowed into his Core, swelling each of his attunements to bursting before flooding into his body, lifting him off the ground. A golden, shimmering halo exploded around him, eclipsing the glow lamps in the hall.

The soldiers exclaimed, some of them shielding their eyes and stumbling back. Victor spread his arms and arched his back, enjoying the infusion, and, not for the first time, he noted the euphoria that came with it. Perhaps it was because of his underlying guilt, his worry about Edeya, but this time, he really noticed how his outlook changed—how, when the euphoria passed, he felt better, less troubled than before. It struck him how he always seemed to bounce back after traumatic, horrific ordeals, and he wondered how much of that was due to the Energy healing his mind as much as it did his weary body. Whatever the cause, Victor felt better, and it was with a wide grin that he read the new System messages floating before his eyes.

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 60 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Level 60 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Quinametzin 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.\*\*\***

Victor lifted his hands in the air, turned in a slow circle, and roared, "Level Sixty!" The crowd's reaction was thunderous, and Victor laughed when he heard them cheering, stomping, and howling. They slapped each other's backs, summoned drinks from dimensional containers, downed them, and shook each other, faces flushed with excitement. Looking over their heads, Victor saw the

crowd had grown, that most of the ninth cohort's survivors were now gathered in the great hall, and he nodded at them, proud and pleased that he could give them something more to celebrate. After a while, he shouted, "One more!"

When the noise died down, he reached into the chest and lifted the impossibly heavy, pint-glass-sized, oblong stone. It had six facets, each etched with the now-familiar gold and silver runes of the System. He held it aloft and shouted, "Our colony stone!" It probably weighed a hundred pounds, which was a lot for such a small item, but, really, nothing to Victor. He held it up for a long time as the crowd went wild again, and the chest disappeared in a cloud of golden steam.

After a while, Valla pushed closer to him and wrapped one arm around his waist, pressing herself against him. When he looked down at her, she smiled, and nothing but happiness could find a grip on his heart at that moment. Even when he looked around the hall, over the heads of the cheering soldiers, and saw a large group of Naghelli sitting at one of the now-empty tables with Kethelket, he didn't let dour guilt invade his mind. They weren't celebrating as raucously as the soldiers, but they wore friendly expressions, and he could see drinks in their hands. They'd lost many and suffered, but their long exile was over. They had a home. Plenty of people would think that was worth dying for—Victor certainly did.

A long time later, after much drinking, feasting, and story-telling, Victor and Valla left the celebration and moved Chandri to one of the empty rooms in his home, furnishing it for her with items taken from plundered storage containers. She was still out of it, her body working hard to regenerate her damaged and missing tissue. The process required Energy, and her Core had to slowly recuperate it, constantly being drained to feed the elixir she'd been given. While they were making Chandri comfortable, Lam spent time with Edeya, sending messages back and forth to Rellia; they were trying to figure out where Victor should plant the colony stone.

"How urgent do you think it is?" Valla asked. They'd put a comfortable, blue-upholstered couch next to Edeya's bed and sat on it together, watching her sleep.

"It?" Victor looked at Chandri and frowned. "Her healing?"

"No, I'm sorry. I was talking about Edeya."

"I don't know. I know I'm not an expert, but, well, forget that; I think I know more about Death Casters than a lot of people. I've certainly dealt with some real bastards in that regard." Victor chuckled at himself and scratched his head.

"What I'm trying to say is that it seems to me that Death Casters don't do things quickly. They have big plans that take years, decades, and centuries to put together. I think if Catalina were going to try to destroy Edeya's spirit, we'd have seen it by now. The attack she used on her, the way she snatched her spirit out of her, wasn't something she could do to me. Maybe not to you, either; she took Edeya because she's much weaker. I mean, in comparison to Catalina."

"That's not exactly good, though . . ."

“Well, it kind of is. What can she do with a single spirit that’s so many Energy tiers beneath her? Not much. She probably has rituals she performs, a way of gaining power from her victims, but I bet she gathers a lot of them. I bet she locks them away in a phylactery, something like the skull Belikot was inhabiting with his spirit shard. So, she has a big part of Edeya’s spirit, but we have part of it too. I don’t think she can do a lot with that. I think we’ll have time to figure out a way to help her. I have to think that, Valla, or I’m going to go crazy with worry and do something rash.”

“Something rash? I like it when you talk that way.” Valla snuggled closer into his side, and Victor couldn’t tell if she was being serious or teasing him. He decided he didn’t care. He’d already decided he wanted to enjoy good things while he could, and, despite his mistakes, as long as he wasn’t actually trying to harm the people he cared about, he wasn’t going to wallow in grief and guilt.

“What do you think about Lesh?” She sounded almost sleepy, and he wondered why she was bringing the dragonkin up if she was so tired.

“What? I guess I think he’s pretty cool. I mean, he helped a lot during the battle. I’m not sure I’m cool about him wanting to follow me or whatever, though. He’s pretty . . . intense.”

“He’s very strong. He reminded me of you when he faced off against Hector and his dragon skeleton. That weapon of his is conscious, I’m sure. He calls it Belagog. I asked him about it, and he offered to let me hold it, so I tried, and it fell to the ground, pulling me with it. I couldn’t budge it! Oh, he laughed raucously!”

“You think he was testing me when he held it out? You think I should have tried to take it?”

“Oh, that’s an interesting question! I hadn’t thought of that. It puts his supposed fealty in a new light.”

“Well, the System chose him to come after me for a reason. I figure we’re both kind of . . .” Victor frowned, trying to pick the right word without sounding like an ass. Finally, he sighed and just said what he’d been thinking. “I guess the System views us as overpowered for our level. Well, I think—what level is he?”

“I don’t know. Use your little scope thing on him!”

“My scope thing? Am I getting more articulate while you become less so?”

Her eyes narrowed mischievously. “Hush, pendejo.”

“Hey!” Victor’s outburst broke the spell of their whispered conversation, and Chandri groaned and turned to her side. Her unbandaged magenta eye opened a bare slit, and she stared at Victor and Valla for several seconds before recognition illuminated it, and she croaked out a question.

“What’s going on?”

Valla jumped up and gently smoothed Chandri’s hair, whispering softly, “Nothing, sorry we woke you. You were injured in the battle, but you’ll be fine. You need to rest.”

“Mm,” Chandri murmured something else, but Victor couldn’t make sense of it. Then she fell back asleep.

When Valla sat back down, he pulled her close, squeezing her into his side, and whispered, “So, are we going to talk about our Class refinements?”

“I already made my selection. I’m sorry, but I did it while you were missing, hoping it would somehow make it easier to find you.”

Victor’s eyes opened wide, and he stared at her for a long minute. How could she be so cool about something like that? She’d been fifth tier for longer than he’d known her. She had to have been bursting with excitement about the refinement. “Well?”

“Well, I chose something I thought Tes would approve of.” She grinned, leaning back, closing her eyes, and generally taking her sweet time. Victor reached toward her neck, pretending to choke her, lifting his upper lip in a snarl.

“If you make me choke it out of you . . .”

She clapped a hand over his mouth. “Hush! Okay, okay. My new Class is Storm Dancer, which, based on the description, will help me gain more offensive magic and skills to use while in flight. It’s an epic Class, and the prerequisites were interesting. I had to have the ‘power of flight,’ affinity with air-attuned Energy, and a previous ‘dancer’ Class.”

“That’s awesome, Valla! You were a Sword Dancer before, yeah?”

“That’s right.” She smiled, clearly pleased with herself. Victor pulled her tight again, and they snuggled side by side for a few minutes before she said, “Well? What about you?”

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“You mean my refinement?” Victor whispered, leaning close and resting his cheek against Valla’s head as she leaned into him. “I haven’t looked yet. I’m nervous about it, and, well, we’ve been busy.”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah, the whole reason I took this Battlemaster Class instead of a legendary option was because it’s supposed to open up better Classes or something. What if it didn’t?”

“I wouldn’t worry. Even if you were stuck with keeping Battlemaster, it’s not as if it’s weak. My new Class isn’t legendary. Should I be ashamed?”

Victor could tell from her tone that she wasn’t upset; she was teasing. Nevertheless, he felt bad for his choice of words. “I didn’t mean that. I just . . .”

“Hush; I know what you meant.” She pulled away from him and gestured to Chandri. “She’ll probably sleep through the night. Why don’t we go someplace we can talk.” Victor let her pull him up from the couch and followed her into the hallway, then down to their bedroom. They had a table and chairs in the corner to the left of the door, but he walked past and sat on the thick red rug beside the bed. Valla sat down in front of him and waited expectantly.

“All right. Let me pull up the options.” He activated his status page, gave his attributes a quick once-over, and then mentally selected the blinking “Class Refinement” tab. The first option filled his view:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 1: Quinametzin Foe Slayer - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Sufficiently advanced Quinametzin bloodline. 2. Epic-level Berserk or Berserk-like ability. 3. Epic-level strength or vitality. You have unlocked the secrets of one of your primogenitors’ Classes. Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality.\*\*\***

“Do you remember the Quinametzin Foe Slayer I was offered last time?”

“The name is familiar . . .”

“It’s my first choice this time. Um, it’s legendary, and basically, all it says is, ‘Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood.’ The Class attributes are strength and vitality.”

“It doesn’t sound bad. I imagine if it’s only granting you increases to two attributes, they’ll be significant.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Victor shrugged. “Let’s see what option two is.” He mentally selected “Next,” and his eyes widened as he read the description.

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 2: Warlord - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Prior Class levels in Battlemaster, Martial Sage, or Combat Savant. 2. Sufficiently advanced bloodline. 3. Sufficiently advanced weapon skills. 4. Sufficiently advanced attributes. 5. A sufficiently advanced Core with appropriate affinities. 6. A history of leading followers into large-scale conflicts and achieving victory. Class attributes: Vitality, Intelligence.\*\*\***

“Well, shit. I guess Khul Bach knew what he was talking about.”

“Warlord?” Valla’s voice was hushed as she leaned toward him, clenching her fists excitedly.

“Yep! It lists Battlemaster as a prerequisite, but also some other Classes I haven’t heard of, Martial Sage and Combat Savant.”

“Really? It makes you wonder if other worlds have more knowledge of Classes and their refinements.”

“Wonder? Nah, I’m certain they do. I bet, for example, whatever world Tes was operating out of, the one with the guild she was a member of, has entire libraries dedicated to the subject.”

“You think so? Do you think the ‘hub worlds’ Lesh mentioned will have something like that?”

“I mean, they must. Don’t you think? Imagine how much money people could make offering access to their secret Class tomes. On the other hand, I guess there are probably sects that don’t let anyone know their secrets.” Victor shrugged. “Something we can try to find out, huh?”

“Yes! Do you have other options?”

“Let’s see.” Victor could see that another option awaited because of the still-blinking “Next” floating on his System interface, but he didn’t know if it was simply the old “keep your current class” option. He selected it:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 3: Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Titan, giantkin, leviathan, behemoth, or colossus bloodline. 2. Rage or rage-derived affinity. 3. Magma, or magma-derived affinity. 4. Berserk or berserk-like ability. 5. Marked by the mountain’s fury. You have discovered the depthless anger of a mountain’s heart, and the furious spirit of that mountain has marked you as kindred. Accepting this new Class will further mark you as a herald of the angry, sleeping gods of the earth, reminding the waking world of the smoldering anger that rests in their hearts. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will.\*\*\***

“Holy . . .” Victor struggled for words, so many questions springing into his mind that he couldn’t get his tongue to form them one at a time. As Valla stared at him, he finally blurted out, “Have you ever heard the System describe anything as a god or gods?”

“The System? Never.”

“I can’t tell if it’s being, like, figurative or literal, but it seems to be calling volcanos sleeping gods.”

Valla’s eyes widened. “Back up, Victor. What’s the Class?”

“Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath. It’s also legendary, and it has some pretty wild prerequisites. I think the fifth one is the hardest—a person has to have been ‘marked as kindred’ by the ‘furious spirit’ of a mountain. Also, it requires specific bloodlines, rage, and magma affinities. Like, I can’t imagine those combinations are common.”

“Does it interest you more than the Warlord class?”



Victor thought about her question. He'd taken the Battlemaster Class specifically to try to get the Warlord Class offered to him. Now, he had it before him and found himself less than enthused. Something in him was vibrating with excitement about the herald Class, though, and he didn't have to try very hard to see the root of his enthusiasm. He knew it was his Quinametzin nature. He knew it was his memory of the volcano's power, the heat of its fury in the air. The volcano had saved him. More than that, it had saved the people he most cared about.

Victor had truly felt the hand of something unimaginably powerful. He'd bathed in its Energy, incorporated it into himself, and turned it against his enemies. He'd met a Warlord, one who'd come to dominate his world with that Class, but what was he next to a volcano? Sure, Warlord Thoargh was strong; he'd intimidated Victor and chased him out of his world, but would he be able to stand in a volcano's fury unscathed? Victor didn't think so. This Class, this Herald of the Mountain's Wrath, seemed to be offering him the chance to take what he'd experienced inside the volcano and carry it out into the world. "Worlds," he corrected himself.

"Hmm?"

"Will you be angry if I don't take the Warlord Class?"

"What? Why would I be angry? It's Khul Bach you might have a problem with."

"Tough. I'm Quinametzin, not Degh, and everything in my blood is screaming for me to take this Class." It was true. He felt it in his bones, in his blood, and in his spirit, a deep reverberating sureness. He'd speak to Khul Bach about it eventually, but he didn't need the old giant's advice right then. If Khul Bach had never heard of the Class, he might argue, might try to change his mind, and Victor didn't want to deal with that. Khul Bach didn't know what he'd felt when he'd stood in that caldera, steeped in the Energy of the Volcano. There was something there, a connection that couldn't be described with words.

"The, um, mountain herald one?" Valla was smiling, looking at him in a way that he'd come to recognize as loving acquiescence; she knew he'd made up his mind. "Shouldn't you at least see if there are more choices?"

"Yeah, good call." Victor advanced the selection screen and was strangely relieved when he read:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 4: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.\*\*\***

"No other options."

"So, you're sure?"

"Yeah, more sure than I've felt about anything for a long time."

"Well, the Warlord Class will probably be available at seventy if you change your mind." Valla laughed and shook her head. "Imagine! I never thought I'd be talking so blithely about reaching level seventy!"

Victor struggled to find any trace of his earlier gloom as he leaned forward to kiss her. She gently returned the affection, reaching up to lightly scratch the short, stiff hair on the sides of his head with her nails. Victor felt like melting into her embrace, but he chuckled, pulling himself away. “All right, I’m doing it.” Before any doubt could find its way into his heart, Victor scrolled back to the third refinement option and selected it. Warmth rushed through his body as System messages scrolled before his eyes.

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have refined your Class: Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! World-first Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath! Feat Awarded: Mountain’s Resilience.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Wake the Earth – Basic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Mountain’s Resilience: The strength of the mountain infuses your very bones. Like the mighty rocky slopes of a slumbering god, you are resilient against the elemental Energies. You will take 80% less damage from earth, 80% less damage from fire, 50% less damage from air, and 25% less damage from water. These resistances will stack with other sources of protection.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Wake the Earth – Basic: Remind the earth under your feet of the fury that lies dormant in its depths. When you cast this spell, you will cause a violent upheaval by transferring some of your Energy into the ground beneath your feet. The size and magnitude of the upheaval will depend on the Energy you unleash. Energy Cost: Minimum 2500, scalable. Cooldown: Medium.\*\*\***

“Uh, this is awesome.” Victor swiped the last message away and, as he refocused on his surroundings, saw that Valla had moved away from him, standing by the door. It was only then that he realized the air was full of smoke.

“You’re going to burn up the furniture!” Valla cried. Victor looked down and saw the carpet turning to ash in a circle around him and his body outlined in smoldering flames.

“Oh shit!” Victor turned his gaze inward, saw that his pathways were absolutely flooded with magma-attuned Energy, and laboriously forced it back into his lungs and then into his breath Core. As he did so, the flames flickered and winked out, and the heat radiating from his flesh faded to a much more tolerable level. He looked at Valla sheepishly, “Sorry about that.”

She arched an eyebrow and stepped closer to him. “Are you pleased with your choice?”

“Yes! I got a title and feat for being the ‘world-first’ in my new Class. That’s never happened before!”

“Hmm,” she nodded, tapping a nail thoughtfully on her chin, “I’ve heard of that. Obviously, it happens less frequently nowadays, but when Fanwath was new, many such titles were handed out.”

She walked in a circle around him, stomping on the still-smoldering carpet. “Well? Tell me about what you gained.”

Victor joined her, stomping on the ruined carpet with his much larger feet. “All right, I’ll give you the details, but then I want to hear more about your new Class.”

“I’ll make that bargain, but let’s go sit upstairs while this room airs out.”

“Will it?” The bottom level of Victor’s home was devoid of windows; his one big complaint about it.

“I’ll get a wind gust circulating, just a moment.” While Valla concentrated, a soft, gentle breeze flowing from her outstretched hand, Victor pulled up his status sheet and perused the details. He wanted to get the numbers right when he and Valla compared their gains:

**Status**

**Name:**

**Victor Sandoval**

**Race:**

**Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 1**

**Class:**

**Herald of the Mountain's Wrath - Legendary**

**Level:**

**60**

**Breath Core:**

**Elder Class - Improved 3**

**Core:**

**Spirit Class - Advanced 8**

**Breath Core Affinity:**

**Magma - 9**

**Breath Core Energy:**

**2200/2200**

**Energy Affinity:**

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

**Energy:**

**23243/23243**

**Strength:**

370

**Vitality:**

475 (523)

**Dexterity:**

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

190

**Agility:**

213

**Intelligence:**

172

**Will:**

553

**Points Available:**

0

**Titles & Feats:**

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

**Skills:**

**System Language Integration**

**Not Upgradeable**

**Spirit Core Cultivation Drill**

**Advanced**

**Breath Core Cultivation Drill**

**Advanced**

**Cooking**

**Basic**

**Animal Taming**

**Basic**

**Unarmed Combat**

**Basic**

**Knife Mastery**

**Basic**

**Spear Mastery**

**Basic**

**Bludgeon Mastery**

**Improved**

**Axe Mastery**

**Epic**

**Grappling**

**Advanced**

**Sovereign Will**

**Advanced**

**Titanic Leap**

**Improved**

**Spells:**

**Iron Berserk**

**Epic**

**Inspiration of the Quinametzin**

**Epic**

**Channel Spirit**

**Improved**

**Enraging Orb**

**Basic**

**Globe of Insight**

**Improved**

**Project Spirit**

**Improved**

**Dauntless Radiance**

**Basic**

**Heroic Heart**

**Basic**

**Spirit Walk**

**Basic**

**Tether Spirit**

**Basic**

**Harsh Light of Justice**

**Improved**

**The Inevitable Huntsman**

**Improved**

**Aspect of Terror**

**Advanced**

**Imbue Spirit**

**Basic**

**Honor the Spirits**

**Improved**

**Titanic Aspect**

**Basic**

**Alter Self**

**Basic**

**Energy Charge**

**Basic**

**Banner of the Champion**

**Basic**

**Wild Totem**

**Advanced**

**Impart Nightmare**

**Basic**

**Guard Ally**

**Basic**

**Volcanic Fury**

**Basic**

**Wake the Earth**

## Basic

#

The next day, Victor found himself arguing with Rellia; she'd ridden ahead of her portion of the legion, pushing her vidanii to its limits to get to the Sea Keep in time to personally help Victor and Lam decide what to do with the colony stone. They sat at his dining table with Valla, Kethelket, and Edeya, though the latter simply stared blankly, sipping from a cup of lukewarm tea Lam had given her. Victor had watched Lam touch a thin, matching silver rod to Edeya's crown and tell her to drink. It was creepy, and he hated seeing Edeya that way, which was the root of his argument with Rellia. "I don't want to waste another week gathering everyone to plant the stone. We need to get Edeya help, like, starting today."

Rellia looked at Edeya, and though her eyes betrayed her sympathy, she frowned. "I understand, but consider the fact that she's already been stable like this for more than ten days. Consider also that we'll need time to build up the System stone once it's planted. It won't have the options for world travel right away. We'll need the legion members to claim their citizenship. We'll need to set up portal stones to Gelica and Persi Gables to bring our families over, and then they'll need to claim citizenship. The options for growth are dependent on citizens. Once we've done that, we'll need to sink millions of Energy beads into the stone to open up construction and development avenues in the System menu and . . ."

"I get it! Shit!" Victor growled, staring at Edeya, scratching his stubble angrily. "How much time are we talking?"

"Weeks, perhaps. I hope not months. We can't jump straight to world travel; we have to go through certain growth phases. The System does things in a methodical way, and, no, I'm not sure why. I'm going off books written by some of the people who were around when Fanwath was formed. They weren't easy to come by, you know; the Ridonne have done much to destroy the history of those times. Nevertheless, I think it's your best option of quickly finding reliable passage off-world unless you want to go to Persi Gables or Gelica and travel to one of the backwater worlds the Ridonne have opened up in those cities."

"What about Tharcray?"

Rellia chuckled. "By all means. Go and ask the Ridonne to allow you to use their colony stone. Never mind the months-long journey to get there."

Lam interrupted the speculation with some of her own, "Didn't you say Catalina probably won't do anything with Edeya's spirit right away, that she might have plans that spanned decades or centuries?"

"Lam, I don't know, though! I was just guessing, thinking aloud, trying to make people feel better. Regardless, we should hurry. I thought you'd be the first to agree with me on that point."

Lam's eyes narrowed, and Victor could see she was getting angry. She held Edeya's free hand, and her thumb outlined little circles on the young woman's palm. "I agree with you. I do. It's just that

she has a good point; thousands have sacrificed for this endeavor. Should we really plant the colony stone here, ahead of their arrival? Is this the best place for it?"

Kethelket cleared his throat. "The central location, the one Hector held, is not an option."

"Yeah, I will recommend that you all do not build anything on that volcano."  
Victor couldn't keep the amusement out of his voice.

"This isn't a time for jokes," Lam growled.

"I'm not joking. Do you think I'm the only one who might be able to wake that volcano?" He didn't wait for an answer. Gesturing to Kethelket, he added, "He has a point. The central location is a no-go. We don't want the capital at the pass; what if Ridonne invades? We don't know what's south of these lands, so why build it south? We're on the western edge of the Marches, and there's a sea here. On the eastern edge, you've got more mountains. I think this is the best spot! Wouldn't it be smart for the capital to have a port?"

"I agree." Kethelket nodded. He and Victor had spoken at length that morning, and Victor had spent a good part of that conversation trying to apologize for the losses the Naghelli had suffered. Kethelket wouldn't hear it; he insisted that Victor was responsible for a swift victory with relatively minor losses, all told. No matter how Victor described his foolish mistake of venturing into the caldera alone and becoming trapped, Kethelket continued to point out their crushing victories over much greater numbers. More than that, he insisted that they all shared in the blame; they could have done more to hobble Victoria—Catalina. All in all, there were still more than two hundred Naghelli, and they were eager to live among the Ghelli again, no longer outcasts.

Rellia surprised him by nodding, clearing her throat, and pushing her chair back. Victor hadn't seen her in weeks, and though she looked much the same, she also looked different. It took him a while when she first arrived to realize what it was, but after he'd figured it out, it was obvious—she'd advanced her race at some point. She was taller than before, leaner with brighter eyes and more pronounced canines. He couldn't help noting how her ears curved upward through her thick, lustrous red hair. He wondered if she'd unlocked the same bloodline as that cat-like Ardeni he'd killed near Fainhallow after they'd attacked his airship. She stood up and rested a hand on Lam's shoulder. "I agree. We'll find a suitable site here, near the sea. Better to get the stone in the ground and start working on it."

#

Victor climbed to the top of the grassy hill. He could hear Lesh's steps close on his heels, but his long, powerful legs devoured the slope, leaving most of the others behind. When he reached the broad, flat hilltop and stood at the center, he turned in a slow circle, taking in the view. To the south, small in the distance, he saw Sea Keep butting up to a range of rocky cliffs and hills. To the west, maybe a mile distant, the Silver Sea stretched to the horizon, glittering in the sun's light. To the north, more rolling hills fell away, and distantly on the horizon, he saw the green-blue smear of grasslands. He knew that beyond those grasslands was the burnt-out forest of Black Keep. Turning



to the east, he saw the ash-dark sky hanging over more hills and valleys and, just a purple smear in the gray sky, the slope of the mighty volcano.

“A good site,” Lesh rumbled. Victor turned to him and saw that many others had mounted the hill—Rellia, Valla, Kethelket, Lam, dozens of soldiers, and most of the Naghelli. He watched them continue to climb up the slope, coming into view, and that’s when he picked out Chandri. She was much recovered from her injuries. Her hair was short, cut that way to keep it out of her wounds before she’d gotten the regeneration potion, but otherwise, she looked like her old self. She was even laughing at something the soldier beside her had said.

“I think so too. From here, the city will have space to grow out toward the sea and in every other direction. And this hilltop is the highest around—a good place to defend.” Victor watched as Valla approached, and she smiled brightly, waving. She could have flown up ahead of everyone, but she kept Lam company, holding one of Edeya’s hands while Lam held the other. As he stared at her, his eyes wandered to Lam, Rellia, and even Edeya; they all looked stunningly beautiful in the bright sunlight, their clothing clean and colorful, their eyes glittering like jewels as they flashed smiles, talking excitedly. Victor hoped their good mood wasn’t misplaced; he hoped he was right and they’d still be able to help Edeya. It made him nervous that Lam was acting as though it was a sure thing. He figured that might be how she coped with the stress.

He waited a few more minutes until almost everyone had assembled, forming a big, loose semi-circle around him at the center of the hilltop. Lesh stepped back and sat in the grass near Kethelket, and Victor raised his voice, “Everyone! Give your attention to Legate ap’Yensha!” He locked eyes with Rellia, and she smiled and nodded.

“Soldiers! Fellow citizens of these new lands! Our time has come to make our claim! I rushed to get here, but many other worthy comrades are also hurrying to join us, so let’s keep them in our hearts on this momentous day! Today, we found our colony. Today, we claim our freedom! Today, we begin building toward something great, leaving our mark on this world so that our children’s children will remember us and be grateful for the freedom we fought for, for their lives unburdened by the yoke of Ridonne oppression!” She smiled and nodded as her words were drowned in cheers and applause. The soldiers were happy for her praise, but everyone knew the situation. Everyone knew Edeya, standing there with a blank expression, desperately needed help and that the colony stone was the fastest way to get it for her.

When it didn’t seem like Rellia would say more, Victor hollered, “Glorious Ninth! We’re here because of your bravery!” Again, the soldiers went wild with cheers, and Victor saw Agnes and some of the other former thralls shaking their fists in the air, howling with excitement. They’d fit in well with the cohort, and it looked like they’d made many friends, judging by how close the others

crowded around, exchanging slaps on the shoulders. “I don’t have much more to say other than I’m proud of you all. We’re going to build something amazing here.”

Victor smiled and turned away as the crowd continued to applaud. He looked questioningly at Rellia, then Lam and Valla. When they all nodded, he hefted the heavy System-created colony stone and knelt in the grass, twisting it with the slightly broader end until it was stuck in the grass, standing upright. Nothing happened, and Victor chuckled; what had he expected? He had to activate it. “Channel some Energy . . .” Lam called, but Victor lifted a hand and waved her off. He knew how to kick-start a magical item. He pulled a thread of inspiration-attuned Energy out of his Core and sent it out through his palm into the stone.

**\*\*\*Colony Stone, activate at the present location?\*\*\***

Victor smiled and turned to nod at the largest part of the crowd behind him. “Yes.”

**\*\*\*Who is the leader of this settlement?\*\*\***

Rellia had prepared Victor for this. As soon as she’d realized they were going to go through with the colony founding that day, she’d walked Victor through a ten-page dissertation about the colony stones and what he should do to set it up properly. As he sat there, contemplating the question from the System, Victor knew he could be selfish and claim the colony for himself. He could even make himself a dictator like the Warlord in Coloss. “I’m not that kind of pendejo, though.” He spoke aloud, low so only he could hear himself, but he almost had a heart attack when the prompt flashed in his vision:

**\*\*\*Who is the leader of this settlement?\*\*\***

Seeing it was the same question, his racing heart slowed, and Victor carefully said what Rellia had written, “Rellia ap’Yensha, Victor Sandoval, Lam, daughter of Fellis from Twilight Home. A temporary triumvirate with equal voting authority and weight.” Lam and Rellia had some sort of landholder republic in mind, and Victor didn’t know enough about the subject to want to argue. He just wanted his share of the lands they’d conquered. The temporary triumvirate would serve until they’d opened more options up in the stone, and she could change things around.

**\*\*\*What is the name of your settlement?\*\*\***

Victor smiled and loudly proclaimed, “The Free Marches.” Of course, cheers broke out around him as the prompt disappeared, and he heard the sound of thousands of tiny cracks splitting the stone. Heat and steam burst forth from the seams, and Victor grinned, inhaling the hot gasses, utterly unfazed.

“What’s happening?” someone cried, and he realized he was leaning over the stone, watching, and blocking almost everyone’s view with his bulk. He stood up and backed away, watching as, in seemingly random order, segments of the stone split apart, stretched, and then re-fused with the whole. This occurred over and over, hundreds or thousands of times; all the while, steam lit with golden highlights burst forth from the splits in the stone. With each cracking and fusing,

the obelisk grew, and Victor continued to back up until he was standing beside Valla.

The crowd became quiet, watching, mouths agape, as the stone grew to immense proportions; after a minute or two, there was so much steam flowing down the sides of the hilltop that it rose to even Victor's hips, and some people had to cough and wave it away from their faces. The stone continued to grow, cracking, fusing, and emitting gouts of dense steam the whole time. After what must have been fifteen or twenty minutes, it finally started to slow and gradually settled into its final, solid shape. The little obelisk-shaped stone was now a true monolith, towering forty feet into the air, each of its six facets measuring four feet wide at the base.

The enormous monolithic stone had planted itself in the ground, and its dark gray surface ticked as it settled. Victor watched as the golden runes seemed to float up from the depths, hovering and shimmering just beneath the stony surface. As the steam blew away on the wind, a System message appeared in front of his eyes:

**\*\*\*Colony: The Free Marches, established. Initial area of influence: The lands granted in the System-generated conquest challenge—66 million acres south of the mountains known as the Granite Gates, east of the body of water known as the Silver Sea, and bordered on the south and east by as-yet-unnamed mountain ranges. Current population: 3. Colony Stone level: 1.\*\*\***