

Victor BK9: Ch21

Book 9: Chapter 21: A Meeting With the Queen

Victor sat, sipping a cup of spiced coffee, heavy with cream, looking out over his balcony as he contemplated the changes Qi Pot's heart had wrought in him. The heart had been potent, though nothing more than Obert's. It had been different, though; Victor had felt Qi Pot's strange, hot, shadowy Energy coursing through his pathways. He'd felt it trying to do something, but it hadn't taken; either his body had resisted it, or the heart hadn't been potent enough. Whatever the case, Victor hadn't gained any new feats, affinities, bloodline alterations, or anything of that sort. However, he'd earned a rank to his Core and advanced to level seventy-two.

He hadn't been too surprised by the level; he felt he'd been close to seventy-one before killing Qi Pot, so the additional Energy infusion from the heart had pushed him over the edge to the next. With a sip of hot, cinnamon-flavored coffee, he sighed and looked at his status sheet:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 2

Class:

Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum - Legendary

Level:

72

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Improved 6

Core:

Spirit Class - Epic 3

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9

Breath Core Energy:

2500/2500

Energy Affinity:

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

Energy:

36871/36871

Strength:

508

Vitality:

673 (740)

Dexterity:

208

Agility:

231

Intelligence:

172

Will:

673

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, Behemoth's Regeneration, Blood Supremacy, Furious Battle Momentum

For the first time, will wasn't his highest attribute. His vitality had caught up to it, and with the bonus from his wyrm-scale vest, it had cleanly outstripped it. When he added his Sovereign Will boost, his vitality nearly hit one thousand. He knew from talking to his friends and loved ones that such a number was unheard of on Fanwath. However, he supposed there were some folks on Sojourn and Ruhn with stats that were that high. "Well, I'm not done yet." Victor chuckled.

Looking at his status sheet again, he frowned at his Breath Core rank. He needed to work on that, and it seemed like he might have to do old-fashioned, slow, and steady cultivation. Maybe if he could kill some more wyrms or other creatures with Breath Cores and eat their hearts, he'd see a boost, but so far, that hadn't been on the menu. He had the egg to eat, which, apparently, had come from a wyrm, and was eager to see what would come of it, but first, he had his meeting with Queen Kynna to attend.

He sighed, tossed the remainder of his coffee over the balcony railing, and went inside to finish getting ready. Ten minutes later, Bryn guided him through the palace toward the expansive royal

gardens on the back acreage. The palace grounds took up several square miles, and the queen's gardens were supposedly quite something. Victor hadn't yet checked them out.

"Does it feel different, milord?"

"What's that?"

"Being a grand and fine duke, sir." Bryn looked at him sideways, and Victor saw a glint of humor in her eyes.

"Very clever."

"I notice you aren't wearing your uniform, milord."

Victor snorted. "Nah, too shiny for me. I'll wear it only upon royal decree."

Bryn chuckled. "Such a rebellious champion, er, excuse me, duke."

"All right, all right, that's enough of that shit." Victor watched her walk for a moment, then added, "You've got quite a spring in your step today. Did you get some good news?"

"Actually, I did, sir! I've been informed by Captain Wash that I'll be accompanying you as you travel to your new duchy."

Victor's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Hah! No one told me. Well, I'm glad to have you, Bryn. You're sure that's what you want? I'll probably be there most of the time. Don't you have family—"

"I'm happy, milord. I find my duty as your guard and guide quite entertaining."

Victor nodded. "Good."

They passed through a resort-like rear patio complete with pools, fountains, and rose hedges—all yellow. Then they walked through a tall archway in a red-brick wall, and Victor had to pause to take in the many sweet smells and the gorgeous hedgerows. They were comprised of flowering shrubs laid out in a meandering pattern down a gentle slope toward a lush, green copse of woods in the distance. He could see the queen's entourage about halfway down the hill. "Looks like we're heading the right way."

"Yes, sir. I was told she'd be in the garden."

Victor nodded and followed Bryn through the maze-like hedges, and when he came to the broad central path, lined with weird, fantastical marble sculptures and flower-filled planters, the queen turned toward the two of them and waved. "Might as well wait here, Bryn. She'll want privacy."

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"Aye, milord, her retainers are moving off." It was true—Queen Kynna's cadre of eight "Queen's Guards" and her ladies-in-waiting were separating themselves from the monarch. The ladies moved off in clusters of two and three, murmuring

and giggling. The guards took up a star-shaped pattern a reasonable distance from the queen, leaving her alone as Victor approached.

“Hello, Duke Sandoval.” She smiled, performing an almost mocking curtsey, lifting her silky, pale-blue skirts.

Victor bowed. “My Queen.”

She held a finger to her crown and tapped her nail against it, producing her weird, blue, static Energy bubble around them. “For our privacy.”

Victor nodded, folding his arms over his chest and inhaling deeply. “At least it doesn’t block the smells. This garden is something else.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? My favorite part is the grove.” She nodded down the slope toward the trees at the base of the hill. “There are special tree gardens and living sculptures in there. My great-grandmother had a powerful affinity for plants.” While Victor followed her gaze, the queen seemed to gather herself, building the impetus to broach the topic of their meeting. “Do you feel I’ve tried to entrap you?”

“In a way, I guess so. I was irritated at first. I mean, I still am. I didn’t come here looking to manage an estate or to have people follow me.” Victor held up a hand to forestall her objections. “I know it’s an honor. I know you’ve given me a piece of coveted property. I also know why you did it. I mean, it doesn’t take a genius. You hope I’ll grow fond of the place and the people there. You hope that I’ll feel a connection to them, and, being so connected, you hope that I’ll understand the risks of a succession war better.”

She nodded, her high, crystal crown glittering with a dazzling reflection of the morning sun. “It’s more than that, though, Victor. I do want you to understand the risks, but I also want you to share in them. Now that you’re a titled noble, should you lose in a duel—”

“My lands and people will be at the mercy of the winning King. I get it. Right now, it doesn’t mean much, but I suppose your plan is to have me spend time at Iron Mountain, growing to care about the folks there, huh?”

“Am I so transparent?” She smiled and waved a hand. “Don’t answer that. I’ve had a long, heart-to-heart discussion with Thorn, my most trusted advisor, as you’ve no doubt guessed. I believe I have come up with a compromise for you and Dar to consider.” Victor nodded, perhaps a little absently. He’d seen people moving around on the next tier of the garden, further down the hillside. Were they Kynna’s retainers?

“Thorn brought up a grudge my father had with the ruling family of the kingdom of Ardent. They lie to the east, removed by nearly a thousand miles and two other, smaller kingdoms. Thorn believes we could make a believable argument for pursuing vengeance against Ardent. In order to challenge them, per the rules of the Empire, we’d need to share a border.”

Victor nodded. He hadn’t seen the movement again and decided it might have been a songbird or something. “Which gives you an excuse to attack the two kingdoms separating you, I guess?”

“That’s right. I believe—” Kynna gasped, squeezing her eyes tight as she reached up to grasp her head in both hands.

“Are you all right—” She fell toward Victor, and he caught her in his arms, and that’s when he felt it, too—a potent, draining vortex, sucking the Energy out of his Core. As the blue, static Energy shield faded around them, Victor looked inward and saw that his rage-attuned Energy was being drawn out of him. It was unpleasant and left him feeling weaker, but it was only his rage. His other attunements roiled and swelled with power. He looked around, saw Kynna’s guards jogging toward them, and shouted, “Something’s wrong!”

Kynna was a dead weight in his arms, completely unconscious. Victor held her close, turning in a circle, and that’s when the shrubs exploded as a dozen crackling magenta portals spun into existence, out of which dozens of soldiers poured. Victor saw figures wielding large weapons and wearing heavy armor and, along with them, just as many lithe fighters in sleek leather or silky garb. They immediately began to channel Energy as they clashed with Kynna’s guards.

Victor saw Bryn and a couple of other royal guards surrounded by at least ten attackers and wanted to run to help, but he was stuck with Kynna; a dozen of the strange soldiers had already broken past Kynna’s other guards and were charging him. Alarm bells clanged from the palace, and he hoped help was on the way as he shifted Kynna, planning to set her on the ground so he could summon a weapon.

Victor wasn’t often caught unawares, but one of the attackers was absurdly nimble and quick, and he felt a stab in his shoulder as a knife drove through his clothes. He took a stumbling step, finding combat with no rage in his Core strange and foreign. He felt like he was outside himself, that his body was slow and clumsy. He’d been admiring the garden, talking to Kynna, and now—Another blow, this time from a mace, caught him above the ear, and Victor felt the stab of split skin and the concussion of his skull being rattled. He stumbled to a knee, hunkering over Kynna, trying to shield her from a flurry of attacks.

As more attackers swarmed him with stabs, slashes, and thudding blows, he tried to recover his wits and remember what he should do. A voice—his own—roared in his mind, “Channel Energy into your armor, fool!” but something was making him dull and slow. Something was still pulling at his rage-attuned Energy. Then, as a rapier gashed his forehead, sheeting blood into his eyes, he saw it—a pulsing, throbbing, purple-glowing rod impaled in the ground a dozen yards away where a hedge used to be.

“A trap,” he grunted, then, as Kynna and he received more stabs and Energy-infused attacks, he bunched his legs and leaped out of there. The Titanic Leap was his most clumsy ever, but it was enough—he soared some twenty feet into the air, then nearly five times that far ahead, just past where Bryn and the other guards were being overwhelmed. Victor crashed onto the cobble path and fell, sliding on his knees in his efforts to keep Kynna from tumbling free of his arms.

Victor immediately felt his head clear, and his fury began to stoke. As his eyes blazed with molten fire, he surged to his feet, still holding Kynna, and turned to glare at the dozens of attackers. The Queen’s Guard were formidable combatants, and they were putting up a desperate defense to keep the attackers who badly outnumbered them at bay. Victor could see Energy spells of all sorts—fireballs, glowing shields, ghostly, translucent weapons, and even showers of mystical bolts.

He caught a glimpse of Bryn, utterly surrounded, bleeding, her weapon gone from her hand, but a large shield held before her as she stood back-to-back with a Queen’s Guard. She’d tell him to leave. She’d tell him to take the queen and run. Wouldn’t she? Shouldn’t he?

Victor looked at Kynna and saw her face was bloody from a broad, bone-deep gash on her brow and that arrows and stab wounds covered her body. Was she even alive? Her crown had been knocked off, and her hands hung limp, but in that second of hesitation, while he contemplated the “right” thing to do, he heard Bryn cry out, and he knew she and the queen’s guardians would soon be killed. He glanced up the hill but didn’t see any help mobilizing. What was going on? A coup?

A huge warrior, wielding a massive, two-handed mace with a spiked ball on the end, waded into the fight where Bryn and the Queen’s Guard held something like fifteen attackers at bay. Victor wasn’t sure how, but it had to do with some enormous surge of Energy the Queen’s Guard had unleashed—a rippling curtain of weird, pink clouds that seemed to obscure spine-tipped tentacles. They grasped and stabbed at the attackers, pulling them off, and for a moment, Bryn was clear, and her desperate, dark-gray eyes locked onto his.

“Fuck this,” Victor growled, and he reached into his repertoire of spells and cast one he’d let languish for far too long—Guard Ally. A shield of brilliant golden, glory-attuned Energy surrounded Bryn, and suddenly, Victor felt the jostling of the enemies around her. He felt the stabs of spears and the slashes of swords, the burning of fireballs, the jolts of lightning. He felt everything intended for her, only doubly so.

Grunting with the effort, he lowered Kynna to the ground, and then, as cuts and burns and gaping wounds appeared on his body, then rapidly healed, he stepped over Kynna’s insensate form and summoned Lifedrinker to his hands. She thudded onto the pavers before him, her heavy axe-head driving them into the soft earth as he grasped her handle. Victor, buffeted by more and more blows, felt his mind slipping away, lost in the torrent of rage that slid into its own special pathway created by his Furious Battle Momentum.

Before he lost himself, he channeled Energy into his armor, and his disguise of soft, bloodstained clothes was replaced by the fierce, black, and red shell of his wyrm-scale and lava king hide armor. The blows intended for Bryn continued to

rain down on him, but now they were mostly rebuffed. Still, Victor's rage had clouded his vision red, and he'd had enough. He cast Iron Berserk, knowing his epic-tier Core could substitute any of his affinities for rage to keep it going.

For the first time on Ruhn, Victor took on his proper, titanic aspect. He surged from ten to more than twenty feet in height. Lifedrinker was no longer an unwieldy burden as his strength soared and his massive bones stabilized his form. He lifted her high, and as she sang with furious blood lust, bursting into molten flames, he roared. As the blows aimed at Bryn pounded into him, he focused on the giant warrior with the two-handed mace and cast Energy Charge, fueling it with fear-attuned Energy.

In a cloud of black smoke and shadows, he ripped the garden path to shreds and then slammed into the warrior, sending him flying, bouncing, and careening off other warriors. His head caught the edge of a stone bench, and Victor saw his skull come apart, and then he was wading into the fools surrounding his friend. Lifedrinker split bodies in twain, like a cleaver quartering chickens. No armor stood before her. No bones or spells of shielding could stop her smoldering, depthless obsidian edge from rending the bodies of Victor's foes.

As blood and viscera sprayed, he roared and laughed. His Iron Berserk didn't add to his madness, and the blows had stopped falling on Bryn, so his Furious Battle Momentum had not yet driven him beyond reason. With a bit of sanity still providing clarity, Victor looked over the ten corpses near his feet and roared at the Queen's Guard and Bryn, "Protect the queen!" and then he charged another pack of attackers.

The Queen's Guard he rescued fell back, knowing well her duty to the monarch. Victor's great body filled the gap as he wove into the attackers, cleaving and hacking with the precision of a master. Lifedrinker felt light in his hands, but her blade was like a razor-edged wrecking ball. Hundreds of attacks hit him, but the assassins were like children fighting a madman in heavy armor. For every five stabs or cuts or spell-blasts, Victor demolished another attacker. His strength was at levels he'd never experienced as his Furious Battle Momentum began to stack with his Iron Berserk.

Lifedrinker's great, wedged blade caught an armored warrior on the shoulder plate, split through it, cleaved through his arm, then his torso, and then his other arm at the elbow. His top half was thrown to the side by the swing, but his legs stood there before Victor kicked them aside and focused on the last group of attackers still battling a desperate pair of Queen's Guards. He strode forward, too mad to use his Energy Charge, and on his third stride, Lifedrinker whooshed through the air and split three of the assassins to pieces. In a shower of blood, Victor bore down and screamed his fury.

The roar was enough to stun the remaining fighters. Even the Queen's Guards were awestruck, stumbling back as Victor fell on the last of the attackers, feeding his blood-hungry axe as he slaughtered them. Before long, he stood over the last of the black-clad assailants, their guts and blood steaming in the cool air, his chest heaving, his throat gurgling with a low, maniacal laugh. The surviving guards, including Bryn, still glowing with a shimmering shell of Victor's Glory-attuned Energy, rushed the Queen up the path toward the palace.

Enough of Victor's mentality was intact, that he knew he didn't need to chase them. He'd hardly taken a wound as he slaughtered the assassins, so his Furious Battle Momentum wasn't built up enough to overcome his prodigious will. Instead, he stood in the gore-strewn garden, massive axe in his hands, staring at the ruined corpses of his foes.

As his blood slowly cooled, bit by bit, he began to take note of the strange rods, now tipped over and inert. He sent Lifedrinker into storage with a quick, "We'll talk soon, chica," and then he walked over and picked up one of the rods. His frown deepened when he saw the pale green ribbon around the device. He'd seen ribbons like that, hadn't he? With a great effort of will, he pulled the rest of his rage back to his Core and canceled his iron berserk.

His head cooler and clearer, he stared at the ribbon and searched his memory—the queen's ladies. He'd seen several of them wearing ribbons like that. Victor glanced up the hill and saw the Queen's Guard ushering Kynna into the palace—she was walking. Victor looked around the battlefield again, moving to collect the other rods; there were nine, and they each bore the pale green ribbon.

He studied the ruined corpses of his foes and the handful of dead Queen's Guard. Where were the queen's ladies? Not a single one was dead on the field, and none had escaped with the queen. Had they disappeared before the ambush? Could they all be traitorous? It seemed so improbable, but he couldn't think of another explanation. Someone had planted the rods, and somehow, all the ladies had slipped away before the ambush. Scowling, Victor sent the rods into his storage container and then started toward the palace. That's when the Energy hit him.

Book 9: Chapter 22: Fire and Ice

The fact that Victor didn't gain a level from his slaughter of the would-be assassins told him a great deal about them; they weren't steel seekers, and they likely weren't even tier-eight or nine iron rankers. Still, the surge of Energy was enough to distract him for a moment, refill his Core, and speed up his body's natural regeneration. When it was over, he stooped to pick up the queen's fallen crown, then jogged out of the garden, pounding up the inclined pathway to the palace, intently scanning every doorway, every window as he approached the central portico where he'd seen the queen's guards ushering her inside.

Soldiers were forming up near the tall, glass double doors, and when they saw him running their way, Victor wasn't surprised to see some panic enter their eyes; he was still clad in his armor, and though he'd returned to his standard giant size and sent Lifedrinker back into her storage container, he presented a fearsome sight. Captain Wash was there, though; he calmed his troops and shouted them out of his way. "She's inside, Champion."

Victor nodded and slowed his jog to a walk as he pushed the enormous glass door open. There, he saw the Queen, still surrounded by her Queen's Guard while, all around her, attendants, soldiers, noble folk, and officials scurried about. They shouted instructions, questions, and generally alarmed-sounding statements while the queen ignored them and locked eyes on Victor. Bryn stood beside her, a battered shield still on her arm, but Victor's magical aegis was gone, dispelled by the influx of Energy he'd received from the dead assassins.

As he stepped close, Victor held out the queen's crown and knelt before her, perhaps to reassure everyone whose nervous fear hung palpably in the air. Kynna took the crown in blood-stained

fingers and, with trembling, halting movements, lifted it to her head. Victor could see the evidence of recent healing all over her; pale, new skin marred her forehead where she'd been gashed, similar freshly healed wounds covered her arms, and, despite its heroic attempts to repair itself, her gown was gashed, torn, and stained with the queen's blood.

"Thank you, Champion. Thank you, Victor. My guards tell me the assassins are all slain. I owe you much, but I fear we have snakes among us. I fear—"

"It was your ladies." Victor produced one of the ribboned rods he'd pulled from the garden's soil. "Where are they?" He looked around the big marble-decked hallway at the clusters of panic-stricken faces and the frantic, rushing servants. He saw none of the queen's ladies in waiting.

Queen Kynna took the rod, hefted it, and delicately held the pale ribbon between her fingers. "They mock me."

"Who?"

"Come, Victor. We must move to my private wing. There, I'll explain." She turned, and the guards formed around her as she marched purposefully down one of the broad, arched hallways.

Victor followed and found Bryn striding beside him. He looked down at her, taking in the dents and puncture marks in her once-shiny armor and the wide, almost haunted look in her eyes. He gestured to her helmet. "Take that off. You're done fighting for now. Let yourself breathe."

"I..."

"Consider it an order."

"Yes, Champion." Bryn touched her helmet and exposed her strong, tanned face, crusted with dried blood. He saw her breathe deeply as they marched, and Victor knew what she was thinking: everything had happened so quickly, she'd thought she was going to die, and now life was moving on as usual. It was a strange feeling the first time it happened.

"You've never fought in a battle you thought you were going to lose before, have you?"

"I...No. I suppose I haven't."

"Well, you didn't die, so don't be afraid to look into the face of death and laugh later today."

She spoke softly, eyeing the guards and the queen ahead of them, "Because of you." She cleared her throat and said it more clearly. "I'm alive because of you. That...spell. I've never been shielded so fully. Are you a Paladin Class?"

Victor chuckled. "Not even close." He reached over and clapped her on the shoulder. "Don't give me all the credit. You and the Queen's Guard gave me a chance to break the queen free, and then,

when I saw how valiantly you were fighting, it convinced me that I had to do the stupid thing—something I’m quite used to, by the way—and not run away with the queen. I’m glad for that.”

“How did you kill so many so easily? How—Your axe! What a weapon! I—”

“Shh!” Victor jostled her again. “Let’s not spread the word until we’re sure the cat’s out of the bag. I don’t know how many witnessed my fight, but I’m still kind of hoping it was just us.” Victor nodded to the queen and her guards. He turned his head, looking over his shoulder to see at least two dozen nobles and retainers following behind, keeping a “polite” distance. “The queen,” he said, more loudly, “should tell these people to get lost for now.” He knew Kynna could hear him, and he hoped she’d act without him having to insist.

They’d just turned toward the broad, spiral staircase that would lead up to the Queen’s second-story wing when the clamor of stomping, metal-clad boots came from an adjoining passage. Victor turned to see Chamberlain Thorn charging at the head of fifty or so royal guards; they flooded into the main hallway, putting themselves between Kynna and all the retainers following behind. The chamberlain looked panicked, his face drenched in a sheen of sweat and his breath coming in harsh gasps. “My Queen! I was seeing to your instructions in Frostmarch when I heard of the attack!”

Kynna stopped at the foot of the staircase, her guards, Bryn and Victor, between herself and Thorn. She turned and seemed about to speak but hesitated. Victor frowned, looking again at the chamberlain. What was going on? If he’d been in Frostmarch, wouldn’t he have come from the same direction as the queen and all the nobles bunched up in that hallway? He stared at the man, looking at the sweat and panic in a different light; what if he was worried about something other than the Queen being attacked? What if he was worried about her surviving?

Kynna’s voice rang out, forcing Victor’s mind out of its speculations, “Thorn, I wonder, why do you suppose Guard Captain Wash was having trouble mustering his soldiers? Why do you think he could only find a handful on duty and was delayed in responding to the threat?”

“My Queen, I shall immediately have the man investigated!” Thorn turned to one of the soldiers beside him and began to bark an order, but the queen interrupted him.

“Where are the Rochan sisters, my dear Chamberlain?”

He looked at her, eyes wide. “I...I don’t know, Your Majesty! Were they slain in the attack?”

Victor watched Kynna’s face, noting how she shook her head slightly, not a negation of the question but a gesture of dismay—disappointment. “Wasn’t it unusual for you to request such a favor? I don’t believe I ever received such a request in all the years you’ve served my family.” Her voice became a mocking parody of Thorn’s, “Please, My Queen. It would mean somuch to my wife. Her cousins would be eternally grateful!” Oh, Thorn! How could you? I want you to know that after Victor has taken your head, I’ll root out your entire bloodline for this. Those women will be merely the start!”

Hearing those words and his name snapped Victor's mind into focused clarity. Thorn had asked the queen to allow those women to be her ladies in waiting for the day. They'd set up the formation, allowed for the portals to open, and weakened Victor and the queen. They'd escaped before the attack, and Thorn had kept the royal guards away. Were they all loyal to him or just this fifty?

While his mind raced, putting the connections together, a clamor arose from behind Thorn's troops; the retainers and noble folk were fleeing. Victor summoned Lifedrinker and pushed Bryn back. "Get the queen and her guards out of here."

"You think I'll surrender?" Thorn bellowed, suddenly clad in dark blue plate-mail armor that instantly rimed over with frost. "You are the one who should be begging forgiveness, My Queen! You

are the one who threatens to destroy all that we hold dear! You are the one who —" A deep *thum* sounded behind Victor, echoing in the corridor and rattling his heart in his chest. His brain had only just realized it was the sound of a bow being shot when Thorn fell to his knees, a meter-long, feathered shaft protruding from his chest.

The royal guards he'd brought with him drew their weapons, and Thorn fumbled with a flask, but Kynna wasn't done. Thum, thum, thum sang her bow. Arrows that imploded with weird, crackling Energy slammed into their ranks, drawing soldiers into them, smashing them together, and turning them into metal-clad hunks of gelid, bloody flesh. She killed at least twenty of the soldiers with her attack. He might have hoped she had more shots like that ready, but she gasped, "Victor! Finish them! That's all of my Energy!"

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Victor shoved Bryn. "I said get her out of here." Then Lifedrinker was in his hands, and he could feel the rage coursing into his pathways. Victor cast two spells nearly simultaneously: Iron Berserk and Energy Charge. He streaked over the marble floor on wings of purple-black shadow, rapidly surging in strength and stature. Lifedrinker led the charge, her gleaming obsidian edge singing for blood as Victor aimed her at the chamberlain.

Thorn had poured something over his wound that dissolved the arrow and mended his flesh. He saw Victor coming, and though a frosty metal visor masked his face, Victor could see the panic in his movements as he summoned a shield and braced. The impact from his charge was cacophonous. Lifedrinker wouldn't be defeated easily, and she screamed like a vengeful spirit as she ripped into Thorn's mighty bulwark. Whatever metal the shield was crafted from wasn't easily split, but split it she did. The sound was horrific and only the tip of the iceberg as Victor's Core poured Energy out to defend him from the cataclysmic crash.

Somehow, Thorn stood against the impact. Victor reasoned he must have had a defensive Class, and he wasn't a low-tier iron ranker. Waves of displaced Energy rolled off around him, sending the soldiers and corpses nearby flying, bouncing down the hallway like caricatures of people in a video

game. The white marble turned black as hot Energy rolled over it, cracking the walls and splitting the tiles with flame-filled crevices.

Lifedrinker's massive, heavy axe-head bit through the shield, inch-by-inch, and then her top edge began to dig into Thorn's metallic breastplate. Her edge found the armor a much softer barrier than the shield, and Thorn gave up his resistance as she drew blood. He wailed and flung his shield to the side, rolling away from Victor's irresistible charge. "You fool!" he screamed, and then Victor felt a wave of power as he summoned a frosty scepter topped with a potent, ice-like jewel.

Victor's rage was stoked; he was berserk, and his Quinametzin blood was hot, but the waves of cold coming off that jewel were like nothing he'd ever felt. Frost coated his hot flesh instantly. The marble around him froze and split with thunderous pops and cracks. Bits of stone and mortar fell from the ceiling, and the already damaged floor shattered in an ever-widening radius with Thorn at the center. The chamberlain screamed, "I am no piddling iron-ranker! No backwater champion for you to toil against! Because I choose a life of service does not a weakling make me, boy! I don't care who sent you!"

Victor scowled and lifted Lifedrinker. Her mighty edge, rimed with frost, scraped the crumbling ceiling, and a huge chunk of marble fell to shatter against his shoulder. He hardly felt it. Thorn looked up at him with icy blue eyes, and a surge of frigid Energy radiated out of his scepter, so chilling that the moisture in the air fell to the ground as snow, and Victor felt his tough, titanic flesh growing numb and stiff, his fingers and muscles unresponsive. The red fled his vision, and, to his horror, his eyes began to ice over.

Behind Thorn, in his frozen, blurry vision, he saw the remaining soldiers fall to the ground, shattering like blood sculptures. The marble was covered in a sheet of dense ice by then. Victor could hardly move, and though Thorn stared at him, oozing with smug victory, he felt no panic. His body was freezing over, and his rage was halted in his pathways, but something in his chest was still roiling with angry heat—his Breath Core and its potent, furious, magma-attuned Energy.

Thorn might be a steel seeker, and his Energy was a well with depths that stretched beyond what Victor could grasp, but Victor held the fury of a sleeping god in his chest. He held the rage and heat of the earth awakened, and all he had to do to grasp it was weave a bit of magma-attuned Energy with his rage into the pattern for Volcanic Fury. Though he stood frozen, and Thorn began to relax, sensing his victory was complete, Victor found that his magma-attuned Energy flowed easily out of his Breath Core and into his central pathway, thawing it along the way.

As he warmed his pathway and tricked some rage-attuned Energy into it, Thorn spoke into the air, perhaps using some device or spell to communicate with a distant ally, "I have him and will finish the job. Once he's out of the picture, I'll try to reason with her but keep the boy in hand; we may need to go ahead with our original plan."

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Bryn stood before the queen's doors with two of the Queen's Guard—a man and woman she didn't know well. "You reckon he'll stop 'em all?" She glanced away from the stairwell to the man on her right. He was tall, his armor streaked with soot and blood; he'd been one of the first Victor had rescued after saving her.

"You saw him destroy the assassins." She didn't need to say more; how could he lose? She'd never seen anything like it.

"But Thorn and them royal guards...I mean to say, Thorn might not be a champion, but he's been around a long time. I've felt his aura in negotiations. I've heard him talk before he came, saying he could probably kill Obert if things got bad enough."

Bryn scowled. "Well, he didn't, did he? If he wanted to be champion, he had plenty of time to step up! He's a coward and a snake! The queen shot him, didn't she?"

The other Queen's guard spoke up. "Too right, she did! Duke Victor will finish 'em off! He probably already has; you all heard the crash!" It was true. Shortly after they'd climbed the stairs and run to the queen's quarters, the whole palace had shaken. Marble tiles had split even in the hallway where they now stood.

Bryn realized she could see the other woman's breath as she spoke, and she tested it herself, huffing some air out before her in a white cloud. Wasn't Thorn an Ice Elementalist? "Something's wrong. It's too cold."

"Look!" the first guard said, pointing toward the stairwell. Sure enough, frost was gathering on the marble and slowly spreading toward them, climbing the walls and creeping over the marble.

"It's too quiet," the second guard said. Bryn couldn't argue; Victor wasn't a quiet fighter. Was he defeated? Should they retreat? "Bryn, you're his guard. You need to go and look. If we don't hear back, we've got to move the queen to the escape portal."

"I—" Bryn didn't want to say what was in her heart; she was afraid. Was her duty worth her life? Growling, she remembered Victor's words; she'd already fought once today, thinking she was going to die. She was different now. Death didn't own her anymore. "I'll go look. I'll try to signal if you should flee." With that, she crept forward with trembling knees, glad it wasn't apparent through her heavy armor. She still wore her battered shield on her left arm; if she couldn't repair it, and if she didn't die, it had earned an honored spot on her family's hearth.

When she stepped onto the frosty marble, she had to use her Balance of the Whipperlash spell, magically enhancing her agility to the point where she could daintily tiptoe through the slippery, icy mess to the steps. Once there, she crept down, crouching, ever peering ahead, alert for the smallest sound. When she rounded the last turn, she could hear a familiar voice speaking.

“...keep the boy in hand; we may need to go ahead with our original plan.” The voice paused and, a moment later, said, “Yes. Yes, have the women keep him in the summer tower.”

It was Thorn, and he didn't sound defeated or, frankly, even wounded. He sounded smug and confident. Was he talking about Prince Tomorran? Was Victor dead? Bryn crept forward to peek around the central column, affording herself a clear view of the hallway. The scene that unfolded was one of nightmares. Ice hung in thick sheets from the broken walls and ceiling. On the floor were the fractured bodies of every soldier Thorn had brought with him, and in the center of all those horrific, frozen sculptures stood Victor and Thorn.

Victor was, again, twice his usual size, looming large over Thorn, his great, deadly axe high over his head, frozen near the thirty-foot-high arched ceiling. Victor was coated in ice, his flesh blue, his red-black armor dim, obscured by the frosty stuff. He wasn't moving, and no breath plumed from his mighty lungs. Thorn stood before him, holding a potent, ice-attuned Energy focus, and he seemed to be preoccupied, muttering as he summoned a book and began to leaf through it.

Bryn frowned. Could Victor be dead? Defeated by ice? As she formed the thought, a sheet of the stuff fell off Victor's torso to crash at Thorn's feet, and the chamberlain jumped back, startled. He lifted his focus, and a pulse of potent frigid Energy rolled out of it, eliciting deep cracks from the depths of the palace as more and more marble was flash-frozen. Thorn lowered his focus and growled at Victor's frozen figure, “Give it up, fool. Just die before I have to waste the effort on—”

He danced back, interrupting himself as the ground around Victor began to hiss with steam, and the ice instantly thawed. Great sheets fell from Victor, the ceiling, and the walls, and then Victor's magnificent, gleaming black axe fell like a guillotine, nearly splitting Thorn in two. Somehow, the chamberlain slid back, gliding over the wet, ice-littered ground in his frosty blue armor. Victor's entire body was steaming, but apparently, he was just getting warmed up.

As Bryn watched, Victor lifted his axe, and it burst into flames. He burst into flames—red fire limned his body, and he began to exude black smoke like a man made of living brimstone. Bryn couldn't see his face, but most of the smoke came from his deep, heaving exhalations. Rather than swing that massive axe again, he leaned toward Chamberlain Thorn and screamed. The roar had a different quality to it than the battle cries he'd let loose in the garden.

The sound was like thunder, like an avalanche, like the world waking up and announcing its fury. The walls and ceiling came apart, crumbling before Victor's voice. Great sheets of marble fell, smashing into Thorn, forcing the chamberlain to expend more and more Energy shielding himself. Still, Victor wasn't done. As his body smoldered and the palace fell apart around him, he lifted his foot and stomped.

Bryn had never felt an earthquake before, but she'd heard tales of them—this was what she'd imagined. When the stairs bucked and cracked beneath her, she leaped, using every ounce of magically enhanced agility she could muster, fleeing the fight, rushing upward ahead of the

crumbling steps. When she pounded onto the rapidly thawing marble of the queen's hallway, she screamed, "Run! The palace isn't safe!"

The Queen's Guard didn't have to be told twice; the hallway rippled like it was alive, marble tiles popping loose, the walls cracking and falling apart, and, of course, plaster and tile falling from the heights. Bryn held her shield over her head and charged through the open door behind the guards. When the queen saw her, she shoved past her guards as they tried to rush her into her study and the secret passage beyond. "Does he yet live?"

Bryn knew she didn't mean Thorn. She wanted to know if her champion would survive the day. "He lives, but he's gone mad with fiery rage! Thorn tried to freeze him—he has Tomorran, but I know where! We must flee; Victor will bring the palace down!"

Book 9: Chapter 23: Schemers

When Victor's blood ignited with the hot, boiling fury of the volcano, rationality fled his mind. He vaguely remembered screaming at Chamberlain Thorn with a voice powerful enough to shatter marble, but he had no memory of casting Wake the Earth. Unfortunately, when his mind was enraged by Volcanic Fury, it seemed to fixate on that one ability among all his others. It was almost like the spirit of the great, sleeping gods of the earth wanted to use him as a conduit for their depthless, frustrated malice.

There was no telling how much destruction he might have wrought if he'd finished with Thorn and turned his madness against the city. Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, depending on whom you asked, he'd been in the middle of an enormous marble and granite structure, standing on the ground floor, with a vast edifice over his head and half a dozen subterranean levels below. As he pummeled Thorn, and the world shook, the ground gave way, and even for a burgeoning titan engorged on the fury of the mountain, thousands of tons of stone was enough to dampen his rampage.

When he came back to himself, Victor was in the dark, and his hand was clenched around the cold, dead flesh of Thorn's neck. Dust and soot were thick in the air, and, bit by bit, he began to notice small details—jumbles of broken stone, the hiss of gasses venting from subterranean outlets, and the soft, almost comforting glow of magma, burbling as it cooled. Victor's first panicked thought was of Lifedrinker, but she was there, close at hand, with her dark edge buried in a massive granite slab.

With a grunt, he stood to retrieve her, and that was when he realized he had a System message waiting for him:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 73 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.*****

Had he already claimed his Energy from Thorn, then? Was that what had, ultimately, broken him out of his rage? Victor looked around the dim space and saw that above his head was nothing but broken, jumbled stone slabs and that another such slab pinned Thorn's legs to the ground. Piles of broken stone were everywhere, and he had vague, foggy memories of throwing them off himself. He wondered if he'd been buried or injured by the collapse. He supposed he'd never know; he healed too quickly while enraged, and if the influx of Energy from Thorn had been enough to level him, then it would have healed any lingering wounds, too.

His little chamber beneath the rubble was only about a dozen giant-sized paces across, and he figured he'd need to start digging if he was going to get out of there. Victor touched Lifedrinker's haft, sending her into storage, and then he summoned a sharp knife into his hand, turning to Thorn's corpse. "If you're going to cause this much damn trouble, I'm taking your pinché heart."

While he worked, Victor's mind wandered to worrisome topics. Had he killed any innocents in his rampage? Had the damage he'd done to the palace killed anyone? He hoped not—people on Ruhn were generally well into their iron ranks, and the folks in the palace were usually higher than average. Surely, most of them could get away while the ground shook. Surely, there were enough guards and high-level nobles around to help any children.

"Right?" he asked the sticky, cold organ as he pulled it from Thorn's chest. The heart wasn't able to reassure him, so Victor sent it into storage. Looking around, he saw other, partially buried corpses, but they were members of the royal guard, no doubt the men and women who'd come with Thorn and died before the collapse.

He was looking up, contemplating his best route of egress, when, with a faint tinkling of chimes, he heard Queen Kynna's voice as though she stood close by, pitching her voice for just his ears, "Victor, my scryers have located you in the wreckage. Soon, the Earth Elementalists will have you free. Thank you for slaying Thorn, my champion. Thanks to you and the brave efforts of guardswoman Bryn, my son is safe, and a coup has been thwarted. Please stay safe where you are; it will be more than an hour before the Elementalists have cleared the way."

Victor tried speaking back to her, "Um, okay. Was anyone hurt in the, uh, battle?" Could he play the destruction off as simply the side effects of his struggle with Thorn? Whether he could or not, it didn't seem the queen could hear him. No further message was forthcoming. He found a relatively flat hunk of marble and sat down, contemplating his situation.

His thoughts started with how he felt; he didn't like it. Objectively, he supposed he should feel good. He'd saved Kynna and Bryn in the garden and stopped and killed Thorn. He'd even gained a level in the process. Wasn't that good? Why, then, did he feel like he'd gotten too drunk and done something terrible? Why did he feel guilty? He knew the answer; he'd lost himself to the rage again, and, as good as it felt in the moment when he was smashing and destroying and killing, it felt awful in retrospect.

What it boiled down to was that Victor didn't like having control taken from him, even if it was his own magic doing it. He hadn't liked it when his original Berserk made him that way, and he didn't like it when Volcanic Fury did it. "Why then, pendejo, did you choose a new class that gives you yet another way to

lose control?" He chuckled, shaking his head as he gathered saliva in his mouth to spit, trying to rid himself of some of the dust that had caked his airways.

He could hear distant rumbling and scraping and figured it was the queen's Elementalists working to move the wreckage of the palace. He wondered how far up they were. How many underground passages and galleries had he and Thorn fallen through? Thinking of Thorn reminded him of the man's heart, and Victor decided he might as well do something productive while he waited. He dug the cold, sticky organ from his storage ring and contemplated it.

Thorn had been a steel seeker. A cowardly one, but a steel seeker, nonetheless. He'd had a powerful affinity for ice or something similar; would that hinder Victor's ability to absorb the Energy? He was anything but cold, after all. "Pendejo," he cursed again, gathering more spit. "That loser could have beaten Obert or Qi Pot. Why didn't he?"

He supposed there were a few good explanations. Thorn might have been a coward, only willing to fight when he'd been caught in the act of orchestrating a coup. Maybe he'd been afraid that, after beating one of the "backwater champions," as he'd labeled them, a more powerful kingdom would come calling. "Or maybe the piece of shit was working for someone else." Victor wondered about that—would it be so strange for the great houses to have agents spread out through the lesser kingdoms?

The heart didn't appeal to him in its cold, clotted state, and Victor was tempted to summon his camp stove and cook it up. Something in his gut said that would be wrong, though; perhaps part of his "ritual" was to eat the hearts raw. So, holding his breath and trying not to think about what he was doing, Victor tore a massive hunk of the heart off with his teeth and began to chomp it down.

The meat was cold. At first, he'd thought it was just that Thorn's body had cooled, and the heart had lost its vibrant heat. He soon realized it was more than that; it wasn't that the heart wasn't warm—it was cold, like meat taken from a freezer and barely out of the rock-hard stage. What was more, as Victor swallowed his first bite, he could feel the coldness spread through his belly and into the surrounding flesh. As he chomped off another bite, he wondered if he was making a mistake.

Victor didn't take small bites, but Thorn had been a giant—a man of nearly the same stature as himself when he wasn't enraged. Despite its coldness, the heart didn't taste bad once Victor's saliva loosened up the blood. That fact encouraged Victor that he, hopefully, wasn't making a foolish mistake by consuming flesh that was clearly attuned to an affinity he didn't share. The frigid feeling spread through his body as he ate, and he could feel the tendrils of that icy Energy seeping into his Core space. When he gazed inward, he saw those tendrils of blue, frosty Energy rebuffed by the heat of his Spirit core. ♦

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He wasn't left guessing about what would happen to him for long. As the Energy infused his flesh to the point where he passed beyond cold to numb, System messages began to scroll into his field of view:

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new affinity: Blue Ice.*****

*****Warning! Incompatible Core: Spirit Cores cannot have an elemental affinity.*****

*****Compatible Breath Core Found: Elder Class. Reapplying acquired affinity.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new Breath Core affinity: Blue Ice.*****

*****Applying Energy gains to Breath Core.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Breath Core has gained three ranks: Improved 9.*****

Victor read the messages and felt a swelling of frigid Energy in his chest. He nearly panicked, fearing his magma-attuned Energy would be overwhelmed, but the spike in “blue ice” Energy reached a crescendo and then faded, leaving him feeling almost normal, if not a little...cooler. He turned his gaze inward, studying the space where his Breath Core lay.

Swirling, almost lazily, his ball of angry, magma-attuned Energy traversed the space in direct opposition to a ball of frigid-looking, deep blue, icy Energy. Victor knew from the System messages that it was called “blue ice,” but he had no idea what that meant other than it was cold even to look at. The two orbs of opposing power circled his Breath Core space, almost like they were squaring off, sizing each other up. It was amusing to watch, but Victor hoped he hadn’t created something untenable in his Breath Core.

As the sounds of stone grinding and shifting grew closer, he decided to experiment a little. Standing and facing toward the center of his little cave of crushed marble, he opened the pathways to his Breath Core, inhaled deeply, and, just as he’d learned to do so many months ago back in the Untamed Marches, he exhaled a plume of fiery, magma-attuned Energy. It wasn’t nearly as impressive as when he was under the influence of his Volcanic Fury spell, but the stream of liquid fire was significantly broader and stretched further than when he’d first acquired his Breath Core.

As the hot, molten rock smoked and sizzled, he looked into his Breath Core again and saw that both Energy orbs were reduced. Was his Energy cap the same for both attunements? Looking at his Status sheet to confirm, he saw:

Breath Core Energy: 1780/2800

He’d gained three hundred maximum Energy from his Core’s new ranks, but his total was a singular value; he didn’t have different tallies for the two Energy types. “So, how do I breathe blue ice?”

He opened his pathways again, took a deep breath, and this time, instead of firing off his breath by reflex, he looked inward to his Breath Core space, and using his will, he pulled a strand of the icy blue Energy into his pathway before exhaling. Just as he’d hoped, a plume of frosty, crackling air erupted from his mouth, coating the sheet of still-smoldering magma and freezing it over. More than that, he could hear the stones beneath the sheet of frosty ice cracking as the frigid substance bit deeply into them.

“Now that’s badass!” Victor slapped his hands together, then looked at his Breath Core Energy levels again:

Breath Core Energy: 770/2800

He was rather happy to see that his Breath Core’s Energy wasn’t being split by the two affinities but rather that he had a total sum of Energy that he could use as he wished, much the way his Epic-tier

Spirit Core worked. The thought made him wonder if that meant his Breath Core was well-constructed and wouldn't need tweaking before he advanced to epic tier and beyond. He also wondered if he'd be able to enhance his Breath Core cultivation by adding a source for the strange "blue ice" Energy.

He must have spent more time thinking and experimenting than he thought because a great clatter of crashing stone interrupted him, and a stream of light shone down into his dusty, smoky space.

"Duke Sandoval?" a strident woman's voice called, and he shielded his eyes to peer upward where a large woman wearing honest-to-God brown corduroy overalls stood in the hazy opening, peering back at him.

"That's me!"

"Are you well?"

Victor chuckled and began hopping up the broken stones toward the opening. "That's likely a matter of opinion. Some would say no."

The woman peered up at him and took in the clean, undamaged appearance of his clothes—Victor had long since sent his armor into hiding. "Ancient Gods! How'd you survive this catastrophe?"

Victor brushed his hands together, wishing his skin could similarly clean itself, and shrugged. "I'm tough and lucky, I guess." He wasn't sure he should claim responsibility for the "catastrophe." Was the queen spinning a different tale? Still, his guilt tweaked his guts, and he blurted, "Was anyone else hurt?"

"Aye, plenty! Still, the gods must favor Gloria, for none are reported dead save those traitors what caused this disaster! Her Majesty says you had a hand in that, milord, so you have the thanks of me and mine. Imagine! Trying to kill such a wonderful woman as Queen Kynna Dar! And her poor son! Such an innocent lad! I'm beside myself!" She shook her head and sighed, then pointed further upward toward another, brighter light. "I should stop my rambling, sir. Head on up—I've made steps there in the larger stones. Take your time; we've folks waiting to tend to you."

"And you?"

"I'll clean this mess up as much as I can. Her Majesty is eager to have Thorn's body so's she can search for evidence of his accomplices. You, um, didn't take his rings or—"

"Nah. They're all there." Victor waved and started climbing. It was true; the woman had basically built a staircase out of the rubble with comfortable, grooved steps seemingly molded into the marble. He wasn't sure how he felt about Kynna blaming Thorn for the destruction, but he supposed a person could make the argument that this was all the traitor's fault. If Thorn hadn't attacked Kynna, Victor wouldn't have had to fight him. It wasn't like Victor

had wanted to use his Volcanic Fury; he'd needed it to break the former chamberlain's ice spell.

The cheers of guards and more Elementalists broke him from his introspection, and he smiled as he emerged from a massive pit into the dusty, broken remnants of the central portion of Kynna's palace. He was glad to see that the four wings were mostly intact, visible over the rubble and that the grounds and gardens seemed relatively whole. For once, he was happy that his power wasn't truly the equivalent of a great volcano.

He waved to the folks hard at work clearing away the mess, then caught sight of Kynna, still surrounded by her Queen's Guard. She was waving him over from atop a partially broken staircase. Victor jogged over, nodding and waving to every soldier and worker he passed; all stared at him with a mixture of adoration and awe. Some cheered, some shouted his name, and some simply stared, dumbstruck by his presence.

When he mounted the steps and stood before Kynna, he knelt, biting back a quip about how easy it was to impress her people. Before he could speak, asking something inane like how she was or saying something lame like he was glad her son was all right, she grasped his shoulder and pulled him to his feet. "You've saved our nation, Victor. I'll not have you kneel this day."

Victor looked around at the dusty, bloody faces of the Queen's Guard and asked, "Is Bryn—"

"She's well. I insisted she see a physician. She suffered a head wound while rescuing my son, but Leyna here says that she'll be fine." The queen glanced at one of her guardians. "Yes?"

Standing there in a battered silvery breastplate tooled with enameled yellow roses, the woman nodded quickly and, in a hoarse, breathy voice, responded, "Aye, My Queen. The physician said she'd be right as rain in no time."

Queen Kynna, her hand still on Victor's shoulder, smiled and gently squeezed. "You see, Champion? Your loyal guardswoman is well, my betrayer is dead, and my son is safe." She gestured to the wreckage of her palace. "This will be made whole again, given time. In the meantime, I'd like to travel with you to Iron Mountain." She reached up to tap her crown, encompassing herself, Victor, and all of her remaining Queen's Guard in her blue dome of privacy.

"Something more?" Victor prompted.

"I'm quite sure Thorn wasn't acting alone. I believe he was...prodded to act. I've reconsidered my ancestor's proposal, Victor, and I believe it's time that we speak in earnest about the next steps. If the nations of Ruhn want to scheme against me, plot my demise, and threaten my child, then I believe it's high time we gave them a reason to fear us."

"Us?"

"Well, Victor, after hearing the tale of your performance in the garden and seeing how you stood up to Thorn, I must admit that I've gained a...new perspective with regard to you challenging more dangerous champions." She turned back to the wreckage. "Still, it's a pity Thorn's schemes brought down the palace, don't

you think? The word going around the city is that my new champion was nearly killed by the man. He might have emerged victorious if he hadn't brought the palace down on himself."

As she turned back to him and winked, Victor grinned and nodded. "Yeah, he was a real mean bastard, that Thorn. Lucky for me, a giant chunk of granite fell on his head."

Book 9: Chapter 24: The Weight of Rule

The vast teleportation network on Ruhn made traveling between cities and larger towns painless, but it took something away from the scale of the world, at least in Victor's mind. When he and the queen's entourage traveled from Gloria to Iron Mountain, nearly five hundred miles distant, it only took a few seconds. His first view of his duchy was a dim, stone-walled room where rune-inscribed metallic inlays made intricate patterns on the floor—the portal chamber.

A guard wearing gray and black livery and wielding a lightning-tipped spear immediately took a knee. The queen's emissaries had already prepared the duchy for their change in rulership. "Your Grace," the tall, narrow-faced man said. "I am Gand, your guard captain."

"It's good to meet you, Gand. I'd tell you to stand, but the queen will be here any second." A flash of light heralded more arrivals, and soon, the room was filled with nobles, ladies in waiting, Queen's Guards, and, of course, Kynna and her son, Tomorran. As the party, some thirty people, filled the portal chamber a little uncomfortably, Victor turned to Gand. "Where's my chamberlain? Have rooms been made ready for the queen and her people?"

"Duke Sandoval," Kynna said, coming to stand beside him. "My Queen's Guards are interviewing and vetting your household staff. I'm sorry, I meant to tell you, but the preparations for our departure got away from me."

Gand looked up from where he knelt. "I was about to say the same, milord. Most everyone's in the great hall with Her Majesty's people."

"I have people in place, Victor." Kynna turned to Gand. "Please rise, Captain. Tell me, where are the Ladies Davas and Loray?"

Gand stood and nodded to the door. "Without, My Queen."

"Very good. Please give Duke Sandoval a tour of his estate, and my people will see to us."

"As you say, Your Majesty." Gand bowed low, then turned to Victor. "Shall we, milord?"

Victor turned to scan the throng of people, ignoring the murmured conversations. When his eyes settled on Bryn, he nodded. "Let's go, Bryn." He turned to Kynna and bowed. "I'll speak to you soon, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. I'll be in touch."

Victor nodded, then followed Gand out the door and past another row of royal dignitaries he vaguely recognized from Kynna's palace. With Gand leading the way, Victor and Bryn were given a lengthy tour of an estate that rivaled Kynna's royal palace in grandeur. Victor was, frankly, struck dumb, a little numb and withdrawn as he realized that the entire place was, technically, his. So long as Gloria wasn't conquered and he wasn't killed, the enormous structure with hundreds of rooms, including vast ballrooms, a great hall, kitchens, parlors, a library, a martial hall, barracks, and three different wings of bedrooms and suites, was his.

The estate put his home on Fanwath to shame. It put Rellia's palace to shame. The tower where Victor's suite was located had twenty floors and a magical elevator that used spatial magic to deposit him at his desired level nearly instantaneously. More than the structure itself, the estate was loaded with valuable furnishings, art, and every little thing that Victor would never think of—curtains, dishes, glassware, linens, pantry items, and a million other tiny objects he took for granted.

The tour took more than two hours, and Victor was feeling overwhelmed enough, but when they finished in his master suite and stepped out onto the balcony, he got his first clear view of the real value of the Duchy of Iron Mountain—the land. The first thing he saw was the mountain. His palace, for there was no denying that was what it was, was situated on a massive hilltop, but if he looked to his left, down the slopes of the hill and overtop miles and miles of orchards, he saw the mountain for which the duchy was named, and it made him feel tiny. It also woke something in his chest—the Iron Mountain was a slumbering volcano.

The peak stood alone. A few rolling hills drifted away from its shoulders, but otherwise, the great conical, steel-gray slopes rose up starkly to form an enormous mountain, the top of which was slightly concave, draped in white snow, and obscured by clouds. It was like a thing from a fantasy book cover—a mountain that seemed impossibly huge and out of place, rising from thousands of square miles of green forests and cultivated land.

Victor stared at it for a long time, listening to the song in his chest as his magma-attuned Energy echoed the deep, soundless voice that rippled, unnoticed by most, through the land. The mountain made the one where he'd battled Hector look like a hillock. Its presence rumbled in his bones, and he began to truly understand why the System called such beings "sleeping gods."

"Um, milord, if you look to the right, you can see the town, well, more of a city these days, really."

Victor blinked, finding his eyes dry, and wondered how long he'd stood staring at the volcano. He glanced at Bryn and Gand, offering a quick, reassuring smile. "That's a hell of a mountain."

Gand nodded. "Aye, milord. The greatest peak on the western continent." He gestured to the right. "The town, though, sir. I can point out a few of the more prominent locales."

Victor nodded and turned to look where Gand pointed. His palace had high walls, but they were far below his tower. Looking past them, Victor traced his eyes over perhaps a mile of manicured, garden-like lawns, and then, at the demarcation of a much smaller, more decorative wall, the town began. It wasn't nearly as large as Gloria, but as Gand had indicated, Iron Mountain was more of a city than a town. Gand pointed out a famous inn, the market square, the city administration hall, the guard barracks, and, on the banks of a broad, slow-moving river, the warehouses where the wealth of the duchy was made.

Iron Mountain's lower slopes were peppered with mines, and all manner of metals, precious and otherwise, were mined from its enormous slopes. They were brought on rails to the town, shipped off on barges, and taken to other towns and cities where they were processed. "It's by design, milord. The original Duke of Iron Mountain hated the smell of industry; he insisted on selling the ore raw, despite the value he gave up by foregoing smelters and forges. He argued that the duchy was rich enough, especially when you considered the orchards. We feed half the continent."

Gand sounded proud, and Victor, looking out at the beautiful countryside and the neat, orderly little city, could understand why. It was a lovely place. He said as much, "It's a beautiful place, Gand. I'm assuming you're able to give me this tour because you were cleared by the queen's people?"

"Yes, milord. I was among the first to go through their vetting process. They were thorough, but I can understand why. Terrible what happened in Gloria!"

"Yes. The queen's being careful for a reason. On that topic, tell me, where are the Haveshi?" Victor knew that Kynna had sent her agents to gather up the former ruling family of Iron Mountain, but he didn't know where she'd put them.

"They're awaiting you in the Hunting Hall, milord."

"The Hunting Hall? Was that on the tour?"

"I pointed it out, milord, but we didn't go inside. It's a large parlor where one of the earlier dukes, Avard, I believe, liked to keep his trophies and artwork with a, well, a hunting theme."

"And all the Haveshi clan is there?"

"Yes, milord."

Victor sighed, dreading what came next. "All right. Let's go get this over with. I can't imagine they enjoy being left in the dark."

Gand's gray eyebrows twitched like he wasn't sure if he should smile or frown or agree or disagree. After a moment's hesitation, though, he nodded. "Aye, milord."

As they walked, Victor asked, "Are they..." He wanted to say 'popular,' but considering he was a duke now, he tried to elevate his vocabulary slightly. "Well-loved?"

"For the most part, aye, milord. The people were proud of Duke Qi Pot, and while he was away doing his duties for the king, his brother ruled Iron Mountain with an easy hand."

“And his brother’s name?”

“That would be Lord Draj, milord. I beg your pardon; I suppose he’s no longer a lord.”

“Draj Haveshi? Is he the head of the family, then?”

“There’s also his mother, Lady Tyla, milord, but she’s softer spoken than Draj.”

Victor nodded, and they walked in silence for a while as he thought about the situation. He didn’t like having the former ruling family of the duchy living under his roof, and he intended to remedy that situation, but he had to be delicate. He tried to imagine someone he cared about in their situation; this was their home, and it was a beautiful place where he was sure they’d built many memories. Kynna had told him he could do as he pleased—even banish them. The thought made him sick to his stomach, though, and he knew she’d already guessed he wouldn’t do either.

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Despite the discomfort of the situation, he hoped to find some kind of middle ground. He’d seen dozens of beautiful estates on the edges of the city as he’d scanned it from his tower. Surely, these people could be made happy and whole without having to share a roof with the man who’d killed their former head of household. What a fall, though—to go from this palace, ruling over these beautiful lands, to mere citizens. Victor felt like he wouldn’t be able to stomach it. He’d leave.

“How many people live in the duchy?”

“Upwards of eight-hundred-thousand, milord.”

“And the coffers? How do they stand?” Victor wouldn’t be surprised to find the duchy’s wealth drained and mysteriously missing.

“That I don’t know, milord. Sir Draj would have an idea, but your treasurer will no doubt finish her vetting soon, too.”

As they turned down a wide, arched hallway with paintings of forest scenes lining the walls, Victor turned to Bryn. “Did you get ahold of the artificer?”

Her helmeted head nodded. “Yes, milord. Trobban will settle his affairs and arrange to travel here within the week.”

“Good.”

At the end of the hall, eight guards wearing the yellow rose of Gloria on the breastplates stood guarding a pair of wooden doors carved with hounds, birds, trees, and the like. Gand stopped and said, “The Haveshi are within. Would you like me to announce you, milord?”

“No. You and Bryn can wait here.” He moved between the guards and stood before the door, gathering himself. He was his natural size—something close to eleven feet tall, and he’d shifted his Sovereign Will bonuses to agility and dexterity; he didn’t think he’d need strength or vitality and figured a little boost in

his motor skills might help him avoid making awkward movements, tripping on a rug, or something equally embarrassing.

Before he opened the door, he cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin and grinned as the shadows lifted from the hallway, and the soldiers nearby shifted and inhaled sharply. He tugged the doors wide and stepped through.

Victor didn't mean to glare as he scanned the room, but his natural expression was rather predatory; his dark brows were constantly angled downward, and his eyes were sharp and hawkish, accentuated by his long, straight nose. For that reason, when he saw some of the folks who looked up at his entrance flinch back, he forced himself to smile as he reached back and pulled the doors closed behind him.

The Hunting Hall was large with high, vaulted ceilings, and though one wall was dominated by floor-to-ceiling windows, gauzy, gray-green curtains hung over most of them, giving the lighting a calm, peaceful effect. The décor was interesting; just as Gand had said, there were many trophies from hunts on the walls and stands—the horns, claws, and teeth of fantastic beasts mounted on plaques, as well as a great many taxidermied heads. Victor saw bears, stags, great serpents, and dozens of creatures he couldn't name.

Couches set in conversation groups were scattered about, and on them, Victor counted at least twenty people with a strong, familial resemblance to Qi Pot. Another dozen or two folks with wildly disparate appearances were undoubtedly children or in-laws. It was a good-sized clan, by Victor's standards, but he knew there were other families on worlds like Ruhn and Sojourn with thousands of members. As people realized he'd entered, their conversations died, and everyone, even the children, stood and turned to face him.

He looked around, his inspiration helping him to read the expressions—fear, anxiety, and anger were common, but he also saw curiosity and, in some of the younger faces, hope and perhaps a bit of admiration. What tales had they heard about him, he wondered. The room was silent, and in that silence, Victor's ears picked out their nervous breaths and the tapping at the window as a soft breeze jostled the branches of a fruit tree grown a bit too close to the building.

Victor didn't know what Draj or Tyla looked like, but he supposed he didn't care. His words were for the entire clan. "Hello, everyone. I'm Victor Sandoval, and, by right of conquest and royal decree, I'm the new Duke of these lands." He let his gaze traverse the group, settling on many sets of eyes, waiting patiently to see if anyone would be foolish enough to object or declare their animosity.

No one spoke, but many men and women began to take their knees. Victor held up a hand. "I'll not demand you kneel here. What would be the point of such a show between us? If I wanted to teach you a lesson in humility and force you to demonstrate your obeisance, I'd be sure to arrange an audience first." He chuckled, ever amused by his ability to pull words he barely understood from the depths of his mind thanks to all the reading he'd done at Dar's behest.

As those who'd begun to kneel returned to their feet, Victor focused on a woman with three small children clutching her skirts. The kids, two boys and a girl, regarded him with big, fearful eyes, making him want to lighten the mood. "My goodness," he said, scanning the other children in the room, "what well-behaved children! I know it can't be easy keeping still and quiet, and I want you to know that I appreciate it. I'll be sure to award your good manners.

“As I said, I’m the Lord of these lands now, and I understand how that must be difficult to hear. I understand that many of you may wish for my demise. I’m sure many of you also wonder what fate is in store for you. Surely there are rumors, though, yes? I haven’t spoken publicly, and I know Her Majesty, Queen Kynna Dar, hasn’t made any proclamation, so you must be feeling some dread.”

“Ancient Gods, just tell us!” a young man wailed, and Victor chuckled as a taller teenage girl clamped her hand over his mouth.

“Fair enough. Well, you should put most of your fears to rest; I’ve no intention to punish you for being related to a man who, by all accounts, was simply serving his king—” He was forced to stop as gasping sobs escaped many of the men and women. More than one collapsed onto the couches, unable to stand on shaky legs. Victor smiled and gestured to one older woman struggling to stand again. “Stay seated, please. In fact, everyone, take a seat. I should have started with that.”

He stepped further into the room and waited while almost everyone sat, especially those with children. Some didn’t sit, however. Some stood with arms folded, glowering. Victor marked those faces, intent on learning if it was simply pride that kept them on their feet or if they harbored dangerous ideas about vengeance. Looking at those folks, wondering if he should be ready to fight, his sharp Quinametzin eyes picked out some interesting details; these people wore no jewelry, nor did they have weapons. Had Queen Kynna’s people stripped them of their belongings?

“I’ve heard good things about your family, and I intend to see that you have every opportunity to maintain some status in the duchy, but I’ll also see to it that other options are available. I can’t imagine it would be easy to live in the shadow of this palace after having once ruled from it.”

A woman with dark hair and eyes, dressed in an elegant, silken blue gown, spoke up, “We must leave the palace?”

Victor turned to regard her. She sat on a pale leather couch, with her legs crossed, and held the hand of a blond-haired boy who couldn’t have been more than six years old. “Pardon me for asking; I’ve yet to put faces to names. Might I have yours?”

“I am Tyla Haveshi.” The answer surprised Victor, and he fought to hold his face neutral. The woman didn’t look more than thirty years old, but she was the matriarch of this clan. He should have expected as much, but it was hard to escape his old notions. He’d imagined she’d look more like his abuela.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Tyla.” He knew better than to address her as “milady.” Kynna had made that clear to him; he was the Lord of these lands, and these people, in particular, would need to be reminded of that fact. Even so, some of

the men and women gathered there gasped and looked stricken by what they viewed as blatant disrespect.

“I’ll be glad to meet with each of you regarding the prospect of continuing to serve the duchy, and, in some cases, it might make sense for those people and their immediate family members to live in the palace. However, most of you will be expected to live elsewhere. I intend to provide your family with a sizeable estate and lands in the duchy.”

“You’d throw us from our home, then?” This time, it was a man who spoke up, one of those who hadn’t sat down when he’d asked them to. He was tall, with dark, curly hair and golden eyes, and looked very much like Qi Pot.

“Draj, I presume?”

The man folded his arms over his chest and nodded. “That’s right.”

Victor didn’t press him about not addressing him respectfully. Not yet. He’d anticipated an objection like the one Draj had voiced. “I know I’m new to these lands, but I’ve read a history or two. The Haveshi held power in Iron Mountain for just over seventy-four years, shortly after Qi Pot won his first duel for King Groff. Is that right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, what was the name of the duke before that?”

“I—”

“If you don’t remember, don’t feel bad; over the last twenty-four hundred years, there have been no less than eighty different families, under the rule of twenty-nine different royal bloodlines, to hold the claim to these lands. Qi Pot was Duke of Iron Mountain for far longer than some of those other dukes, but not the longest—not even close.” Victor allowed his voice to grow deep, speaking from his gut as he let his aura slip its bonds. “In short, Haveshi Clan, your claim on these lands is nothing unique, nothing special.”

As people gasped and shrank back from the weight of his aura, Victor glared at Draj and growled, “Sit down.” The man fell back onto the couch behind him, and everyone else who still stood quickly followed suit. Victor walked toward the windows, reeling in his aura; he’d tried hard to focus its weight in Draj’s direction, but some of it had pressed down on the children, and he already felt guilty, hearing sobs as they struggled to breathe.

When he had it in check and silence once more reigned in the room, he pointed out the window to the massive mountain near the horizon. “This duchy is called Iron Mountain because of that mighty peak, not because of any family in this palace. One day, I’ll leave, too. One way or another, someone else will rule these lands. It’s just the way it goes. This duchy is part of Gloria now, and if you play your cards right, every single member of your family might gain lands and titles that make you look back fondly at the times you spent here, thinking them quaint and small.”

“Does Gloria have so much to offer? Duchies greater than Iron Mountain?” someone asked. Victor didn’t see who; he was still staring at the mountain.

“Not yet.” He turned and clapped his hands, startling almost everyone. “I’ll have one of the queen’s stewards begin interviews. If any of you want to serve the duchy or the crown, I’ll help arrange it. As for the rest of you, I’ll have the details regarding your land grant and estate ready for you in a day or two. In the meantime—”

“Milord!” Tyla stood, still clutching the hand of the little boy. “If you’re done… impressing my family, I would like a chance to speak. Even before you arrived, we all came to an agreement. In the event that you decided to show mercy and if we weren’t banished, we all agreed that we wanted to continue to serve the people of Iron Mountain. We wish to swear fealty, Lord Victor. We all wish to serve your household.”

Victor folded his arms, frowning at the woman, wondering why nothing could ever be simple. Couldn’t they all just move out? Couldn’t he just get back to training and planning the next duel with Kynna? He had a magical egg to eat! For a brief moment, he wondered if he could return to Kynna and refuse these lands. Was that an option? Instead, he nodded, forced a smile, and gestured to a couch. “Let’s sit down, Tyla. I’d like to hear more about your family.”

Book 9: Chapter 25: Schemes

When Victor finally returned to his chambers atop the central tower in his palace, he was exhausted. Tyla Haveshi had kept him talking to her, her son, Draj, and half a dozen elder cousins—the decision-makers in the clan—for nearly four hours. In the end, Victor concluded that the people of the Haveshi family were more afraid of fading into obscurity than they were upset about the loss of Qi Pot and their status as the de facto rulers of Iron Mountain.

It wasn’t that he trusted Tyla or the many people in that room, but after four hours in which he’d been introduced to children and been regaled with tales of the honors so many of them had won, Victor couldn’t detect an ounce of animosity. He couldn’t believe that so many people with such varied experiences could hide hatred or lust for vengeance so smoothly. Of course, he was smart enough to know that he was projecting his own mentality and morals onto those people, so he knew better than to grant everything they wanted *carte blanche*.

He’d still insisted that they take up residence in the city, but he’d been very open to the idea that many of them would continue to serve the duchy and, as they’d all requested, his household. It was almost like they wanted him to be their surrogate patron. After listening to Tyla talk about tradition for over an hour, Victor was beginning to understand that it wasn’t all that uncommon for a lord of an estate to do so. Somehow, that wily, young-looking, old woman had made him come around to the idea that he was, for all intents and purposes, responsible for them now.

Tyla had let one little revelation slip during their hours-long talk; she was close friends with Queen Kynna and had been since long before Xan had been

aggressive to Gloria. When Victor learned that much, a lot of pieces fell into place. Kynna had known that Tyla would behave this way, that she'd cling to him and want to make her family indispensable to him—dependent on him. The most annoying thing about knowing that was that it had still worked; Victor liked Tyla, and even Draj had begun to grow on him, offering advice and information freely, putting his knowledge of the duchy on exhibition.

Victor shook his head, sighing, looking out over his balcony toward the enormous Iron Mountain. Its slopes were painted orange by the impending sunset, making Victor think of fire and magma. He wondered just how long it had been since the monstrous volcano had last blown its top. It had to be thousands of years. A knock sounded, and he turned away from the view, striding across the richly appointed sitting room to the foyer and the door that led to the guardroom outside his elevator.

When he opened the door, Bryn stood there, and just behind her was Queen Kynna. "Her Majesty is here to see you, milord."

"Thanks, Bryn." Victor pulled the door wide and gestured for the queen to enter, bowing slightly. "Hello, Your Majesty."

"Good evening, Victor. I hope you don't mind me coming by for an evening meeting. I took the liberty of ordering us dinner so you won't be starved while we work."

Victor pushed the door closed and gestured to the large dining table. "Please have a seat. As for starving, I am hungry but had something else in mind."

"Your egg?" She chuckled and sat down, surprising him by not taking the seat at the head of the table but rather the one to its right.

"Yeah. Don't worry, though, it'll wait."

"You won't have to wait long. Once we go over a few things, I'll have much to occupy me as I prepare for the next challenge."

Victor thought it would be weird to choose a seat other than the head of the table, but he hoped he wasn't sending the wrong message. He hoped it wasn't a trap. He chuckled under his breath at that thought—how strange politics were! Before he'd been summoned to Fanwath, could he ever have imagined that he'd be worrying about the implications of taking the wrong seat at a table?

Kynna lifted her crown off and set it on the table to her left, but she tapped a nail against it, creating her privacy barrier before she turned to Victor. "It grows heavier and heavier throughout the day."

Again, Victor wondered at the double meaning of her words. Was she being literal, or was she demonstrating that she understood the weight of ruling over people? He decided to play it neutrally. "I can imagine."

"Do you want to talk about your time with the Haveshi family?"

"Well, I learned that you happen to be good friends with their matriarch."

“I am—I was. We haven’t spoken much in recent years. Still, I don’t believe she or her sons were pleased with how King Groff was treating Gloria.”

“They’re very eager to continue their service to the duchy. I was intent on removing them from the palace and their official duties, at least at first, but after our meeting, I’m starting to think I could use their help and loyalty. How do you feel about it?” Victor didn’t want to ask for advice openly, but he supposed a little humility might serve him well.

“Tyla knows that the star of her family has fallen. They could be stripped and banished, forced to start over in a new world. If we sent them to another high-tier world, they’d be paupers, and if we sent them to a frontier world, they’d have to fight for their position, and then, if they rose to power, they’d be ruling over a backwater. I believe that Tyla is grateful we’re not doing that to them. My agents took their dimensional containers when they rounded them up, but we have them set aside. If you agree, I believe you could win much favor with them if you return all or most of their personal belongings.”

“Do I need to earn favor with them?”

“Perhaps that’s the wrong term—loyalty might fit better. As for whether or not you need them...” Kynna paused and stroked her sharp, elegant jawline for a moment. “Iron Mountain is not a trivial duchy to rule. It’s enormously rich and influential, and there are a million moving parts to the industries here. You could find commoners familiar with the workings of the mines, the orchards, and the ports, but loyalty among them will be just as questionable as you might find the Haveshi’s.”

“So, you think I should just trust Draj and let him continue to operate things?”

“I wouldn’t precisely trust him, but you could certainly use him. Your problem, Victor, is that you’re alone on Ruhn.” She held up a hand and shook her head. “No, I don’t mean that you don’t have me or your loyal guardian outside that door, but you don’t have a network of people you know and trust. You have to put some faith in people; sometimes, it will bite you, and sometimes, it will reveal new allies.”

“Yeah, but is it smart to trust the people whom I’ve displaced?”

“Again, I caution you not to think in those terms. These people are alive at our mercy. They’re still allowed to live here at yours. Many rulers of the kingdoms of Ruhn would have had every one of them relieved of their heads by now.”

Victor sighed and waved a hand. “All right. I understand your point. Let me ask you something else, though. If the veil walkers ensure that people follow the laws of warfare on Ruhn, why are assassins sanctioned? Why didn’t they intervene when Thorn tried to take your life and captured your son?”

“The veil walkers who remain on Ruhn are concerned with the small folk. The rules for warfare and the resulting duels are meant to protect the commoners of Ruhn from the whims, schemes, and ambitions of the nobility. They care not if my rivals slay me and mine in our sleep.”

“Yeah,” Victor sighed, “I guess Dar kind of touched on that with me. It’s wild to see it in action, though.” Victor pointed to the blue dome surrounding his dining table. “You think you’re safe here?”

“No, not safe, but safer. My coming here will throw any traitors’ schemes into disarray.”

“Traitors meaning people in Gloria.” Victor nodded, understanding how moving her court away from the capital in the wake of his destruction might thwart other immediate plots to dethrone her.

“Yes. As for schemes, Victor, we have our own to consider.” She smiled wryly, shifting in her seat to look at him more directly. “I believe I can create a plausible connection between Thorn and the kingdom of Bandia.”

Victor frowned, trying to picture the complex map of Ruhn in his mind. “Can you remind me—”

“Bandia is a coastal kingdom on this continent, and if we conquer it, we’ll be within our rights to challenge one of the kingdoms on the eastern continent.”

“So does that mean we can skip the kingdoms between here and, uh, Bandia?”

“No! The rules on warfare are clear; we must share a border or body of water with the kingdom we challenge. The beauty of my strategy is that we can begin to work our way toward Bandia, and we can do it without declaring a succession war; with Thorn’s ‘connection’ and the attempted coup, we have a plausible reason for wanting to conquer Bandia, and thereby, the kingdoms between us.”

“So, Thorn’s betrayal provided you an excuse to start the succession war in secret, huh? I’m assuming that will result in fewer assassination attempts than if you openly declared it?”

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“Precisely. Thorn’s relation to the Queen of Bandia—she’s his second cousin—and their recent communications cloud the waters just enough for us to justify action.”

She seemed excited and hungry, and Victor wondered what had changed. It didn't sound like Thorn's 'connection' to Bandia was really what was motivating her. "You don't know that the Queen of Bandia was involved in the coup, though?"

"I believe she's been whispering in Thorn's ear for years—decades, even. Looking back with a critical eye, I can see how her kingdom benefited from diplomatic overtures Thorn argued were best for Gloria. Well, you saw the state of my nation when you arrived. I believe the man has been undermining me since the moment I took the throne. My father loved him dearly and thought he was a brilliant strategist, so I never suspected him."

"Are we going to stop there? I know you said we'll be within our rights to challenge a great house once we conquer Bandia, but are you going to? Are we taking this all the way?"

"My brush with death and my son's capture drove something home for me, Victor. So long as there are divisions in society, such as the one between the great houses and the lower kingdoms of Ruhn, then it's never safe to be on the ladder's lower rungs. It's far easier to throw someone off if they're below you. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah, for sure. They call it 'king of the hill' for a reason."

"So, I tire of being at the bottom of the hill. I thought a calm, quiet life was what I wanted, but that coup attempt woke something in me. I believe I have a bit of my ancestor's desire for glory in me, Victor, and I'll not sit down here and allow my 'betters' to decide my fate." She sneered as she said, "betters," and Victor grinned fiercely.

"That's what I like to hear! Hell yes! When's my next duel?"

Kynna smiled and reached over the table to clasp his wrist in her long, slender fingers. Her eyes widened, and Victor knew why: her fingers felt like ice cubes on his hot flesh. "Your skin is so hot!"

"Heh. It was worse before I—" Victor almost said, "before I ate Thorn's heart," but he caught himself just in time. He chuckled and shook his head. "Before I learned to control my Energy."

"I'm pleased you're eager to fight, Champion, but this will be a careful process. We must go through the motions of investigation and accusation. We must feign diplomacy, and when that falls through, we'll need to pressure our eastern neighbor, Lovania, into a duel. It will take time—months, likely. In the meantime, you must make yourself as strong as possible."

As she drew her hand back, Victor nodded and turned to look at the evening sky outside his balcony. “I want to visit that mountain.”

“The mines?”

“No, the mountain. I can feel it. Its spirit calls to mine, and I think it will be worth my time to explore its depths...or its heights. I’m not sure.”

“I—” Kynna frowned and glanced at her crown. “I want to object, but I just asked you to make yourself strong. I cannot stand in your path if you feel something in that mighty mountain that calls to you. However, I’ll send a Spatial Magus with you. Florent is a good man, and he’ll be able to craft a portal that will bring you back here should the need arise.”

Victor thought about it for a moment, and though he didn’t like having strangers looking over his shoulder, he didn’t see a real downside. “I’ll bring Bryn, too, and I suppose that means I’ll probably put some trust into the Haveshi family to run things around here. I mean, you’ll be here, too, right?”

“Yes, Victor. I will keep a keen eye on Tyla and her son, but I believe you’re making a wise decision. Now,” she smiled and gestured toward the door, “I received notice that our dinner is here. Shall we eat?”

“Sure.” Victor leaned back, suddenly feeling a little better about everything. He felt like he had a path before him, and though it was convoluted, with many stops along the way, it felt right. He’d build his strength, and when the times were right, he’d fight some duels. He was beginning to feel a little flutter in his gut, something he hadn’t noticed in a long time—he was excited.

He was eager to face off against the champions of the “great houses” and to show them what he was made of, especially after hearing Kynna talk about how they viewed themselves as better than the rest of the people on Ruhn. He supposed that it was rather apparent in how they labeled themselves, but that didn’t make him dislike them any less. More than that, he was eager to visit that mountain. When he looked at that great peak, he felt a small echo of what he’d felt when he’d visited the Ivid hive world. It was a sense of wonder and awe, and he wanted a closer look.

He and the queen ate a meal her personal chef and attendants served, and Victor savored every delectable bite. They made small talk, and, for the first time, Victor felt like he was beginning to get to know the queen as a person and not just as a ruler or Dar’s distant granddaughter. He asked her about Tyla Haveshi and how they knew each other, and that’s when Victor learned that Queen Kynna was a lot older than he’d thought.

“We hunted together often when I was younger,” she said breezily, sipping her wine while Victor stuffed a large forkful of dense chocolate cake into his mouth. “I’d say the first time we went out was something close to sixty years ago.

Coincidentally, we stalked the slopes of the Iron Mountain; she was teaching me to track the great cats that lurk in the heights.”

Victor tried hard to keep his face straight when she said “sixty.” When his eyes betrayed his surprise, he feigned difficulty swallowing and, with a chagrined smile, cleared his throat and said, “My eyes were bigger than my mouth.”

“I hope you left room for your treasure. Will you consume it tonight?”

“I figure I’ll be out a few days. Is that all right?”

“I’ll manage things around here while you recover. Would you like me to speak to Tyla and Draj on your behalf? I can assign them each an ‘assistant’ who will report back to me.”

“And then you’ll report to me?”

“Of course! I’ll share everything I learn with you, Victor. Our fates are entwined now.”

Victor sighed and leaned on the arm of his chair, making it creak and complain. He rested a hand on his distended belly. “That was delicious.” Kynna’s eyes narrowed, and he wondered if she was irritated that he hadn’t echoed her overture of partnership.

He didn’t have to wonder long. “What motivates you, Victor?”

He decided to be straight with her for once. “It’s funny you ask ‘cause I reflected on that earlier while we ate.” Kynna’s eyebrows arched, and she leaned forward but didn’t speak, so Victor continued. “I feel excited at the prospect of fighting these champions of the great houses. I love the energy of a crowd, and I love to fight, but I also love to beat the shit out of pendejos

who think they’re better than everyone else. Yeah,” he nodded and smiled, “I’d say that motivates me pretty well.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand why my ancestor sent you to us. The members of my Queen’s Guard were impressed by you—enough to speak about you in hushed voices, afraid they’d incite your wrath. Your loyal protector, Guardswoman Bryn, refuses to speak about what she saw when you and Thorn brought the palace down around you. Such loyalty given so quickly isn’t something I’ve ever seen before. I know the people I brought here are loyal to me, but that’s after decades of building relationships. She must see something great in you, and I must confess that I’m starting to see it, too.”

“Ahem,” Victor shifted uncomfortably. “Look, Queen Kynna—”

“You may call me Kynna when we’re alone, Victor.” Again, she reached over the table to grasp his wrist, her touch tender, and Victor wondered if he was

receiving mixed signals or if she was coming on to him. He didn't know how to react, but one thing was sure: he wasn't looking for that kind of relationship just then, especially not with a queen he was supposed to be working for. He held still, though, and didn't pull away, waiting to see if he was overreacting or reading the situation wrong.

"Okay, well, Kynna, I don't try to build loyalty with people. I'm just myself, and if that inspires loyalty, then I'm not going to complain. Bryn's a smart, capable woman, and I think we shared a moment there in the garden when she almost died. I think she knows I witnessed her coming face to face with death, and that created a connection between us. That's all it is."

Kynna smiled, gently squeezing his wrist before letting go. "You're an interesting man, Victor. I looked into death's eyes in that garden, too, you know. I'm very grateful that you were there. Tell me, how many times have you stared into the abyss?"

Victor exhaled slowly, feeling his heart begin to beat normally again as she leaned away from him and folded her napkin, placing it on the table. "A few times, I guess."

She nodded, staring at him for another long, awkward moment before saying, "This was a lovely evening, and I think a productive one, too. I'll speak to you after you consume your treasure, yes?"

"Yeah, of course."

"In the meantime, we'll get things in order here in the duchy, and I'll prepare Florent for his new assignment with you."

As she stood, Victor followed suit, escorting her to the door. "Thank you, Kynna. It was nice to get to know you a little."

"I feel the same." She smiled, and then, as he opened the door, she stepped into the guardroom, where her attendants waited to follow her into the elevator.

When she was gone, Victor looked at Bryn and exhaled noisily. "Sheesh! That was a stressful dinner."

"The food looked good."

"You saw that?"

"Well, they had to bring it through the door..."

"All right, get in there. There are plenty of leftovers. Let's have a drink and look out over my dominion from the balcony. What do you say?"

"Well, I'm on duty..." She laughed and turned to push Victor's door open. "I think one drink will be fine, considering you're the duke."

"Yeah, just one, though, 'cause I have an egg to eat."

Bryn laughed and lifted her helmet off, walking over to the table where the platters of food waited. “I can’t believe you haven’t eaten that thing yet. I wouldn’t have made it two steps off the stage before stuffing it into my mouth.”

“Oh yeah?” Victor chuckled as he walked over to the fully stocked bar in his parlor. “Remind me to keep my treasures hidden from you.”

“Of course, milord.” Bryn grinned, slicing a thick cut of something like a roasted duck.

Victor poured their drinks and carried them out to the balcony, where he did just as he’d said he would—observed his domain. The countryside was dark, but up on the mountain, he saw the faint, amber lights of the mines—tiny glowing dots on the vast, dark slopes. Looking the other way, he saw the city’s lights. He contemplated the thousands and thousands of people living there. How strange to think that he was responsible for them all! “Strange and sobering,” he sighed, sipping his dark, spiced liquor.

“Does it weigh on you?” Bryn asked, coming to stand beside him with her plate of food.

He passed her the drink he’d poured for her and shrugged. “Yeah. It does, but I know what I’m good at, and I’ll keep working on that. There are people here who can help with all this.” He nodded toward the city.

“It’s a wise leader who knows when to delegate.”

Victor snorted, taking another sip. “That a lesson one of your captains taught you?”

She laughed and elbowed him. “How’d you know?”

“Eh, it reminded me of something a friend of mine would say; she was always quoting things from her time in the military. You’d like her, I think.” Victor sighed happily, pleased with how the night went and even more pleased with how the future was shaping up. He and Bryn stood together, enjoying each other’s company but not needing to speak much. Victor mulled over thoughts of old friends and watched the city, and she ate, often grunting in pleasure as she sampled something particularly tasty.

When she was done eating, and they’d finished their drink, Victor walked her to the door and said, “I’ll probably be out for a while. Don’t let anyone in here.”

“I won’t, milord.”

“Goodnight, then.” He pressed the door closed with a solid click. He threw the bolt home, locking it solidly, then went around the apartment, locking all the windows and the balcony doors—it was time to consume his treasure.

Book 9: Chapter 26: Tenecoalt

Victor stood in the central room of his chambers, half of which was taken up by the dining table and half by a sitting area with a few built-in curio cabinets and bookshelves. He’d locked all the

windows and doors, but considering the recent assassination attempt and the fact that he only had a couple of allies in the entire world, he decided a bit more safeguarding was in order. He didn't want to lie helpless for days when there were plenty of folks on Ruhn who wanted him dead.

With that thought in mind, he touched most of the furniture—the dining table and chairs, a couch, and a couple of end tables—sending them into the enormous storage ring he'd taken from Loyle after their duel. Standing in the center of the now-empty space, he took the vault pendant from around his neck and turned the key, quickly setting the clicking, ticking, steaming device at his feet.

The little marble-sized ball rapidly expanded until an eight-foot globe sat before him, clicking softly as the heat generated by the weird spatial magic faded. As a credit to the solid construction of his palace, the hardwood slats beneath the rug didn't creak or sag. Victor stuck the key in the vault's complex circular lock, and as it thunked into place, he turned it until the round vault door opened with a hiss of cool, misty air.

Victor cast *Alter Self*, reducing his height to step into the vault. Out of habit, he knelt beside the satchel containing the ivid royal jelly. His lips spread in a smile, and his eyes shone with delight as he beheld and felt its seemingly depthless potential. He didn't know when he'd use it, but he knew the time wasn't yet upon him. It was just a feeling, an intuition, but the idea of consuming that potent stuff made him think it would take him apart, atom by atom. He closed the satchel and turned to the vault door, removing the key from the outside before pulling it closed and locking it from the key slot on the inside.

Victor didn't know how hard it would be for a high-level iron ranker or a steel seeker to break into the vault, but he knew it wouldn't be easy. In his estimation, anyone trying to smash into the magical metallic orb would destroy the entire palace before they managed to dent the thing. He figured Kynna and her allies would come to his aid long before his little sanctum was breached. He moved to the center of the space and sat down, summoning the gilded, jewel-studded egg from his storage ring.

He held it in his lap, feeling its weight, wondering at the strange idea of coating a natural treasure like an egg with gold. He hoped whatever artisan had done so had worked some magic into the shell, keeping the morsel inside fresh or, at least, edible. He took a deep breath, preparing to try to crack the ornamental shell, when another thought came to him. Breath. Was there enough air in his vault to support him while he lay insensate from the egg? With a chuckle, Victor consciously stopped breathing, giving himself a visceral reminder about how little he needed to.

He'd learned as much back at Dar's lake house—swimming beneath the surface for tens of minutes on a single breath. His epic-tier bloodline and racial status meant that his body's cells were saturated with Energy. They fed off it far more than they did more natural things like food, water, and air. That thought sent his mind spiraling down another rabbit hole—why did he assume Energy wasn't natural? Was it just prejudice—a product of his youth spent in a world devoid of it?

Victor gave his head a quick shake, forcing his focus back on the egg. His wandering mind made him wonder if he was procrastinating, and if that was the case, he was determined to put an end to it. With little hesitation, he pressed his thick thumbnail through the golden shell of the Coldwater Sea Wyrms egg. A heady scent tickled his nose almost immediately—like a mixture of honey and blood. He'd wanted just to pierce the golden shell, but his nail had gone through into the meat of the egg that was, apparently, soft-shelled.

Victor licked his thumb, where some of the gelid material had clung, and his mouth exploded with flavors—a bit like any other egg, but intensely magnified in flavor and somehow sweet. He could taste hints of minerals but was also so overwhelmed by the flood of Energy that came out of it that he nearly lost his ability to focus. His eyes became blurry, and tears streamed from the corners as though he'd eaten something intensely sour, even though it wasn't. With trembling fingers, Victor carefully peeled away the gem-encrusted golden shell, and then, before too many wisps of that potent Energy drifted away from the egg, he put it into his mouth whole.

As he chomped the egg into mush, gulping it down, Victor's mind exploded with dopamine, and waves of euphoria washed over him, sending shivers and tingles over his entire epidermis. He collapsed backward, his vision utterly blasted by exploding lights, and lost all track of his conscious thoughts.

He drifted, insensate for a long while, and though he couldn't form coherent thoughts as the egg did something to his body and mind, later, he might look back and wonder at the odd, dreamlike memories of that time—glimpses of explosions in space, matter coming together, stars pulling apart. Great, tumultuous sounds like standing at the base of a thousand-foot waterfall, like mountains coming down, rumbling and roaring as their stony slopes smashed themselves into rubble, then pebbles, then silt as they sluiced away into nothing. These were just impressions, nothing concrete, and yet, that drifting exposure to those gigantic sights and sounds would shape his dreams for months and years.

When he had the presence of mind to recognize himself—his thoughts and feelings—he was in a much calmer place. A dark void where he drifted, bodiless. When he began to put his thoughts into order, remembering what he'd been doing, he had the wherewithal to peer into that darkness, wondering if he was meant to see something. It was an odd sensation, looking with no eyes. Even stranger was how he could feel the lack of air and matter, even though he seemed to have no body.

Almost as though that realization was the key, a pinpoint of light appeared in the void. Seeing it, Victor focused his attention that way, and then the pinpoint exploded, encompassing him in its brilliant shades of verdant green and hazy blue. Along with the light came feeling, and hot, humid air wrapped him in an embrace that felt like home. He saw his bare feet standing on lush, warm grass. Looking around, he saw ferns, dense jungle trees, vines and thorns, and all the little creatures that made that foliage their home.

The trickle of a nearby stream brought his attention to the space behind him, and there, sitting on a large, moist boulder, was a man who looked both strange and familiar. He was a big, brooding figure wrapped in colorful, green, and yellow-scaled leather. He wore a tooth-adorned necklace and clutched a massive macahuitl—Victor recognized the weapon type from previous visions into his

bloodline. He focused on the man's face—darkly tanned skin, golden-brown eyes, a hawkish nose, and a dark brooding brow. Suddenly, the familiarity became clear: he resembled Victor.

“Strange,” Victor said, stepping toward the man. “Usually, when I have a bloodline vision, I feel like I’m walking in my ancestors’ shoes, not staring at them.”

The brooding figure broke his stony expression by grinning, exposing straight, white teeth. “You’ve eaten something potent. Your bloodline was already nearly pure, and now I’d say you’ve woken so much of me that my memories are boiling in your blood, eager to expose themselves to you.”

“So,” Victor sat on a rock across from his ancestor, “you’re not real? I’m not speaking to your spirit?”

“Hah! I’m as real as you are! As real as your blood. When I had my children, some of me was built into them. Those bits of me went down and down and down through the generations, buried deeper and deeper, but you’ve been working to bring them out, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I—”

“No need to respond, Victor. I know what you know!” He laughed. “I’ve always been a part of you, as have your other ancestors, even your dear, sweet abuelita. We’re all in here.” He reached forward to tap Victor’s chest with a thick, powerful finger.

“But, you’re somewhere else, too...your spirits—”

“Of course! We leave some of us in our children, but our selves carry on. I wonder what I’m doing now? Do you think I found a new life? I know you’ve listened to your ancestors. Chantico has spoken to you more than once. I wonder if I’m out there somewhere.” Victor didn’t think he expected an answer, so he just nodded. “Are you wondering why I’m here? Why the magic of that egg you consumed has awoken me and granted you this strange vision?”

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“Don’t you know?” Victor arched an eyebrow.

“Hah! Of course! You’re burning with curiosity!” He chuckled, then reached down to the little stream and scooped up a little crystalline water, flicking droplets off his fingertips at Victor. It felt good in the sweltering heat, and his ancestor chuckled. “I’m Tenecoalt, Victor, the most prominent progenitor in your blood. You’re alone, trying to embrace a bloodline you only partially understand. I will provide some guidance.”

Victor’s heart began to race. Was he finally going to have some answers? Something more than the cryptic hints Ranish Dar doled out? “I’m

“I know you are! Listen, Victor, we have some time, but as you no doubt know, time moves strangely when the world you inhabit is inside your mind. One task before us is to make proper use of the Energy and clever nature of that natural treasure you consumed. I see you’ve managed to awaken a Breath Core. That’s a feat worthy of praise; in my time, only a few of our kin managed as much. I know you played a large part in the battle against a tremendous elder wyrm. Even I would have struggled to slay such a beast! Alone, I mean,” he chuckled, “not with the aid of an army of hunters.”

“I—”

Tenecoalt held up his hand, “Allow me to speak for a while, brave descendent. The wyrm reminds me of something important, and I think we have the time. You’ve done well to learn a great secret of us Quinametzin—well, of us and others with similar titanic ancestry. Our flesh is potent—resilient and malleable, able to adapt and overcome almost any adversity. You’ve already awakened many secrets of our blood. For instance, not every species can gain regenerative abilities like those you boast. Not every species can awaken a Breath Core.

“When you consume a vanquished foe’s heart, you consume a piece of their spirit, and as your mighty Quinametzin gut absorbs their flesh, your blood sifts through the tiny building blocks, delving it for secrets to incorporate. You must know that not every heart is worthy of your attention, and even if you come upon a mighty heart, if you feel undeserving, the ritual will fail.”

Victor nodded. “I understand.”

“You begin to reach true heights of power. I know from your experiences that there’s a new entity in the universe, a faceless ‘system’ that guides you, though I’m sure it takes its toll from your successes. Soon, you must shrug off the shackles of that nebulous master if you intend to grasp the true meaning of your bloodline. No doubt it will feel scorned and retaliate, likely sending tribulations and challengers your way. In that case, you should learn as much as possible, gain as much power as possible, and ensure you are ready to face dire threats before you do.”

“How—”

“Gleaning what I can from your memories, I believe the ‘system’ will put you on the road to your own liberty. When you pass beyond this ‘level one hundred’ and begin to construct your own ‘class,’ you will touch upon the truth. When you taste it, when you see the trail of blood, hunt it down, Victor. Do not be quieted and made docile by the promises of the ‘system’ and its minions.”

Tenecoalt dragged his hand through the water again, flicking more cool water at Victor and then himself. “Do you enjoy this heat?”

Victor nodded, turning to gaze up at the hazy yellow sun. “I do.”

“Good. This is what the world was like when we walked the Earth. Hot and green, a threat around every corner. The world was full of Energy, and we learned to use it for ourselves. We were among the best at it, infusing our bodies with it to great effect. I feared nothing, Victor—no creature, no man, no monster, no demon. With my macuahuitl, crafted from the metal of fallen stars, I killed giants, dragons, wyrms, and great, undying fiends that poisoned the land where they walked. Embrace that heritage, Victor! Don’t bend to this ‘system!’ Not for a moment longer than you must.

“A final admonishment before I help you with the natural treasure that threatens to dissolve your flesh: your people are gone from the Earth, whether by choice or vanquishment, I do not know, for, in my memory, the Quinametzin were numerous. Make the worlds you tread upon remember us! Do great deeds, and just as you must move out of the ‘system’s’ shadow, you should bow to no one—no prince, no king, no emperor, and, Victor, no queen. If fate conspires against you and someone capable of slaying you demands you kneel, then you must be willing to die on your feet with a weapon in your hand. You’re strong enough now to make that choice.”

His words hit Victor hard. How many times had he knelt to Kynna? Was it so wrong to show respect? Before he could argue or ask why, Tenecoalt answered his thoughts, “Regardless of your justification, Victor, your spirit wanes when you submit. If you find my words too harsh, if you wish to be a shadow of your progenitors, then that is your choice.”

“I don’t want that. I want to be strong and true, but I want to be respected and loved, too.”

“Then find a balance without compromising yourself. The Quinametzin do not kneel.” Tenecoalt sighed and shook his mane of long, black hair. “We waste precious time. I advise pushing the Energy from your natural treasure into your Breath Core. The contents of that ancient egg are potent and fierce, and I believe it will benefit you far more used that way than if you spend it on your already well-advanced Energy Core.

“As for your bloodline, I have further good news. You’ve awakened much of me, and so have you awakened my memories and experiences in your blood. You won’t know it, but those memories will speak to you. Listen to your instincts! Let them guide you with the wisdom of our people. When you face a difficult decision, think about how you feel. When you hear a warning in the back of your mind, listen. Though it seems innocuous and may feel like nothing when you sit alone in the safety of your fortress, this is the greatest boon you’ve yet received from your bloodline.”

When the fierce warrior paused, Victor knew what he was expecting. “Thank you, Tenecoalt.”

“So, you agree, then? About your Breath Core?” Before Victor could form his mouth around the word “yes,” he felt something. It was a stirring in his chest as though a great blockage had been cleared, and cold, roiling Energy began to course through him. Rather than unpleasant or numbing as such dense, powerful Energy ought to feel, it was refreshing and seemed to balance the heat of his other Energies.

“There. As I feared, using the Energy is bringing our time together to a close. I’ll surely see you again, Victor, my brave descendant. Heed well the lessons I planted in your mind this day.”

“I will,” Victor said, but he’d barely said the words before his vision faded, and blackness once more claimed sight. The world became silent again, and he drifted in that dark, endless abyss for what seemed like a very long time. He drifted for so long that he lost track of it, and when dreams began to seep into the nothingness, he didn’t even realize it. He dreamed of wild rides on the backs of stallions, swimming in deep, icy waters, and laughing with friends and loved ones.

When his eyes fluttered open, he was fresh from the throes of one of those latter dreams, and upon seeing the domed ceiling of his vault chamber and remembering where he was, the smile on his face rapidly faded. Blinking, feeling a hollowness in his gut where some nebulous family or friends had been while he dreamed, he realized System messages were waiting for him. As he read them, his melancholy receded as a broad, bright-toothed grin split his lips.

*****Congratulations! You have advanced your bloodline: Epic 5.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Breath Core has gained six ranks: Advanced 5.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new feat: Wisdom of the Quinametzin.*****

*****Wisdom of the Quinametzin: Your bloodline is rich with mighty ancestors, and they live on in the history written in your blood and bones. Your instincts are supernaturally accurate, and your feelings about a person, thing, or place are the echoes of your progenitor’s memories.*****

“Well,” Victor said, his cheeks beginning to hurt from the smile on his face, “that’s pretty badass.”

He was curious about his Breath Core’s Energy, so he looked at his Energy status:

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Advanced 5

Core:

Spirit Class - Epic 3

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9, Blue Ice - 9

Breath Core Energy:**5900/5900****Energy Affinity:****Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1****Energy:****36871/36871**

If he remembered correctly, he'd had 2800 Breath Core Energy prior to his advancement, so he'd more than doubled it. It still looked like a small number compared to his Spirit Core's Energy, but it was a hell of a lot more than one hundred, which he'd started with when he'd first eaten the wyrm's heart. With a satisfied grunt, he clambered to his feet and smashed his head and shoulders into the top of his vault. "What the..."

He looked down at his legs and torso, holding out his arms and hands as he stooped over in the chamber. He'd made himself smaller when he went into the vault, but even considering his Alter Self had been canceled by his time under the effects of the egg, he'd grown a great deal. If he were guessing, he'd say he was now more than fourteen feet tall. "Chingado," he sighed, then reached into his pathways and built the pattern for Alter Self.

When he reduced himself, it felt easy—effortless, even. His body responded to the magic far more rapidly with less Energy input than before. Did that mean he could alter himself even further? Was he becoming more like Tes in that regard? Was it thanks to his now mid-epic-tier bloodline? "What the fuck comes after epic?" He laughed as he turned the key in the vault door, ready to see what he'd missed while sitting around chatting with his hundred-thousand-year-old ancestor.

Book 9: Chapter 27: Meetings

As the heavy, rune-inscribed door to his vault thunked open and air hissed out, Victor inhaled deeply, suddenly aware of how stale the vault's atmosphere had become. He had a moment to wonder if there'd been any oxygen left in it at all and whether bad air could affect his epic Quinametzin constitution before he heard a startled gasp and the clatter of something falling to the ground. He shoved the door open in a heartbeat and leaped out, only to find a wide-eyed Bryn stooping to pick up a toppled wooden chair. "Hey," he grunted.

"Lord Victor! Thank the elder gods!" She seemed annoyed by her own outburst and scowled as if to compensate for her enthusiasm. "Apologies, I was startled by the door opening."

Victor looked past her and her chair to the door leading out of his suite. "Why are you inside?"

"After you'd been...out for a week, the queen investigated your chambers to ensure you were well. When she found this metallic...chamber, she grew worried and instructed me to have a guard watch it. We'd hoped you put it here

and that you were within, but we couldn't be sure. She's had more than one master Artificer examine the runic script, but none determined a way to open it without causing great harm."

Victor nodded while she spoke, turning to retrieve his key and then seal up the vault. When he turned the lock fully to the left, it began to vibrate and hiss with steam, slowly shrinking in on itself. "Yeah," he gestured to the now waist-high metal globe, pulsing with glowing runes, "it's mine." He grinned at Bryn. "Didn't want people peeking at me while I was unconscious."

"A wise precaution. However, I wish you'd told me...milord." She looked at him more closely, staring up into his eyes. "You seem different. Your eyes are so clear—luminous, really, and you seem to have more...presence? I can't put it into words, but I suspect you had some racial advancement?"

"Yeah. My bloodline gained three ranks." Victor smiled and stepped forward, clapping her on the shoulder. "It was a hell of a trip, Bryn. How long was I out? I mean, how much longer than a week?"

"Ten days altogether, milord."

"Shit! Really? Any emergencies?"

"Nothing serious. The queen has been busy with negotiations, but her people, along with some help from the Haveshi, have been managing the duchy. The artificer, Trobban, has come up to see you four times, more and more exasperated as I sent him away."

"Have you been here the entire time?"

"I've taken on a squire, milord. His name is Feist—a promising young prospect of the Queen's Guard. Her Majesty was pleased to allow me to take him on."

"And you trust him? He's not a spy?"

"You mean for the queen?" When Victor nodded, Bryn smiled and shook her head. "No, milord. I don't think so. I've known Feist since before we both began working for the crown; we adventured together."

"All right. Well, that's good, 'cause I don't want you working twenty-four hours a day. Well, let's see here. What first?" Victor rubbed his chin as he stooped to pick up his marble-sized vault, hanging it around his neck. He badly needed a shave. "I'll get cleaned up. I need you to set up a few meetings—the queen, Trobban, and Draj Haveshi. I assume he's the one who's mostly been running things?"

"I believe so, milord."

“All right, and you can cut that shit out while we’re alone—the ‘milords,’ I mean. Come on, Bryn. You’re like my number two on this planet; you can call me Victor.”

She nodded sharply, her well-tanned, scarred cheeks coloring just a little. “Understood.”

Victor grinned. “You weren’t worried, were you? Did you think some schemers managed to lock me up in that vault?”

“Not exactly worried, mil—Victor, but a bit anxious.” She smiled and nodded again. “I’m pleased to see you’re well.”

“More than well, Bryn! Now let’s get going!” Victor clapped his hands, chuckling as she practically jumped toward the door. “I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.” As she hurried out, Victor took a minute to replace the furniture he’d stored away, then took a long, luxurious shower. He soaked in the hot, steamy water that fell from a vaulted, twenty-foot ceiling, scrubbing with woodsy soap. He shaved with a blade that felt sharp enough to split atoms and lemon-scented cream that he found sitting ready for him before a magically fog-free mirror.

Once he’d dressed and stepped out of his bedroom, he found the first of his appointments—Trobban, the artificer—sitting at his table. “At long last! Lord Victor!” The man jumped to his feet, bowing deeply at the waist.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Trobban. I hope you kept yourself busy while I was... occupied.”

“I have, milord! At great expense to myself, I’ve completed the skeletal structure of Lady Arona’s new vessel. While she and I agreed on the optimal components, I haven’t the means to acquire them all, so I’ve been eager to meet with you again.”

Victor nodded, gesturing to the table. “Please, retake your seat.” Once they were both sitting, he said, “Tell me about the skeleton.”

“The skeleton? Oh, for the vessel! Yes, yes! I’ve been painstakingly growing the bones from a crystal lattice. It’s a costly process, both in terms of Energy and materials, but when I had the Golemancer Class, I learned many tricks to perfect the process. I’ve completed the structure, matching Arona’s exacting specifications for size and shape.”

“Um, about that—what did she decide as far as her...appearance goes?”

“She wants to maintain a similar aspect to the vessel she lost—her natural one. I convinced her to increase her size slightly, insisting it would make her more formidable and durable, though adding to the cost.”

Victor nodded slowly. “And the bones? They’re crystal?”

“A living crystal lattice, milord. It’s wonderfully versatile stuff and more than capable of housing epic-tier pathways and supporting a similarly powerful body.” He frowned and began to wring his hands as he added, “It’s just a matter of the cost. I’m out of pocket—”

“How much?”

“Nearly five million standard beads, milord.”

Victor tried to hide his reaction, shifting in his seat as he frowned. “For the skeleton?”

“Yes, milord. The reason I’m eager for reimbursement is that I’ve got a line on a perfect heart for the vessel, but the fellow who’s selling it isn’t willing to take installments—”

Victor abruptly stood, shoving his chair back noisily. “Hang on.” He walked over to the door and opened it, finding Bryn standing near the gilt, black-enameled elevator doors. “Hey, Bryn, did you get ahold of Draj?”

“Yes, milord, he’s due at the top of the hour.” When Victor raised an eyebrow, she added, “In about thirty minutes.”

“Tell him I need him now. I need some information about the duchy’s treasury.”

“Yes, milord!” Bryn turned and pressed the elevator call button, and Victor rejoined Trobban at the table.

“We’ll have some funding information soon. Tell me about some of the items you need to acquire.”

“Yes, of course, milord. As I said, there’s a fellow selling a heart crafted from the heartwood of a Mowpanian Elder Tree. A steel-seeking Animancer constructed it as part of her journey of enlightenment, and though she never used it, I believe it would be the perfect source of vitality for Arona’s new vessel.”

“And the man selling it? What does he want?”

“He’s seeking similarly powerful artifacts of dense Energy suitable for the crafting of an epic-tier automaton Core—or ten million beads.”

“Won’t Arona’s new body need an object like that?”

“Yes, milord, but I haven’t a line on anything suitable yet.”

Victor frowned and leaned back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair. “I mean, you must have some ideas for Cores. Is there anything on this planet that would work, or are we forced to trade for it from people who’ve been collecting artifacts all over the universe?”

“For a Core?” Victor saw Trobban’s eyes dart toward the windows to his balcony. “There are indeed treasures on Ruhn that would be suitable. In fact, there’s a source rather nearby…”

“Don’t hesitate, man! What is it?”

“Well, Iron Mountain, milord. A crystal recovered from one of the mines nearly thirty years ago was of suitable Energy density. I believe the King of Xan gifted it to one of the great houses—”

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“Only one?”

“Only one so far, aye. At least, as far as public knowledge goes—” He cut his words short as a knock sounded at the door.

“Come,” Victor called.

A moment later, Draj Haveshi was striding toward the table. He bowed deeply as he walked, and then, when he was just a few feet from Victor, he lowered himself to his knees. “I am at your service, Your Grace. My family is eternally grateful to serve. When the queen delivered your pardons and requests for temporary service, it was like a reprieve from the heavens. We—”

“Draj, stand up and have a seat with us, please. I don’t need you to profess your loyalty any further.” On the surface, Victor thought Draj sounded fake. He almost seemed like an actor performing on stage, but something deeper, something that spoke from the depths of his bones, told him this man wasn’t a threat. Victor wondered if it was the wisdom of his ancestors helping him to prioritize his focus.

“As you say, milord.” Draj, wearing a fine gray and white suit with the yellow rose of Gloria stitched beside the gray, snow-capped peak of Iron Mountain’s coat of arms, stood, bowed again, and sat across from Trobban.

“Have you met Trobban, Draj? He’s a master Artificer and happens to be working on some very important projects for me.”

“No, milord.” Draj stood and stretched out his hand. Trobban nearly knocked his chair over in his haste to stand and take the man’s hand, clearly unused to being in such vaunted company.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, um, Lord Haveshi.”

“A pleasure to meet you, fine sir. I am, however, no longer a lord.” Draj shrugged and chuckled. “Might I inquire as to the nature of the, ah, projects?”

Victor answered for Trobban. “No. Sorry, Draj, but they’re of a personal nature. Even so, I believe the duchy and Gloria as a whole will benefit greatly from their completion. Eventually.” Victor felt like he was being at least mostly honest—Arona was a powerful entity, and if she found herself indebted to the people of Iron Mountain, he knew she’d feel obligated to even the scales.

Draj didn’t argue. “Of course, milord! What aids you aids the duchy. How might I be of service?”

“Well, I was going to meet with you about the duchy’s economic standing. I keep hearing about the wealth, and it’s apparent everywhere I look, but I’d like to wrap

my head around the big picture. Before you give me all the details, however, let's deal with the small part that might impact Trobban."

"Of course, milord. Only ask, and I will provide the answer."

Victor nodded, thumping a heavy hand on the table as he looked from Trobban to Draji. "First, there's the matter of Trobban's operating fund. While I was...indisposed, he was forced to fund my projects from his own pockets. He's owed nearly five million standard beads. Can you arrange a disbursement for him?"

"Ahem," Draji held a fist to his mouth, perhaps trying to cover his reaction. After only a slight hesitation, though, he nodded. "Of course, milord. There are sufficient discretionary funds for such a payment; however, I would greatly appreciate some advance notice if you believe you'll need continued payments of such...magnitude. You see, there are ongoing projects in the duchy, and many departments clamoring for increases in their budgets, and unplanned expenses can greatly impact those sorts of—"

Victor waved a hand. "Draji, I completely understand. I'll do my best to give you more warning in the future." Victor looked at Trobban. "That goes for you, too, Trobban. Give me a chance to prepare before you incur such expenses going forward."

"Yes, milord!" Trobban bent forward, trying to bow in his chair, nearly placing his forehead on the tabletop.

"Draji, what do you know of—" Victor turned to Trobban. "What was that crystal called?"

"I believe the King of Xan named it the Azurite Star, sir."

Draji nodded, looking from Trobban to Victor. "That's right. It was pulled from Iron Mountain close to half a century ago. Duke Qi Pot gave it to King Groff, who gifted it to the Queen of Kuria, seeking her favor and financial aid to break Lovania's blockade, cutting Xan off from trading across the Horizon Sea."

Victor nodded, waving his hand. "I get that. Basically, it's out of our reach, right? Over on the eastern continent?"

"Yes, milord. I'm not sure what Queen Livessa has done with it, but she wouldn't part with it easily."

"Right, but it came from Iron Mountain, yeah?"

"Indeed, Your Grace, but that shaft was closed when the mountain expressed its displeasure."

Victor's eyebrows shot up. "Come again?"

"It's quite well documented, milord. The Argonthall Shaft, named after the baron who founded it, was one of the deeper mining operations, dug to follow a shaft of heart iron. It operated for nearly four decades and provided tremendous wealth

and treasure to the duchy. When they took the Azurite Star from those depths, the mountain rumbled, collapsing part of the shaft and threatening an eruption that would destroy most of Xan. The earth and fire Elementalists from across the kingdom, along with several from neighboring nations, had to work for more than a year to calm its fury.”

Victor nodded, grinning. “So, the mountain isn’t as deeply asleep as it seems. Are there Elementalists currently working to keep it docile?”

Again, Draj nodded. “The Order of the Mountain, Your Grace. They maintain their hermitage midway up the slopes in a great cave they’ve built into a temple of sorts.”

Victor looked at Trobban. “I’ll work on the issue we discussed. In the meantime, is there anything you can do to move the project forward?”

Trobban nodded emphatically. “Yes, milord! Once I’ve been reimbursed, I’ll be able to acquire some of the lesser artifacts I’ll need for the, um...” He glanced at Draj, then shrugged and simply said, “Project.”

“Good. Leave us for now—Draj and I need to speak about the duchy. I’ll call for you before I leave.”

“Leave?” Both men asked. Draj looked at Trobban, a slight scowl of irritation marring his usual diplomatic poise. Trobban simply looked down, stammering an apology.

“Yeah, leave. I have things to do, men. Don’t worry, I’ll be in touch, and the queen has given me one of her, uh, portal magicians.”

Trobban’s eyes widened. “Ah, a Spatial Magus?”

“Is that their official title?”

Draj replied before Trobban could. “It’s their Class, Your Grace. It’s a well-kept secret of the royal families—the path to that Class.”

“Not that other Classes cannot create portals or teleport...”

Draj spoke over Trobban, “But none quite so well as the Spatial Magi.”

Victor didn’t want another rabbit-hole discussion. “All right. Speak to you soon, Trobban.” He watched the man scurry out of his seat, bowing low, then hurrying out the door. He looked at Draj. “How much money does this duchy make every month?”

“Well, sir, that’s a rather complicated question, and there are many variables—”

“Ballpark.” Victor groaned at himself. “I mean, give me a general idea—a rough average.”

Draj frowned, clearly uneasy with Victor’s bluntness, but he closed his eyes briefly and then began to rattle off an answer, “Profits from the mine leases come close to twenty million most months. Tax revenue from land grants and agricultural goods easily amount to another ten million. Market taxes

from the city vary but range between three and seven million. Port and passage fees on the Green River are usually nearly a million beads per month.” Draji frowned, rubbing his chin as he thought. “There are the hunting permits and dungeon licenses, building permits...” He sighed and shook his head. “I’d need to get my books, milord, if you want more details. Roughly, though, I’d say, altogether, close to forty million beads per month.”

“And how much goes to the crown?”

“Queen Dar has lowered our tribute from nine percent to seven.”

“Oh? Good.” Victor nodded and gestured expansively. “Look, I know all of this is expensive. But you have to level with me. How much will that five million to Trobban impact the treasury?”

“Sir, per the policy set by Qi Pot, we maintain a treasury capable of paying the duchy’s expenses for three years. Beyond that, we have a discretionary fund of nearly ten million beads. I know it sounds like a great sum, milord, but there are many petitions for many projects, and there are never enough beads to go around. For instance, the duchy maintains not only this palace but also dozens of other governmental buildings, which are in constant need of maintenance and updating. Roads and riverways require—”

“Relax, Draji.” Victor tried to smile reassuringly. “I’m not planning to drain the treasury dry. I just want to know what I’m working with.” Victor’s heart wasn’t in the conversation. He desperately wanted to finish his meetings to make his way up to the mountain. More than ever, he felt it was calling him, almost like his duels and the succession war—his reason for coming to Ruhn—had just been a thread of fate drawing him to the real purpose. Iron Mountain had something for him. He wasn’t sure what, but he could feel it, and again, he wondered if his ancestors were guiding him.

“Milord, might I inquire as to your intention for me and mine? From the queen, I understand that you saw purpose in us, a way to employ our talents for the duchy, but nothing has been formalized. I am made a common, landless citizen for the first time in nearly eight decades. I—”

“Draji, what would you suggest if you were in my shoes?”

Draji straightened in his chair, his eyes narrowing slightly as he considered his words. “Milord, if I were in your position, I would recognize the value of trusted, capable hands to manage the duchy’s more... delicate affairs. Your recent ascension has created opportunities, and with them comes the need to solidify control, ensure stability, and foster the duchy’s prosperity. As you and Queen Kynna have noted, a man in your position can hardly afford to oversee every aspect personally.”

He paused, leaning slightly forward, his voice becoming more deliberate. “As for my family and me, we have decades of experience running estates, managing trade, overseeing mining operations. Though I lack formal holdings now, I have not lost my knowledge or my connections. If you were

to grant me a formal title—for Qi Pot, I was seneschal, and I would gladly fill that position for your court—my family could once again serve not just the duchy but you personally, milord."

He glanced up at Victor, gauging his reaction before continuing, "Iron Mountain is vast, and its wealth even more so. It will require skilled management. My talents lie in turning wealth into opportunity, ensuring the duchy's success. And, of course, our loyalty would be undivided, as it has always been."

"A title doesn't make you a landholder, Draji."

"True, milord, but you've offered us an estate in the city—"

"I'll do better than that." Victor paused, thinking. For once, he was happy that he'd sat with Ranish Dar for hours discussing courts, titles, and all the little things he thought he'd never have to deal with as a champion—basically, a glorified gladiator. "I want you to write up a proposal, one that grants the Haveshi family a reasonable portion of the Ducal Demesne—nothing absurd, but enough to ensure you're respected at court. Provided the proposal is reasonable, and Queen Kynna agrees, I'll grant your mother the title of Viscountess, and I will formally reinstate you as seneschal."

Draji leaped to his feet, his chair skittering over the hardwood floors. As soon as he was up, he fell to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground. "Lord Sandoval, you honor me and my house. What you propose is beyond what we deserve, and I am humbled by your generosity. I swear, if thy words be true, then we will be true to thee."

He stayed that way, head on the floor, while Victor mulled over his words. Why had he switched to archaic-sounding language? Had he really said 'thy' and 'thee'? Had he used some old-fashioned words that the System simply translated that way? Victor got so distracted by the tangential thought that it took Draji clearing his throat and swallowing nervously to remind him where he was. "You may stand, Draji. Go now and discuss things with your family. I'll review your proposal when you're ready."

Draji thanked him at least five more times before he slipped through the door. Meanwhile, Victor contemplated the mountain. He could feel it pulling him like it was a magnet, and he was an iron filing. It couldn't be a simple coincidence that something Arona needed was deep in the mountain's guts. He knew the pull was more than that, however. There was a connection there, and it was personal—not just a piece of treasure for a friend.

He sat there at the head of his table, staring out the window at the distant blue-gray peak for a long time, so lost in thought that he hardly noticed the shifting of the shadows as the sun moved through the sky. When Bryn knocked on the door, and he was startled out of his self-imposed glamour, he almost felt like he'd been asleep. "Come," he barked, his voice rough in his dry throat.

The door swung open, and Bryn announced, "Her Majesty, Queen Kynna Dar is here to see you, milord."

“...and so, with another few weeks of pressure, I’m confident we can force a duel. I don’t know how the rumors are spreading, but the fact that you’ve been sequestered for the better part of two weeks is working in our favor. Even in Gloria, there are whispers that Thorn badly injured you, and my agents in Lovania seem to think that Queen Fabaj is overconfident in her champion’s abilities; I’m hopeful that she’ll accept a duel so long as the terms are even slightly favorable for her.” Lovania was Xan’s—Gloria’s now—eastern neighbor.

Victor nodded, mulling over his thoughts. Kynna had spent close to an hour bringing him up to speed on all that had occurred while he was processing the wyrm egg. The information was interesting on an academic level, but he’d had a hard time staying focused, his mind constantly drifting toward the mountain. Was it worse than before he’d eaten the egg? Back then, he’d certainly found the mountain intriguing, even felt some kind of kinship with it, but he hadn’t felt such a pull. Was it his bloodline feat? Maybe it wasn’t a pull; maybe the instincts of his ancestors were pushing him.

“Victor?”

“I’m sorry, Queen Kynna. My mind is swollen with thoughts after my experience with the egg. To your point, would it be helpful if I remained...absent?”

She arched an eyebrow, lifting a polished, violet nail to her lower lip, gently stroking the plump, pink flesh. Not for the first time, Victor felt she was being seductive, and he shifted, clearing his throat and forcing his eyes to stare into hers. “Did you have something in mind?”

“As I mentioned before, I need to visit that mountain.” He tilted his head toward the window. “My...experience has left me even more sure of it. I feel it pulling, and unless there’s some objection, I’d like to leave as soon as possible.”

Kynna clasped her hands atop the table, fidgeting with her thumbs as she closed her eyes briefly, clearly considering her words. “Victor, I hope you understand the far-reaching repercussions to Gloria and its citizens should you fail to return.”

“I won’t abandon you, Kynna. Your magus is coming, right? The guy who can make portals?”

She nodded, unclasping her hands and turning her gaze toward the window. “Yes. Florent has been briefed and stands ready.”

“Well, that’s good, then—”

“What is it, do you think? What draws you to that peak? Are there creatures you wish to slay in its depths? I’ve had my historians look into the mountain and this duchy, and there have been times when it was seen as a destination for adventurers more than a source of mineral wealth.”

“I...” Victor stopped, considering his words, and then, more carefully, started again. “I’ve had a connection to a volcano before. A kinship with the rage that can cling to the fiery magma. You’ve seen me fight; you know I can... lose myself.” He sighed, shaking his head. “I’m just speculating now, but maybe this mountain senses me and the kinship I’ve shared with that other volcano.” He didn’t want to mention his former Class—Dar had drilled into him all too well the benefits of being an unknown quantity when it came to politics.

“Is it true then? Does the mountain have a spirit? Is it alive?”

“I don’t know. I only know that at least one other mountain was. When I felt its spirit and made that connection, it was like—well, imagine I was a candle flame, and the mountain was the sun. I had a lot to learn from the depths of its wrath.”

“Why was it angry?”

Victor chuckled, shrugging. “Maybe it’s because it became a volcano—all that magma flowing through it. Or maybe it became a volcano because it was angry.” Again, he barked a laugh. “Maybe I’ll get a chance to ask this one.”

“You think it’s angry too? Victor, if this mountain were to erupt, most of Gloria would be made into a wasteland. The Elementalists in their temple keep it calm; you mustn’t—”

Victor held up his hands, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about that! I have no intention to go in there and rile things up. I’m going to see where my instincts lead me and then go from there.”

“Following your instincts? That’s your argument for why I should trust you?”

“No, My Queen, you should trust me because I’ve put my life on the line for you a few times now, and your ancestor, Ranish Dar, sent me here to help you.” ♦

Kynna nodded, her crystal crown tilting precariously. “Very well, Victor. I shall trust you. Please stay in touch, and please return in the event I need you. If you are delving deep and the need arises, rest assured that Florent will be able to mark your location, allowing him to create a portal through which you can return to your explorations.”

“Seriously? That’s pretty damn awesome.”

“Florent is a steel seeker, though his talents lie well outside the realm of combat. If things grow violent, his first instinct will be flight. Please, Victor, do not let him be slain; he’s a good, kind man and a boon to our nation.”

Her voice softened as she spoke about Florent, and a certain light entered her eyes, making Victor wonder if his suspicions about her intentions toward him had been misplaced. He decided to press the conversation into more personal territory, if only to satisfy a question that had been itching to be asked since he first met the queen. “Kynna, may I ask a personal question?”

“I wish you would! I tire of these matters of state.”

“What happened to Tomorran’s father?”

“Ah!” She smiled and chuckled softly. “It’s not as personal as you thought, Victor. Anyone in Gloria could tell you that my former husband passed through his test of steel shortly after Tomorran was born. As you know, the council of veil walkers who watch over Ruhn do not allow members of that tier of society to live among us. Galentine was given a choice: join the council of veil walkers as an apprentice or leave the world. He’d already decided before we became lovers, fully intending to leave and continue his journey of enlightenment, so no one was surprised when he moved on.”

“And you’re good with that?”

“Ah, now it becomes a bit more personal!” She shook her head, smiling as she leaned a little closer. “Do I wish he’d put off his ascension for a decade or three and spent some time with Tomorran? I’d be a liar if I denied it. He made himself very clear, though, when we became entwined. It was a condition of our love—his desire to chase his breakthroughs would not be diminished.”

“He must have been quite a guy.” Victor left the other half of his opinion unspoken—that he thought Galentine sounded like an asshole. Of course, part of him acknowledged some parallels between himself and Valla, only that she’d been the one to make the decision for him, whereas Galentine had simply been honest about his pursuits.

“He is a fascinating and impressive individual, a peerless artisan, and a kind, gentle soul. I thought that Tomorran’s birth would change him, make him want to work less and spend more time with us, but I was wrong. As he puts it, his passion for creation isn’t something he can control; he’s driven by his muses, unable to live without pursuing their demands.” She reached up and gently ran her fingers along the crystalline surface of her crown. “He created this for me as a parting gift.”

Victor could hear some genuine sorrow tinging her words, and, of course, those words evoked more comparisons to himself and Valla in his mind. “It’s beautiful, Kynna. I want to call him a fool for leaving you both, but I’ve had my own troubles of a...similar nature, and I’m no one to judge.”

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“Driven, are you?” She chuckled as he shrugged and nodded. “Well, your pursuits certainly seem different from Galentine’s. Still, I wish you luck and hope you find something to help you in your quest for advancement in yonder mountain. When shall I have Florent report for duty?”

“If it’s okay with you, immediately.”

“Yes, that’ll be fine. I’ll maintain close communication with him. Meanwhile, I have much to do. To start, I have meetings with my cousins for the next three days. Everyone’s still quite upset about the coup attempt and my sudden relocation. I’m rather enjoying keeping people at arm’s length! It’s driving the nobles of Gloria mad that I’m only allowing five visitors through the portal chamber daily. More than that, I’m only giving them day passes!”

“Hah! I guess that keeps security easy.”

“Indeed!” Kynna stood, smiling, and turned toward the door. “It was nice to get to know you a little more, Victor. I hope we’ll sit together again when you return from the mountain.”

“Yeah.” Victor also stood and, feeling awkward, reached up to scratch his fingers through his short, stiff hair. “I feel the same way.”

“Travel safely. I’ll look forward to our next meeting.”

“Um, yes, My Queen. Until next time.” She stood by the door, hesitating, and Victor’s mind raced with possible reasons. Was she expecting some show of affection? They’d never hugged or anything like that. When she glanced at the door and cleared her throat, Victor’s mind stopped racing, and he slapped himself on the head. “I’m sorry!” He hurried over and opened it for her, holding it wide. “Thank you for your time, Your Majesty.”

She smiled a little crookedly, her eyes amused, as she passed through. When her guards and retainers formed around her, Victor heard her say, “Larassa, find Magus Florent and have him report to Victor’s chambers immediately.” Then they were in the elevator, and Victor couldn’t hear anything more.

He looked at Bryn. “Anyone else?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay, get your shit together; we’re heading up the mountain. Don’t mention that to anyone.”

Bryn jerked upright, her armor clanking as she turned to stare at him. “My shit, sir?”

“Get all your stuff! I mean anything you want to bring. We’ll be hiking around the mountain and probably going deep into the mines or tunnels or whatever’s up there.”

“Should I bring Feist?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about him. Yeah, I need to meet him, and you might as well have some help.”

She gestured to the elevator. There were no stairs to his suite, which likely wouldn't pass any safety regulations, but Victor didn't think there were any regulations, especially when the duke's palace was the building in question. “Is it all right to leave for a few minutes? I need to go wake him.”

“Yeah, go for it. I'll be alert.” While she waited for the elevator, Victor went back into his quarters and took Arona's phylactery from his container. As soon as it touched the open air, foggy mist began to seep from the bone, slowly coalescing into the translucent likeness of Arona's long-gone physical form.

In her usual raspy, deadpan tone, she said, “I was beginning to think I'd been forgotten.”

“Nah, not forgotten.” Victor smiled and gestured toward the sitting area near the balcony. “Let me fill you in on what's happening.” She followed him over and “sat” on a couch near him while Victor reviewed everything Trobban had told him. He also spent some time going over the events of the previous days, including a vague summary of his experience with the egg and his intention to visit Iron Mountain.

“Did you gain much from the natural treasure?” She eyed him speculatively, and Victor shrugged.

“I got a few ranks to my bloodline and learned a lot more about it.”

“Ever so mysterious, Victor. Some sort of titan, yes?”

“I told you that?”

“Come! You were shouting it in the challenge dungeon.” She frowned, shaking her head. “Or maybe it was afterward, at your party? In any event, either you or someone else mentioned to me that you had a titanic bloodline.”

“Yeah, that's true.” Victor looked at her, watching the realistic expressions traverse her ghostly face, wondering why a spirit would need to look like a person's dead body. He knew that he could alter his appearance on the spirit plane. Could Arona alter hers on this one?

Her thoughts weren't in line with his, it seemed. “Some cultures believe that the spirits of mountains are closely related to titans. Some cultures believe that mountains were titans.”

Victor's eyes bulged at the idea. He peered out the window at the darkening slopes of the enormous mountain on the horizon. “That would be a big, pinché titan!” He looked back at Arona. “If that were the case, wouldn't people know? I mean, if their spirits are in there, couldn't they communicate?”

“They certainly could, but they’re called ‘sleeping’ gods or giants or titans for a reason. The ones who speak are mad with rage—volcanos.” She made a dry, raspy sigh and shrugged. “I speak only of legends and myths, but, Victor, there are people on my homeworld who think titans, themselves, are naught but myth. I think you’d take exception to that.”

“So you think the pull I feel might have more to do with my bloodline than my, uh, rage affinity?” Victor wanted to tell her about his “Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath” Class but wasn’t sure it was relevant, seeing as he’d already taken a different one.

“I don’t know. Perhaps the pull is strong because they’re both a factor.”

“I had a, uh, experience with another volcano.”

“Oh?”

Victor nodded, then related some of the story about his encounter with Hector atop his then-dormant volcano. When he finished, Arona looked pensive. “What is it?”

“What if this volcano seeks your aid in freeing it—waking it? You mentioned Elementalist monks, yes? What if the volcano doesn’t like being calmed? What if it has fury it wants to vent?”

“I don’t think a volcano that damn big and powerful would be held down by a handful of iron rankers. I don’t care what Class or affinity they have. If that thing wanted to blow its top, it would. I mean, maybe those guys are good at soothing it, but it’s definitely not captive.”

“I appreciate your respect for the mountain’s power, but Victor, how do you know it’s only a handful of iron rankers? What if it’s a hundred? What if some of them are steel seekers?”

Victor shook his head. “Arona, I felt the power of a volcano a tenth of Iron Mountain’s size. It was a force—something that made Ronkerz feel puny.”

“Well.” Arona pressed her dark lips together, shaking her head in defeat. “I hope you’re right, and I hope you’d do the right thing in any case. You wouldn’t trade a great spirit’s freedom for the lives of countless people, would you? You wouldn’t destroy the nation you’re supposed to be championing.” Her words were statements, but Victor could feel the questions behind them.

“I’m not a monster, Arona. I’m not like Vesavo.”

She leaned toward him, and Victor felt the air around him noticeably drop in temperature. “I believe you, Victor. Still, what if the mountain is a sleeping titan?”

What if it does want your help to free it? What if it promises you secrets and artifacts and natural treasures? What if—”

“Arona!” Victor stood, feeling agitated. He couldn’t help but raise his voice as he gesticulated, pacing toward the window and back. “You’re panicking about fucking ideas. You’re also worried because you’ve never had to depend on someone who wasn’t a power-mad nutcase. Listen to me: I’m not going to help that volcano explode. If it wants help with something, I’ll find a way to do it that won’t kill everyone and ruin Dar’s kingdom.” Victor laughed, shaking his head, but Arona didn’t seem to share his amusement. She looked chastened, and it made Victor feel guilty. How often had Vesavo cursed her out? How often had he yelled at her?

“Understood.”

“Oh, don’t do that now! Come on, Arona. You know what? I appreciate you mentioning all this. I appreciate you looking out for me. Because of what you said, I’m going to be a lot more careful when I go in there. If that pinché mountain used to be a titan or maybe only part of that myth is true and it’s somehow related to titans, then I need to be careful, but I also need to listen to my instincts, okay? There’s a reason I feel this pull, and it doesn’t feel bad.”

“Will you bring my phylactery or leave it here?”

Victor had intended to bring it, but did she not want him to? “What would you prefer?”

“Bring it! I may be able to offer you advice at a pivotal moment.”

“And if the volcano erupts and I’m killed? You’ll be trapped under a billion tons of rock and lava.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

“No.” Victor smiled.

“Then I will trust you.” Almost as if on cue, a knock sounded at his door, and Arona began to disperse. “I hope we speak again soon, Victor.”

“We will.” Victor watched her flow into her phylactery, picked up the bone, and sent it into storage. “Come in,” he called.

Bryn opened the door, and she and two men entered. She and one of the men wore dark leather armor with metallic breastplates, both embossed with golden roses. The other fellow wore black robes and carried a smooth black staff shod in rune-inscribed silver. Both men were young-looking, though Feist, the soldier—or squire, as Bryn had styled him—was far swarthier in appearance. His brown hair was long, his skin well-tanned, and his light-brown eyes peered about with curiosity. The other man, Florent, was pale with strange yellow eyes and bore a strained expression as though simply walking into the room was a chore.

“Your Grace, might I introduce my squire, Feist, and the esteemed Spatial Magus, Florent.” Bryn bowed, swooping her arm to indicate the two men. They bowed in turn, Feist far more gracefully than Florent.

“Good to meet you, men.” Victor turned to the window, pointing to the mountain in the distance. “Florent, can you make us a portal to that mountain, or do we need to travel there?”

“Milord, last week the queen bade me travel to the foothills of that mountain to learn a portal site. I did so, and now, if you wish, I can open one at your command.”

Victor’s eyes widened. He’d expected the man to say no. “She did that? That was pretty damn thoughtful, wasn’t it?”

“It was, Your Grace,” Bryn chimed in.

“I’d say so, milord.” Feist grinned, putting his fists on his hips.

“Well, it was I who made the journey...” Florent sighed, letting his protestation die on his lips. He stepped further into the room. “Shall I commence?”

Victor nodded. “Commence.”

Book 9: Chapter 29: Into the Mountain

When Victor stepped out of Florent’s strange, crackling black portal, he felt the mountain before he saw it. It was like being a little kid and standing in the shadow of a giant. The presence was heavy, though Iron Mountain was just passively being; it wasn’t trying to crush him with the weight of its aura, nor was it filled with any palpable rage like the volcano under Hector’s base had been. Still, Victor hadn’t felt that sense of insignificance since he’d been to the Ivid world to meet their queen.

As he adjusted to the weight of the mountain’s presence, he looked around and got his bearings. His palace and the town of Iron Mountain were north of the mountain’s slopes, and, turning to look that way, he could see a long, wide road leading away into the thick forest canopy; he wasn’t high enough on the slope to see beyond the trees. Victor turned to see the road continue into the mountain’s foothills, branching off to the east and west several times before winding out of sight behind craggy ridges.

The mountain rose into the sky, further than he could see, the peak lost to the hazy mists of the upper atmosphere. From his palace, he hadn’t realized how the foothills of Iron Mountain were, in reality, mountains themselves. Even standing among them, well aware of their size, they seemed tiny simply because of the enormous, craggy gray peak that loomed over them. Still, now that they were close, Victor realized they had a good deal of hiking to do if they wanted to get onto the mountain proper.

“Gods!” Feist said, taking his helmet off to get a better view. “Never seen the place up close. That’s a hell of a mountain!”

“Calm yourself, Feist,” Bryn sighed. She looked at Victor and shrugged sheepishly. “Apologies for my squire’s boisterous nature, milord.”

“You kidding me? I don’t mind; he’s right!”

With a crackling woosh, Florent stepped through his portal, and it snapped shut, disappearing in a wave of sizzling silver sparks. He looked at Victor and then gestured to the cobbled roadway. “I chose this location because, according to my guide at the time, the branching roads lead to different mine entrances, but if you stay on this main path, you’ll eventually come to the Temple of the Elements.”

“That’s where the fire and earth Elementalists live?” Bryn asked, saving Victor the trouble.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s Bryn. No need for formality.”

“Does that go for me too,” Feist asked, and Bryn cuffed him on the back of the head.

“Don’t embarrass yourself!”

Victor chuckled but didn’t comment. He turned up the road and started hiking. The grade was steep, but his long Quinametzin strides devoured it. As he went, he reached into his pathways and severed the connection to his Alter Self spell, expanding to his true height. It took Bryn a few minutes before she gave him a double-take. “Did you grow?”

“Yeah,” Victor chuckled. “The egg brought out more of my bloodline.” He glanced up and down the quiet road, watching Feist and Florent bring up the rear. When they were close, he asked, “Where’s the railway?”

Florent responded, “For the ore? A dozen tracks meander through these canyons and up the slopes to the various mines. They converge near the base and take a parallel course to this road further down near the forest.”

Bryn looked at Victor, and he could tell she was wondering about his plan. “Should we stop at one of the outposts and get a guide?”

Victor shook his head. “I know it seems strange, but I’m, uh, following a feeling. I can tell the mountain wants something from me.”

“I imagined we’d go to the temple and ask the Order for guidance.”

Victor shook his head. “I don’t think they can help me.” He turned and started walking again.

Bryn kept pace beside him, her armor clanking as she walked. “Why?”

“It’s just a feeling.” Victor laughed at her frustrated scowl. “I know, it’s irritating. I don’t know how to explain it. I’m just going to follow my instincts ‘cause something is pulling or pushing me toward...something in this mountain.” ❖

Bryn just nodded and put her head down, digging into the steep upward climb. Victor could hear Florent and Feist behind him, and though Florent wasn't the sturdiest-looking man he'd ever seen, Victor knew there was no way a guy past level one hundred could possibly struggle with any sort of hike. As the minutes ticked by and they climbed hundreds of feet in elevation, Victor often thought about summoning Guapo and making quick work of the ascent, at least until they came to trails or tunnels that made it impractical. Something about having the mountain under his feet was satisfying, though, and he rather enjoyed the vigorous exercise in the mountain air.

He didn't doubt that the others could summon mounts or other means of quick travel, but they didn't mention it, which gave Victor another sort of satisfaction—these three were following his lead and doing so without any real question or objection. It was something he'd taken for granted lately, likely ever since the campaign for the Untamed Marches. He'd become accustomed to leading to the point where it didn't faze him.

They passed many iron signposts denoting different shafts or other locales on the mountain, from outposts to an occasional homestead. After passing a sign next to a rocky trail that read "Yarrow Keep," Bryn commented, "I didn't know anyone lived up here."

"Nor I," Florent huffed from behind them.

Victor shrugged. "I'll ask about it back at the palace, but I imagine there have been land grants up here over the years. We're talking a hell of a lot of acreage surrounding this peak."

After a few grunts of agreement, they walked in silence for a while, their huffing breaths accompanied by the sounds of nature—birds singing, canines yipping in the distance, and the occasional yowl of a big cat. When they came to a crossroad on the main trail with a narrow path leading off to the right at a downward slope and another to the left that seemed to climb a sheer cliff face carved into the stone by some Elementalist in the distant past, Victor felt a change in the mountain's pull.

When he stopped, Bryn took a few steps and then turned back to face him. "Resting?"

"No. I think we need to go that way." Victor pointed to the trail that climbed the rocky face to the left.

"Narrow," Florent grunted, leaning on his slender black staff. He scanned the cliff and pointed, directing Victor's gaze upward. "It switchbacks a dozen times before it curves out of sight up there. I could shorten our climb by portaling us to the top."

Victor's eyes widened. "You can do that?"

"Of course! If I can see it, I can make a portal to it. It's a costly spell with a long cooldown, but it's different from the one that I used to bring us to the mountain. That one requires me to create an anchor, meaning I have to physically be at the location before I can create a portal to it in the future."

"Well, shit. I don't see why we can't cheat a little; there's nowhere to get off that trail, so I don't think we'll miss anything."

Florent nodded, then, gazing up toward the distant, faint track of the cliffside trail, he thumped his staff on the hard, cobbled roadway. Victor felt a surge of potent Energy, and then, with a sizzling, tearing sound, a black portal opened in the air before him. “Go,” Florent grunted.

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Victor stepped through first, and just as when he’d taken the portal from his palace to the mountain, he felt a brief sensation of coldness. Then, he stepped out onto the narrow, stony pathway. He took a few steps, making room for the others, then took a moment to look down at his ant-like companions on the roadway below. “That saved some time,” he muttered as Bryn emerged from the portal and hurried toward him.

Everyone was on the new path a few seconds later, and Victor led the way around the stony escarpment. The drop to his left was dizzying, but it didn’t bother him much; Victor figured he’d probably be able to land on his feet by activating Titanic Leap, and even if he couldn’t, he didn’t think a fall would kill him, even thousands of feet down onto rough, jagged boulders. There was a lot to be said for having an epic-tier vitality and a titanic constitution.

The trail, carved out of the stone of the cliffside, continued deep into a narrow canyon between the side of Iron Mountain and a nearby “foothill,” which was larger than any of the mountains Victor had visited around Tucson. They followed it for hours, steadily climbing higher, and when it wound around again, heading straight up a new canyon—a natural split in Iron Mountain’s shoulder—the sky had grown dark, and the sun was a distant memory.

Before climbing into the new canyon, Victor gestured to the relatively flat, stony area on which they stood and asked, “Does anyone need to rest?”

Florent stepped forward, his face a little flushed but his breathing regular and unstrained. “Unless you intend to make camp, I would rather press on. No sense delaying the inevitable.”

“I’m fine,” Feist added.

Victor looked at Bryn, and she simply gestured with her hand, pointing toward the trail. He nodded, grinning, and continued to hike. The moon and stars provided plenty of light for Victor’s eyes, and he led them deep into the canyon, always following the ever-present tug at his Core or his heart or his spirit—he didn’t know exactly what part of him was being pulled, but he felt it. By midnight, they’d passed two forks in the path, climbed another thousand feet, and traversed two rocky ridgelines.

When they crossed the second one, Victor stood and looked back to the north, over the vast, dark sea of the forest, and sure enough, he could see the distant lights of the town. Bryn stood beside him and sighed, wiping some sweat from her brow. “We’re pretty damn high, Your Grace.”

Victor clapped her on the shoulder. “I like the way you talk, Bryn.”

“Thank you for not insisting I be polite.”

Victor had to laugh at the idea and, shaking his head, turned and continued to climb. Two hours later, Florent called out, “I see a cave!”

Victor had a habit of watching the trail in front of his feet, looking for stones to step on and ensuring he didn't slip on loose scree. When Florent called out, he looked back to see where the man pointed, and sure enough, about a mile up the canyon and on the other side, he saw the oblong crescent of pitch-black darkness that stood out among the starlit boulders. When his eyes settled on the opening, Victor felt the pull with renewed intensity, and he simply knew that was where he was meant to go. "That's it," he grunted.

"Shall I create a portal, or would you like to progress on this trail?"

Victor let his gaze drift back to the stony path, following it up the canyon with his eyes. He could see that it probably wrapped around the canyon to the far side further up, but if they could skip that hike, it would save them hours. "Portal," he grunted.

Florent nodded, then moved past Victor so he had more open space before him. He slammed his staff on the ground, and Victor felt a surge of Energy, and once again, Florent's dark, crackling portal appeared. "After you, Your Grace."

Victor brushed past him and stepped into the void hanging in the air. His foot came down on gray stone, and he stepped into the opening of a dark, dusty cave. While he waited for the others, he peered into the deep shadows, his Quinametzin eyes straining to pierce the dark. It looked like it went deep and descended rapidly. Standing there in the cave opening, he could feel something calling to him even more intensely.

There weren't words or coherent thoughts associated with the call, but Victor was more and more sure that it was the mountain and not some other being. Perhaps his ancestors were aiding the call, allowing it to affect him more profoundly, but Victor felt like it was something in his blood—a kinship the mountain recognized. He couldn't get any sense of emotion from the pull; it didn't seem desperate or angry or hopeful. It was just a pull that said come, and something in Victor wanted to answer.

The sizzling crackle of Florent's portal fading brought Victor's mind back to the present, and he looked at his companions. "Anyone need rest?"

"Not I, Your Grace." Feist thumped his breastplate with his gloved fist.

Victor chuckled at his enthusiasm but looked at Florent. "You're good?"

"Fine, if a bit bored."

"Well, maybe things will get more interesting in this cave." Victor gathered some inspiration-attuned Energy and summoned his coyotes. As the shimmering silvery mist gathered on the cave floor and his five companions sprang into existence with yips and yowls, Victor laughed to see Bryn take a step back, her hand reaching for her sword. As he squatted to pet the cheerful canines, they swarmed him, licking and slobbering all over his face and neck. "All right, all right!"

“You’re a summoner?” Bryn asked, eyes wide. “You never used your pets in battle—”

Victor stood, and his cheerful demeanor turned into a glower as he stared at Bryn, Florent, and Feist. “You might see me do a few things in here that I’d rather the rest of Ruhn wasn’t aware of. Consider this mission and anything you witness to be a secret between us. Agreed?”

“Yes, milord!” Again Feist slammed his fist to his chest, and this time Bryn joined him, nodding and saluting.

Florent chuckled and nodded. “I’ve no one to share such things with, milord, but rest assured, you’ll have my secrecy.”

Victor nodded, then turned to his coyotes and clicked his tongue, jerking his thumb toward the tunnel. They cried and yowled in excitement as they took off, eager to be the first to discover something interesting for him. “They’ll scout,” he explained. As he started after the coyotes, Victor summoned a Globe of Insight, charging it until it blazed like a star in the air over his head. With that brilliant illumination, his eyes pierced the depths of the tunnel for a hundred feet or more, and he could see that it wound slightly to the right.

“Were those wolves, Lord Victor,” Feist asked from behind Bryn as they walked. “I’ve never heard such funny cries. It almost seems they were trying to talk.”

“Coyotes. They’re related to wolves but usually smaller. Mine are quite a bit bigger than natural ones. Coyotes are clever and brave, and they rely on each other to survive.” Victor could feel his companion spirits deep below them, racing ahead. He couldn’t see through their eyes but could get general sensations and emotions from them. It seemed they were still together; the tunnel hadn’t branched yet.

As they descended, the cave grew larger rather than smaller, and Victor found himself able to stand upright and take comfortable strides. He imagined that the people who’d carved the trail into the stony cliffs leading to the cave had probably been prospecting—looking for mineral deposits and whatnot—but this cave seemed natural, and Victor didn’t see any evidence of mining. “There wasn’t a sign by the trailhead leading here, was there?”

“No, milord,” Feist replied. Victor was starting to like the guy; he was quick-witted and eager.

“Doesn’t seem like any mining operation reached this tunnel, does it?” He looked over his shoulder, addressing the question to all three of his companions.

Florent shook his head. “I think not, milord.”

“Strange, don’t you think? That trail in the cliff face couldn’t have been easy to make.”

“On the contrary, milord,” Florent replied again, “for a powerful Earth Elementalist, it would be a few days' work at most. I'd say it's likely a noble in times past wanted to explore this cave and sought an easier route for his hired hands.”

“Hmm.” Victor stopped, pausing to better concentrate on his coyotes. They were fast when they had room to run, and it felt like they were very distant, like they'd covered miles. “My coyotes are way ahead of us. They haven't run into anything —” Victor gasped, choking off his words, as he felt a surge of panic mingled with excitement. His coyotes had come upon something. He got an impression of a vast space, heat, and the undeniable danger sensation from all five of them. Then, they were gone.

“Are you all right?” Bryn grabbed his shoulder, and Victor shook his head, trying to banish the startled panic and fear his companions had sent his way.

“Something just killed my coyotes.”

“Gods!” Feist cried, “I'm sorry, milord!”

Florent saved Victor the trouble of explaining. “Those were spirit totems, Feist. They aren't dead forever.” He looked at Victor, “Isn't that correct, milord?”

“Yeah, that's right. Still, something killed them in about two seconds flat.” He glared at the three of them. “Maybe you all should wait here.”

Florent shook his head. “I have strict orders to accompany you, milord.”

“I'm not letting you go down there alone!” Bryn looked horrified at the thought.

“I'm with you, Your Grace!” Feist announced.

Victor smiled at Feist, nodding as he locked eyes with the young man. “I appreciate your bravery.” He turned to Florent, “But if I tell you to run, you better have a portal ready.”

“I always have an escape portal ready, milord! How else do you think I can feign such bravery?” He grinned lopsidedly and winked, getting a few hearty chuckles out of Feist.

“Fair enough.” Victor looked up at his Globe of Insight, then canceled it, reclaiming his Energy. As the tunnel was thrown into darkness, Florent's black staff began to glow with silvery light.

“Shall I extinguish this, milord?”

“Up to you,” Victor said, casting Banner of the Champion, blasting the tunnel with its blazing golden light.

“Gods! I feel that!” Feist cheered, pounding his chest with his fist. Even Florent stood taller, the wan pallor of his flesh perking up with some color.

Bryn was beaming ear-to-ear as she peered up at the bloody sun on Victor's floating, magical standard. "I'm learning a lot about you today, Your Grace."

"C'mon." Victor started down the tunnel, his lengthy strides forcing the others to half-jog to keep up. "You're probably going to learn a lot more."

Book 9: Chapter 30: Barrier

With his banner blazing, Victor led the way deeper into the vast, steeply descending tunnel. Loose boulders here and there, dust, and rubble marked their progress, but other than that, the tunnel was empty. Such a sizeable subterranean space in a wild System-controlled world seemed like it ought to be home to many creatures, but neither Victor nor his companions spotted so much as a mouse or even cobwebs. The air was dry, and though it started out cool, it became progressively warmer as they descended.

After walking for more than ten minutes, Victor stopped and turned to his companions, "The area where I lost track of my coyotes isn't far, perhaps a hundred or two yards around that bend." He gestured to where the steeply descending tunnel rounded a wide corner to the right.

"Shall I scout?" Bryn asked, stepping forward.

Victor chuckled and shook his head. "No. I'll go ahead and, if you hear the sounds of battle, you can come and see what it is and whether you'd like to get involved. Keep yourselves safe, though—I'm sturdier than I might seem."

"Oh, I don't know, milord," Florent whispered, his voice carrying a note of droll humor, "you seem quite sturdy to me."

Victor chuckled, gave his companions a solemn nod, then turned and loped down the hallway. With his banner blazing behind him, it wasn't easy to note, but when he began to round the corner, he thought the shadows ahead were lighter. A dozen more steps revealed why. The great tunnel opened into an even greater subterranean hall. It was a space that could hold a thousand titans Victor's size. The space had a ceiling that had to be five hundred feet high with a glowering ball of orange-red fire hanging from black chains mounted to its stony surface.

Stepping into the space, Victor saw that the distant, opposite wall looked to be made of dense-looking, yellow-gray metal that shone softly in the light of the globe of fire. Something massive shifted in the shadows to his right, and he whirled to see a humanoid figure, though one that made him feel small. He might have said it was an iron automaton if he didn't know about magical alloys and rare, Energy-dense elements. It was about fifty yards from him, and even at that distance, he could see it was much larger than any giant he'd faced—certainly taller than he was in his berserk, titan form.

The figure's round, metallic head shifted toward him, its baleful red eyes staring his way as it slowly, with surprisingly limber joints, lifted a titanic black greatsword. Victor had the distinct impression that it was giving him a fair warning and that violence would ensue if he moved further into the chamber. Was that what happened to his coyotes? How could something so enormous and seemingly cumbersome kill five of his quick, clever companions so suddenly?

Rather than be caught by surprise, Victor channeled Energy into his armor, cladding himself in his wyrm-scales and Lava King hide. His Sojourn set enchantments gave his armor a fiery orange glow

that seemed to intensify when Victor readied for a fight, and readying himself, he was. He reached into his storage compartment and summoned Lifedrinker into his hands, grinning fiercely when he realized his latest size boost meant he could handle her almost comfortably, even without casting one of his berserking abilities.

At last! Will we fight, my love? Will we spill the blood of your foes?

“Maybe, chica. God, it feels good to hold you, though. Stay ready!”

Always!

Lifedrinker’s gleaming black axe-head began to glow with a fiery inner light, and Victor could see the air around her shimmering with heat waves. He took a step, and the great, black-metal golem or automaton or whatever he was supposed to call it took a single step and swung its sword in a flat arc. At first, Victor thought it was malfunctioning and trying to cut him even though he was still nearly half a football field distant, but then the air that the tip of the sword cleaved crackled with red, lightning-filled Energy and a wall of destructive force rolled toward him like a deadly tidal wave.

Victor had about two seconds to react and, without thinking, activated his Flight of the Lava King armor enchantment. Enormous fiery wings sprouted from his back, and when he looked into the air above that wall of deadly Energy, he exploded upward, leaving billowing clouds of black smoke in his wake. He soared over the metallic man’s attack, and as he streaked toward his enemy, Victor cast Iron Berserk.

His body surged in power and size, and Lifedrinker became comfortable in his hands. He lifted her high and directed his flight downward, streaking like a fiery comet toward the metal giant. The golem—Victor had mentally settled on that label—moved far more fluidly than anything that size made of metal had any right to do. It stepped to the side and raised its thirty-foot sword, aiming to swat Victor out of the air. Victor didn’t shrink away from the blow, even as that black blade exploded with crackling red-lightning Energy.

As he came down, Lifedrinker’s brilliant, gleaming, incredibly dense edge met the sword in a cataclysmic crash. Focusing on his movement, unable to stare at her impact, Victor knew she won the contest because she didn’t stop. She didn’t even jerk in his hands much. She continued to fall toward the golem’s chest, and her enormous, wedge-shaped axe-head punched through a foot of dense metal to sink into the cavity beyond. As Victor leaped back, leaving Lifedrinker to do her work, he saw the top half of the golem’s enormous sword still sliding over the stony ground.

“Yeah! Drink!” he roared, laughing madly as the golem thrashed its truncated sword, stomping toward Victor. For his part, Victor kept backpedaling, enjoying the show as red currents of Energy coursed into the dense, mirror-like black surface of his axe. The golem tried to cleave the air with its shortened weapon, and Victor could see red lightning sparking in the air, but it wasn’t enough to ignite another wave of deadly destruction. He laughed, taunting the golem as it stumbled toward him, its movements slowing by the second as Lifedrinker tore torrents of its vital power away.

When the golem's steps looked almost like a slow-motion movie, he darted forward and flanked the thing, slamming a shoulder into its side. He grunted with the impact, driving with his powerful legs until the enormous construct began to teeter. It tried to swing its broken sword at him again, but Victor slipped behind it, and while it rocked unsteadily, he gave it another shove. This time, as it rocked forward, he squatted down, hooked his hands around its tree-sized ankle, and, with all his might, heaved.

The golem toppled, futilely trying to break its fall with too-slow arms, and when it impacted the cavern floor, it split the stone and shook the ground like a building falling. Victor looked up to see dust and small hunks of stone falling from the ceiling. He almost sprinted for the tunnel, sure the whole place would come down, but the tremor of the impact was short-lived. Whatever had created the tremendous stony hall had built it sturdily.

The golem wasn't yet dead, but its movements were slow and weak, and it seemed stuck, its arms pinned beneath it. Steam and smoke poured from the seams of its joints, and every so often, an arc of red electric Energy would lash out with a crackling zap. Victor moved around the side of it, grasped the rough, black metal of its shoulder, and heaved, trying to turn it onto its side; he didn't want to leave Lifedrinker pinned beneath it. The thing was heavy, but since it wasn't quite dead, it actually helped Victor in his efforts, pushing with its damaged, grinding arms, trying to right itself.

By the time Victor managed to complete his deadlift, screaming and red-faced from the effort, the automaton was nearly still, and white steam veritably billowed out of the enormous rupture in its chest where Lifedrinker had buried herself to the haft. He grabbed her and yanked, pulling her forth with a massive arc of red-tinged lightning. Before the mechanical giant could find a way to repair itself, Victor lifted Lifedrinker and walked around its twitching arms to smash her into its passenger-car-sized head, over and over.

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With each upswing of Lifedrinker's flaming, obsidian blade, gears, crystals, and electricity-charged motes of Energy flew through the air. Heaving from the workout, sweating through the red heat of his rage, Victor dismantled the automaton, and Lifedrinker continued to drink the bright red Energy that leaked from its shell. He wasn't sure how long he toiled, but it had to have been five or ten minutes before he looked up from the wreckage to see his companions standing nearby, watching in various states of disbelief.

"I think it's dead, Your Grace!" Feist called.

Victor regarded him through his red haze of fury, and as the squire's words slowly registered, he began to laugh. It was a deep belly laugh, and the mirth chased the rage from his pathways, ending his Iron Berserk. As he returned to his normal size, leaning against one of the titanic construct's mangled legs, he realized he was standing in a sea of pulsating orbs of shimmering Energy. They were hazy but bright, filled with the potent Energy of a high-level conquest.

Considering the ease with which he'd dispatched the construct, Victor was a little surprised by the volume of Energy that surged toward him, but the thought was dashed from his mind as he was overwhelmed. The influx lifted him from his feet and sent his mind reeling down rainbow-hued passages of kaleidoscopic confusion. He caught glimpses of things that only served to confuse him further—waterfalls, flaming comets, erupting peaks, slender reeds blown by pink-hued winds, and a tree with branches that scraped the firmament.

When he came back to himself, he sat on the cavern floor, back to the ruined golem, and he could hear the sound of movement and soft conversation nearby. "...think the innards are largely intact, at least in the torso." It took his disoriented mind a moment to recognize Florent's voice, but Bryn's reply was easier to place.

"Don't touch anything until Victor awakens."

"Naturally! I'll keep my fingers intact, thank you very much."

Before he spoke or moved, Victor focused on the System message floating before his eyes:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 74 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.*****

"Really?" he grunted. It seemed to him the golem had been far too easy to slay to grant him an entire level, but he supposed it wasn't something he'd complain about.

"Your Grace?" Bryn called from somewhere above and behind him. He grunted, pushing himself to his feet, and looked to see Bryn and Feist standing atop the golem's chest. Florent was inside, peering out through one of the rips Lifedrinker had made. Thinking of his axe, Victor whirled around but relaxed when he saw her resting where he'd left her, blade half-buried in the stone of the cavern's floor.

"How long was I out?"

"Just about ten minutes or so, milord. This monstrosity certainly spilled a great amount of Energy for you."

"Yeah." Victor frowned, moving to look past the golem at the rest of the cavern. The enormous metal wall drew his eye. More pointedly, the gigantic vault-style door at its center seemed to call his name; whatever was in the mountain, whatever had been reaching out to him through his instincts or his blood or his spirit—it was beyond that wall.

"Your Grace," Florent's voice came to him, echoing oddly from inside the golem's chest, "there are quite a few, likely valuable components inside this automaton."

"We'll talk about that in a minute. Did any of you examine that door?"

Victor pulled Lifedrinker from the stone with a grunt, hefting her over his shoulder, wincing as her enormous weight pressed down on his scale armor. As he strode toward the door—easily five hundred yards distant, he heard his companions scurrying down from the golem’s corpse. Bryn called out, “No! We didn’t want to leave you, and it didn’t seem like anything was urgent about it.”

Victor heard her, but he didn’t respond. He was too focused on a shiny square of silver-colored metal beside the enormous vault door. His eyes were good, not quite good enough to read them, but good enough to see letters etched into the metal. Bryn jogged to catch up to him, and when she was beside him, she asked, “I saw you fight in the garden and against Thorn, but Victor, I didn’t realize you were that big. Did your bloodline advancement increase your, um, giant size?”

“Titan,” Victor grunted absently, but her words cut through his focus, and he paused, turning to look back toward the ruined metal golem. “How big do you figure that thing is?”

Feist and Florent were jogging toward them, and the Spatial Magus answered, “Approximately forty feet tall and hundreds of tons in weight, milord.”

Victor looked down at Bryn. “How tall was I compared to that thing?”

“Maybe three-fourths.” She glanced to Florent and Feist for confirmation.

“That’s right, milord,” Feist said, nodding. “I’d say your fearsome helmet was about midway between the thing’s head and its waist.”

Victor nodded, scratching his chin. “Yeah, Bryn, I guess so. It’s weird, ‘cause I thought when I took that form, I was already at my, uh, bloodline’s potential. I guess I was wrong.”

“I can’t claim to have ever seen a titan, Your Grace,” Florent said, slowing to a stop as he reached Victor’s position, “but there are many myths likening them to mountains, so…” He trailed off, allowing his words to build their own implications in everyone’s mind. Victor only nodded. Was it a coincidence that Florent was the second person in as many days to talk to him about mountains in relation to titans?

“Let’s see what that plaque says.” Victor turned and started walking again, his long strides forcing the others to hurry.

“Plaque?” They’d already covered half the distance, but still, Bryn had to squint at the vault door for several seconds before she said, “Oh! I see it.”

When they stood before the door, it dwarfed even Victor. It was easily twenty feet in diameter, though the keyhole in the spinning locking lever was sized for a normal—giant-sized—key. Victor looked at the plaque and read aloud, “By decree of His Majesty, Longar Fray, Sovereign of Iron Mountain, this passage is sealed for all eternity. Let none dare trespass beyond this point. To linger

here is death, for the full measure of our king's wrath shall fall upon any who violate this sacred order."

Victor turned back to the enormous, broken form of the metal golem. "You figure that thing was the guardian?"

"I see nothing else that it could be, milord," Florent agreed.

"Um, who was Longar Fray?" Bryn asked.

"Sounds like he was calling himself a king, doesn't it?" Feist asked.

Victor ignored them as they continued to speculate, leaning close to peer into the keyhole. It looked very complex—grooves arranged in a half-moon for multiple key tines seemed to go very deep. Compulsively, he reached up and tried to turn the wheel, but it didn't budge. "I need to get past this door."

Florent cleared his throat. "Milord, if the man who made this door was the lord of Iron Mountain, perhaps the key is in the palace."

Victor backed up several paces, looking up and down the metal wall. "It must have cost a fortune to build a wall like this. That metal feels dense. Can you guys feel that Energy in it?"

Florent nodded. "I certainly can, milord, and you're not wrong—that metal is amber-ore."

"Holy Shit!" Victor smacked his head, remembering the treasure he and Thayla had stumbled upon when they were thralls in the Greatbone Mine. They'd found crates of ore like this—maybe a ten-thousandth of what was represented by the wall before them—and it had made a fortune for Lam. "So, if I need to smash my way through, I'll probably have to break the stone and tunnel under it."

"I wouldn't advise such measures, milord." Florent moved past him to point at the runes etched into the metallic barrier. "This wall is fortified with dense enchantments. I believe it likely has deep footings. Even if it doesn't, I can't imagine the crafters of such a formidable barrier wouldn't think of the possibility you suggested. If I were intent on keeping people out, I'd enchant the wall to collapse the surrounding stone rather than allow a breach."

Victor turned and scanned the cavern again, ensuring he hadn't missed anything. After a long, fruitless perusal, he looked at Florent. "Can you make a portal here? I mean to and from?"

"Yes, milord. I can create an anchor here."

"All right. Bryn, Feist, you two will wait here. I'm going back to the palace to see if we can find a key. If not, I'll bring some Elementalists, and we'll try crafting a tunnel under this wall. We can start further back and go deep, hopefully avoiding any traps."

Bryn nodded. “A clever plan, Your Grace.” He thought it was funny how she reverted to formal language when Fest and Florent were close, but he supposed it was for the best; she was trying to set an example for her squire.

“Your Grace, that may work, but it’s a rather remote possibility, and such a tunnel would take some time to construct—”

Victor waved a hand, cutting Florent off. “I don’t care what it takes, my friend; I’m going through that wall. If I have to bring the fucking mountain down around it, I will.” Victor didn’t mean to speak so vehemently, but the call was getting very strong, the urgency eating at him like a constantly overfull bladder. He nodded to Florent. “Go ahead. Make your portal.”

“Milord,” Bryn said as Florent gathered his strange, potent Energy, “might I suggest you bring that craftsman working for you? In our small conversations, he mentioned that he specializes in crafting constructs. It seems to me he might be very intrigued by yonder automaton.”

Victor grinned and held out a massive fist. “That’s a damn good idea.”

Bryn smiled, her brown eyes glinting brightly in the fiery light of the cavern as she wound up and gave Victor’s much larger fist a solid punch. Victor’s middle knuckle popped, making the impact even louder, and he laughed. “Hell yeah, Bryn!” He nodded to her and then Feist. “Keep in touch. If all goes well, we’ll be back really soon.” The portal flared to life behind him as he spoke, sizzling and popping with Florent’s black-tinted Energy.

“It’s ready, Your Grace!”

Victor nodded, then stepped into the void.