

Victor BK6: Ch11

Book 6: Chapter 11: A Baron and His Retinue

The place was abuzz with activity when Victor, Valla, and Edeya burst into the courtyard. Soldiers were hurrying to the ramparts, and sergeants were shouting orders. Victor scanned the area for Sarl, but too many people in similar uniforms crowded the confines between the rampart walls. Finally, his eyes settled on a thicker cluster of Naghelli on the ramparts over the gate, and he figured it made sense that Sarl would be at a central location like that. He was tempted to use Titanic Leap to launch himself up there, but then he'd have to Berserk or at least take on his Titanic Aspect, and he wasn't ready for that yet. He wanted to see what he was dealing with.

He jogged for the nearest stairs, leaped up them, two at a time, and nodded to the soldiers who rapidly cleared a path for him on the ramparts. As he turned toward the gated section of the wall facing south, he saw what had launched the mad frenzy of activity—lines of black-clad soldiers were marching over the twilight hillsides. These soldiers were different from the undead they'd faced; they were orderly and armored, moving with discipline. "Not undead?" The question came unbidden to his lips as he stepped toward the cluster of officers and Naghelli above the gate.

"We're not sure, sir." Sarl turned and nodded to Kethelket. "One of his people got close enough to see their faces. They, well, sir, they look a bit like you. I mean the coloring and size."

"Like me or like humans?"

Kethelket cleared his throat. "I've not met other humans, Victor, but my scout tells me they resemble stocky, wingless Ghelli. That is to say, they aren't red or blue like our other friends here." He gestured to a pair of lieutenants, one Ardeni and one Shadeni. "Speak up, Offathi."

"Aye, sir." A slender Naghelli stepped around behind Kethelket and looked shyly up at Victor. "They have skin a good deal paler than yours, sir, and, well, their eyes are mostly red. Brighter than Shadeni eyes. They might be a kind of undead, but I couldn't tell for certain. I didn't see any rot on them; they weren't like the zombies and . . . things we killed earlier."

"Look." Valla pointed over the crenellations toward the advancing army. A small group had detached from the main force about a mile out and continued to march forward while the bulk of the army hung back. "Do they want to talk?"

"Maybe." Victor frowned, running his eyes over the lines of soldiers, their numbers darkening the shadowy slopes of the nearby hills. "How many do you count?"

Kethelket answered before Sarl could, "Something close to a thousand."

"So, probably not the entire invading army." Victor nodded, stroking his chin.

"Maybe they don't know about our forces up in the pass?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps this army was near and chose to risk a quick assault to retake the keep."

Victor looked at Sarl, then Kethelket and Valla. “Let’s ride out to see what this small group coming forward has to say. Sarl, we’ll let Kethelket do the talking for now. Act like you’re his subordinate, as will Valla and I.”

“Why?” Valla was quick to ask.

“I liked how I could observe the Ridonne when Borrius and Rellia spoke to him. Don’t worry; I’ll speak up when the time is right.”

“Very well.” Kethelket gestured toward the distant group, still walking toward them over the grassy hills. “Will you ride your mounts? They seem to be on foot . . .”

“Yeah, we can walk out. Uvu is still recuperating, and I can summon Guapo if we need some speed. We’ll take our time.” When the others looked at him as though he had more to say, Victor added, “I mean, so we’re talking closer to the keep than his army.”

“Shall I come, Victor?” Edeya looked both eager and trepidatious.

“Yeah. Bring your book and look officious.” As he spoke, Victor caught her glancing over her shoulder as though to see her truncated wings, and he growled, “Don’t you dare worry about those. You look badass.”

She narrowed her eyes, stood up straighter, and saluted. “As you say, sir!”

“Good.” Victor gestured for the stairs, and the others started ahead of him. One of the lieutenants nearby cleared his throat and approached Sarl.

“Will you be bringing a guard detachment, sir?”

“I’ll be quite all right with the Legate, Tribune ap’Yensha, and Captain Kethelket. If they can’t defend any sort of ambush, then I don’t think a detachment of soldiers will tip the scales.”

“Of course, sir.” The lieutenant backed away, his pale blue cheeks darkening, and Victor had to give him a double-take—he looked like he was about fifteen years old. As he descended to the gate, he looked around and had to remind himself that he wasn’t surrounded by people younger than he; the truth was, with Energy so prevalent in the world, nobody really looked their age. That lieutenant might very well be forty years old.

“Shit, he could be older than that.”

“Something on your mind?” Valla rested her hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. “I like it when you reduce your size like this.”

“I knew it was a good idea to learn that spell!” Victor winked at her, but then he shrugged and, following the others through the gate, said, “I was just thinking

that I don't feel my age. I feel old. I mean, I know that's stupid, but I feel like the last year has aged the shit out of me."

"You've seen a lot. More than most people ever do—more fighting, for certain."

"Well, you've been with me for a lot of it."

"A lot more to come, too." She returned his wink, and Victor suddenly felt very damn good, far better than he had any right to feel, what with an unknown army waiting a couple of miles away.

"Keep walking," he said as Kethelket, Sarl, and Edeya paused outside the gate, waiting for him and Valla. "We'll be right behind. With our similar armor, maybe they'll think we're your guards."

"As you say." Kethelket motioned for Edeya to walk beside him. "Come, you're my aide for the moment."

Victor's plan to lure the foreign party closer didn't bear fruit; they stopped a good half mile from the keep's walls and waited. As they drew closer, Victor tried to peer through the gloom of the darkening twilight to see what they looked like. Kethelket's scout hadn't been lying; the figures were all quite imposing physically—the smallest of them had to be halfway between six and seven feet tall. Moreover, they wore glossy black plate breastplates and helmets, the tops of which were festooned with black feathered plumes.

Victor noted slung round shields on three of the seven figures, and each of them wore a sword of some sort or another, from dual short blades to one enormous man with a gigantic, naked, two-handed, straight-bladed sword attached to a harness on his back. "That sword must be seven feet long," Valla said, following Victor's eyes.

"Yeah. They like swords, it seems."

"Their armor shines and reflects the starlight . . ." Edeya started to say, but Kethelket held up a closed fist, and she clamped her mouth shut. The message was clear—they were getting too close, and it wouldn't do for the enemy to hear them speaking in awe about their weapons and armor. Victor felt a little bad for the slight Ghelli; she'd no doubt heard him and Valla talking and wanted to join in, only to be chastised by the ancient Naghelli prince. Victor thought about that, about how Kethelket was supposedly from a time before the joining, from the original world where the Ghelli, Ilyathi, and Yovashi originated. Had he met anyone else on Fanwath that old?

He had so many questions he wanted to ask the man and wondered at how he'd been able to push all those thoughts to the background while they'd traveled. "Always something more important than my simple interests," he muttered, rubbing his thumb idly on Lifedrinker's haft as they walked, his scowl deepening to the point where, if he were cognizant of it, he might have worried the approaching party might think he was intent on murder. He pushed his annoyance aside as they

came to a stop atop a smooth grassy hillock, just twenty yards separating Kethelket's diverse group of five from the seven uniform, black-armored, pale-fleshed invaders.

"You seem to be occupying my keep," the man in the center announced by way of greeting. His voice was resonant and sharp, and he leaned forward with the vehemence of his words. He was lanky, much slighter than the giant with the massive sword, but still a formidable, imposing figure in his shiny black armor with the tall, feathered plume. He wore a single blade at his hip, though it was broad and heavy and looked to have something close to a five-foot reach. Victor could feel the aura the man, or perhaps his entire party, projected—it was heavy and full of violence. These people had fought and killed many people and were prepared to do so again.

Victor shrugged it off, though he ducked his head, playing his part, trying not to look sturdier than their "leader." Kethelket, despite his experience, cringed back a bit but managed to straighten up and scowl. His gossamer, orange-lit wings spread wide, and he touched a hand to the hilt of the sword he wore at his hip and replied, "The keep just yonder?" He jerked his thumb toward the walls behind them. "No, no. I'm afraid you've been ill-informed. That's mine."

"We've deigned to give you this chance to surrender or flee; I'm not here to play games or bargain. You slew a horde of mindless chaff; don't let that bolster your ego to the point where you'll throw your lives away—those creatures were simply meant to hold these lands under the influence of my lord while I gathered my retinue and traveled here. Your trespass, while insulting, can be forgiven—you knew not whom you crossed."

"And whom is it that I have slighted?"

"Why me, and, of course, my lord."

"Must I ask again?"

"So, you truly are an ignorant victim in all of this? A simple bumpkin stumbling upon matters far above his station?" The man smirked, and some of those in his imposing retinue chuckled or tittered. For the first time, Victor realized one of the tallest, most heavily armored of his retainers was a woman. He could just make out her red-painted lips through the narrow gap in the center of her heavy helm. He'd given her a double take when a trilling laugh echoed out of that thick armored encasement. The speaker sighed and waved his hand as though brushing off an embarrassing mistake. "I am Baron Eric Gore Lust, and I serve Prince Hector of Heart Rot."

"Such names . . ." Kethelket shook his head slowly, a note of disbelief in his voice. Victor knew the Naghelli prince was remarking about the 'Gore Lust' part of the baron's name, but he couldn't help wondering about the first part—Eric. Hector and Eric were both familiar names to him, names that harkened back to

Earth, and he pondered that coincidence. More than that, if it weren't for their size and strange pale skin and red eyes, these people could very well be human.

"Such names. Now, will you depart my keep, or must I and my reavers wash the stones with your blood?"

"Well, I, too, serve a lord, you see. If I were to pass off this keep without a struggle, I imagine he'd be rather perturbed." Kethelket turned to Sarl. "Wouldn't you agree, Captain?"

"Oh, aye, sir. I believe our Legate would be furious. Might be worse for us if we returned home having abandoned his keep."

"This is not his keep!" the self-styled baron growled.

"Well, what's that they say?" Sarl asked, eyeing Kethelket as he straightened the lapel on his uniform jacket. "He who holds the pie decides who will eat?"

"I've certainly heard something of the like . . ."

"So, you choose death?" the tall, pale, red-eyed man asked, interrupting Kethelket's quip.

"Choose it? No, sir. I believe we'll put up a fight."

"And your men?" the baron growled, "Will they stay and fight with your head on a pike out here?"

"Are we not going to honor the standard terms of parley?"

"Why should we? Our kind has little concern for the respect of the quick-blooded."

"Quick . . ." Kethelket peered more closely at the baron. "Are you undead, sir?"

"We are immortal." As he answered, the eight-foot giant with the massive sword reached up and grasped the hilt, taking a step forward. "Hold, Porter. We'll not yet water this grass." The baron held up a finger as though urging everyone to pause and pay attention and then looked at Kethelket, eyeing him more closely, taking in his swords and luminescent wings. "I have another option, sirrah."

"By all means! I'd love to hear all of my options."

"You have a sharp tongue; are your blades as bold? Let us settle this like gentlemen. A simple duel here on this hill; should you slay me, my men will leave for the nonce. If I kill you, your men will have one hour to take flight." After he spoke, the man who'd named himself Gore Lust let his eyes drift over Edeya's slight form, then to Sarl, and finally to Victor and Valla, still lingering behind the

other three. "What say you, soldiers? Do you wish to die tonight, or would you appreciate your leader settling this score here and now?"

Kethelket grinned and turned to regard his companions. "Yes, do any of you have something to say in this matter?"

Victor stepped forward and nodded. "I do." He regarded the self-styled baron. "So, you're saying you want to duel the leader of our little army here?"

"That's right, young man. Should I win, you have my word that your people will have a full hour to depart these lands. I won't promise you'll remain safe after that. I can promise that if don't linger near my keep, I, personally, will not give chase."

"And if our leader wins?"

"My army here will depart."

"Depart this world?" Victor pressed, noticing some of the baron's retinue had begun to fan out, shifting their hands to weapons.

"Oh . . . well, I can't guarantee that. Prince Hector, you see, is a rather demanding lord. He may insist on fealty from my thralls."

"No, Lord," the giant said, "My allegiance would be to your lady back on Dark Ember."

"Ah, Porter. Ever loyal to my blood. This is a moot point, good reaver—I will not lose. Still, you should know Lady Charisma will be unable to draw you home past the Prince's lines. He'll have first claim."

Victor watched the exchange, trying to make sense of all the words but gaining far more understanding in the expressions of the few invaders wearing open-faced helms—they didn't like the idea of serving Prince Hector directly. They were loyal to this man and his "lady." He found it interesting and a bit heartening; some infighting among his enemies was good in his book. He didn't like the idea of all these soldiers returning to serve the Prince, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to cut the head off this particular snake. He leaned forward, knuckles white on Lifedrinker's haft. "Okay, I'll accept."

"You?" The baron took a step back and eyed Victor more carefully, then glanced at Kethelket and back to Victor with confusion in his eyes. "You're this one's champion? I hardly think a lanky young man with a crude weapon will serve as an appropriate opponent for me. Do you not fight your own battles, sirrah?" He scowled at Kethelket, who'd stepped back beside Sarl.

"Oh, I do indeed, sirrah. Sadly, this isn't my fight; you said you wanted to fight our leader."

"This one? You all bow to this man?"

“Oh, aye, he’s the strongest of us.” Valla stepped to the side, edging in front of Sarl and Edeya, putting herself between them and the other invaders who’d slowly been forming a semi-circle around their leader.

“Truly?”

“Truly,” Victor growled, and he cut the connection to his Alter Self spell. His body swelled with power, surging with mass and Energy as his true, high-eight-foot form took shape. Simultaneously, he released his hold on his aura, letting the full murderous, fear-fueled fury of his being roll out in a heavy wave that fell like a lead blanket of scorching hatred around him, so palpable that it rippled in the air, like shimmering heat on a blistering day in the desert. “Draw your blade, Eric.” His voice rumbled from his belly, thick with intent so evident that images of corpses and splashes of blood flashed through the minds of all who heard him.

The baron’s retinue balked, stepping back, even the giant stumbling in his involuntary haste to escape the cone of Victor’s gaze. Eric’s jaw had slackened, and his eyes widened, but, to his credit, he held his ground, and his hand found his sword. “So, it will be a contest, after all.” He turned to his six retainers. “You all heard my wishes. I made an offer, and this man has accepted. We will dance the blood waltz on this hill, and you all will witness my victory.”

“Stand back,” Victor growled, and though he addressed nobody in particular, everyone scrambled to obey, creating a loose circle around him and Eric. Edeya and Sarl, in particular, stumbled in their haste to put a bit of distance between themselves and the two fighters; they might have felt his aura before, but never with such baleful fury behind it. Something about the baron’s haughty attitude and desire to fight an opponent he’d seen as weaker than himself had angered Victor; no, pissed him off was a better way to describe his feelings. He wanted to teach the asshole a lesson about coming to his world and thinking he could walk all over everyone.

If he’d been more aware of his inner dialogue and motivations, Victor might have been surprised to note that he was thinking of Fanwath as his world, his home. Later, he might reflect on this moment and wonder at that change, but for the moment, he had eyes and thoughts only for Eric Gore Lust and the shimmering, smoky blade he drew forth from his scabbard. It was a deadly-looking weapon, moving in flickers and jumps as Eric stroked it through the air, and Victor knew it was alive and that it wanted to taste his blood. The thought brought a savage grin to his face as he unslung Lifedrinker. “Time to drink, chica.”

Book 6: Chapter 12: A Waltz of Blood

Victor and Eric circled each other. Victor held Lifedrinker light and ready to strike, crosswise before him, while Eric deftly stroked the air as if testing it with his broad blade of black smoke. Victor definitely had a reach advantage on the smaller man, but he wanted to test him, wanted to see what sort of style he would fight with. Was he about to face another lightning-fast opponent, or was the

darkly armored stranger a brawler, a man of brutal strength? His sword was certainly dangerous looking, but could he use it? Were his skills a match for his braggadocious mouth?

Full dark had set in, but plenty of light lit the grassy hilltop. The sisters were bright in the sky, and, in the distance, the southern horizon was limned with sickly green light. “I can see your eyes strain to follow my movements in the dim lighting,” the baron said, though he couldn’t have seen such—Victor’s eyes were good, and he saw him clearly enough. “Karl, a light for my opponent to see by, if you would.”

“I don’t . . .” Victor began to protest but then shook his head, growling; he didn’t need to take the bait, didn’t need to be distracted. Even so, a member of the baron’s retinue summoned a shimmering globe of reddish-yellow Energy, sending it aloft, throwing everyone’s shadows into sudden movement. It was with that unexpected flare and the flicker of shadows that Eric made his first move. He grunted, almost noiselessly, more a heavy breath than a vocalization, and lunged forward, driving the point of his long, broad sword straight at Victor’s belly.

Victor moved with grace and precision, stepping lightly to the right and hacking Lifedrinker down and to the left, sweeping the dark smoke-clad blade to the side with a clang and shower of bright red sparks. “So, there’s metal under all that smoke.” Victor grinned and lunged forward in a follow-up, pressing the attack, sweeping his axe in careful, precise cleaves and jabs, using his long arms and height to keep the baron on his back foot as he struggled to bring his long, apparently heavy, blade between himself and Lifedrinker’s biting edge. Victor was bolstering his agility and strength with Sovereign Will, and he seemed to be more than a match for the red-eyed invader. He danced around him, repeatedly slipping his guard, smashing and dragging Lifedrinker’s edge against that polished, black-enameled armor.

He wasn’t one to show all his cards at the start of a fight, and thus far, he’d done nothing but use his prodigious attributes and skill with an axe to press the baron, pushing him into an increasingly erratic, defensive struggle as he backpedaled. He almost stepped outside the circle of onlookers, but his giant follower, Porter, blocked his path, allowing his shoulder to bump into his chest. As Victor pressed forward, Porter nudged the baron back into the circle and said, “How long will you toy with the man?”

“Toy? He presses me more than you do when we spar!”

“Come, Baron, it’s not kind to play with your food,” the big, red-lipped woman said through the narrow gap in her helm.

Victor heard all of this, of course, but he wasn’t one to let banter distract him in a fight. He was on the verge of sealing the deal, casting Energy Charge or something similar to end this annoying man’s defensive retreat, when the baron began to exude thick, hot, red Energy that was very familiar to Victor. He’d felt something similar when he’d killed ap’Horrin in his secret oubliette and again when he’d fought the Ridonne. He’d come to recognize the heat and taste of it—a blood affinity.

The surge was massive, a level of Energy that Victor had only come to expect from himself or enemies he found too dangerous to tangle with, such as the Warlord or his War Captains back in

Coloss. The sensation triggered a burst of adrenaline in him, an instinctual need to act, to interrupt whatever was happening. Without a second thought, he cast Energy Charge, fueling it with rage, and, in a flash of red light, he ripped over the grass, sending dirt and debris into the air in his wake, and smashed into the tall, armored baron.

As always, the impact he delivered was devastating, but it wasn't exactly the effect he'd hoped for; Victor had planned to smash the baron, send him sprawling, and interrupt whatever he was trying to do. Unfortunately, Eric's spell was in progress; he was sheathed in his hot, red, hungry, blood-attuned Energy, and the forces generated by Victor's impact rolled off him, shattering the night with a tremendous boom that shook the ground, spraying grass, soil, and rocks outward in a stinging, tearing shockwave. Everyone save Victor and the baron were knocked back and sent sprawling. For his part, Victor was protected by his spell's nature; the very Energy that propelled him shielded him from the impact.

When the dust settled and Victor was able to take stock of his situation, he found that he stood in a shallow crater, nothing but dirt under his feet. Before him, the baron loomed, much changed. He glowered down at Victor through red eyes set deep in a twisted, gray, snouted countenance. Enormous fangs hung over thick black lips that twitched into a semblance of a smile that was half snarl due to the very nature of that face.

More shocking than the change in his countenance was the transformation of the baron's form. His mass had increased by half, though the alterations extended beyond size. The baron's shoulders in their dark armor were like cast iron stoves; his arms were long, knuckles close to the ground, his once-massive sword like a toy in the grip of his right claw. He leaned forward, lifting that dark, flickering, smoke-bladed sword high, and snarled, "Let's finish this little dance; me and my kin are thirsty." Then he brought the blade down like a falling star, straight at Victor's neck.

Perhaps worse than the baron's new size, strength, and speed was the dark wave of something Victor felt a kindred connection to that seemed to radiate from the man—terror. If he'd had an ordinary will, something akin to what Valla, Rellia, and others of their tier had built up, Victor would likely have fallen to his knees at the touch of that dark aura. Even with his prodigious will, he might have met his fate in that moment, but another factor came into play. Victor was no stranger to fear, and as the baron's dark Energy washed over him, it felt almost familiar, almost natural. He didn't so much as flinch, and he brought Lifedrinker up, catching that falling sword on the top of her axe head.

Despite his quick parry attempt, the baron's strength felt like it had multiplied tenfold. Victor thought to drive the blade up, step under the arc of the swing, and deliver a terrible hack to the baron's chest. That idea flew out the window when his opponent exerted his new might, continuing to drive the blade down despite Victor's efforts to deflect it with his axe. The dark, smoky sword screeched as the edge rubbed against Lifedrinker's steel, and Victor growled, driving with all his strength. His efforts fell short, though, and the baron relentlessly gained ground. Soon, the edge was touching his shoulder, heating the scales of his vest as it tried to cut through the formidable armor.

They hung there for a moment, Victor and his armor struggling against the baron's inexorable force, and then the wicked blade parted one of his scales, and the faintest touch of its edge reached Victor's flesh. Pain erupted in his shoulder, and Victor cried out, kicking reflexively with his right foot at the baron's knee, breaking free of the contest, launching himself backward to roll over one shoulder and back to his feet, axe ready. The baron hadn't chased him, though; he stood there, leering, as his long, bright-red tongue slipped out between his lips and tasted Victor's blood from the edge of his evil sword.

"Pendejo," Victor growled, reaching up to rub at his shoulder, warily pacing to his left, eyeing the monstrous man for any hint of attack. At the periphery of his vision, he was aware of movement and the sounds accompanying it—his companions and the baron's retinue had regained their feet and were gathering around the area blasted by Victor's collision with the baron.

"Rich blood, sirrah," the baron-creature growled in a hissing, clicking voice that seemed to emanate from somewhere in its throat.

"You like that?" Victor smirked, continuing to circle the creature, contemplating his next move. In a way, it was amusing how his enemy felt entirely at ease in his supremacy. He was clearly stronger and faster than Victor now, and Victor had to admit he was beginning to enjoy the not-so-subtle game he was playing. How long could he fight the monster before he had to play one of his cards? Should he Berserk? Cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin? Summon one of his totems? Conjure his banner? He shook his head at all the ideas—he'd do what felt right in the moment, but for now, he wanted to see if he could cut the bastard as he was.

Victor stalked forward, feinted to his left, and looped Lifedrinker in a downward hack at the monstrous man's knee. The baron was much faster than before his transformation, though, and he dodged back, returning the blow with one of his own. His blade flicked out and caught Victor just above the ear. He hardly felt it; his juggernaut helm absorbed the impact and sent the weapon skittering along the top of his crown. Meanwhile, the baron was wide open, and Victor used one of the many tricks he'd learned in his sparring sessions to capture his momentum and reverse the trajectory of his cleave. Lifedrinker raked along the dark plate at the baron's thigh, scraping off a thick pile of enamel and sinking into the joint near his knee.

The baron hiss-screamed as she bit into his flesh and erupted in a frenzy of hacks with his sword. Victor ducked a shoulder, taking the blows on his scale hauberk and helmet as he was pummeled backward, forced to pull Lifedrinker away before she could begin to drink. The baron's powerful blows smashed into him, crunching against his armor, marring the scales but not quite cutting through. "Fool! Do you not see you are beaten? Relent, and let me finish you with dignity."

"What are you?" Victor asked, breaking his rule about not talking during a fight. He was curious and couldn't help himself.

"What am I? A lord of blood, an immortal master of death, a drinker of knaves and weaklings. You impress me with your boldness, however. Perhaps another

fate will suit you, hmm? Would you like to join my blood reavers?" At his words, angry snarls and bitter curses erupted from the circle—Victor could see the baron's lieutenants weren't keen on sharing their privileged status.

"Perhaps. What would it entail?" While he spoke, Victor let his eyes drift past the baron, searching for his comrades. The "reavers" had survived his explosive impact with the baron just fine, but how about his friends? Some of them were less sturdy. He saw Valla immediately, standing tall in her wyrm-scale armor, Midnight Hope resting, naked, on her shoulder. Next to her was Edeya, and as he circled the Baron, he saw Sarl and Kethelket—all were fine.

"Let me work my blood magic upon you. Let me plant the seed of blood lust in your soul. Let it consume the life in your flesh and replace it with something far more potent!" The baron seemed to believe Victor was interested. Perhaps what he was offering was something appealing to the people of his home world, but Victor wasn't intrigued. Still, he toyed with the man.

"And my companions?"

"Take them as your first thralls! They will serve well in our army!"

"Lord!" one of his retainers—Victor couldn't see which—cried, outraged.

"Are you, like, being literal?" Victor asked, half playing around and half curious. "Do you drink blood? I mean, are you a vampire?"

"Vampyr!" the baron crowed, his guttural voice rolling the r and enunciating the second syllable with a distinctive "y" sound. "So, you've heard of my kind?"

Victor frowned; this was all starting to feel too weird to him. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised—he'd fought ghouls and zombies, why not vampires of one sort or another? Still, the familiar names and the oddly human-like appearance of the baron before his transformation into a hulking monster were starting to feel like too much. He'd had enough of messing around. "Sure, but I have to ask, why would I want to do what you suggest? What would I get out of it?"

"Are you daft? Perhaps I've offered my gift prematurely. Do you not see the power that awaits?" The baron stood tall, spreading his arms wide, demonstrating his immense reach and the robust frame that lurked beneath his thick armor. "In my vampyr form, I am ten times the man I was!"

"Not really a man, though, right?" Victor smirked, carelessly tossing Lifedrinker from one hand to the other and back again. "To be honest, it looks like a bit of a downgrade."

"Enough! I grow weary of this banter. I shall feast on your blood, and if my rage is sufficiently cooled, I may restrict myself to our earlier bargain and give these

morsels a chance to flee.” He ran his long, pointy tongue over his lips, lingering on his left fang, allowing it to curl wetly around the protruding tooth. Then his eyes began to burn more balefully, more brightly in the deep hollows of his protruding brow, and Victor felt another surge of that hot, coppery Energy. This time, he acted even more quickly, but rather than charge the man, he reached into his own Core and pulled forth a torrent of rage-attuned Energy, pushing it into the pattern for Iron Berserk.

As power exploded through his pathways, flooding his every cell, engorging them, expanding them, Victor roared, holding Lifedrinker aloft. His body flared with the potent baleful Energy in his Core, and the ground shifted under his feet, tiny fissures erupting in clouds of freshly exposed soil. Eric, the vampyr, was no longer looming over him. No, it was with wide eyes and a flinching flourish that he finished his spell and sent a spray of hot, needle-shaped, bloody rain from his outstretched hand toward Victor. His attack fell somewhat flat, however. Rather than engulfing a large human, pouring into every crevice and nook of his armor, it splattered against a titan-sized chest, losing its terrible inertia and dribbling ineffectually to the ground.

Victor lunged, suddenly much, much faster and stronger than before. The baron wasn’t ready; perhaps he was still in shock from Victor’s sudden change in stature. Victor smashed a shoulder into the huge, armored man, sending him stumbling, but he wasn’t done. He pressed his advantage and hacked Lifedrinker, one-handed, into the man, smashing against his armored shoulder, his helmet, and into the arm he lifted to defend himself.

Victor felt more potent than ever, hungrier, and more lustful for battle than he could remember, even with the Ridonne. He wanted to see this fool’s insides on the outside, and he wasn’t even sure why. Perhaps it was his pathetic use of terror in an attempt to cow him. Perhaps it was his almost lackadaisical threat against Valla and the others. He didn’t know, but he was seeing red like he hadn’t in a very long time. As he hacked, his grunts of effort became a growl, and Lifedrinker screamed, whistling through the air, her axe head ablaze, throwing black smoke in her wake, sparking with the impacts and throwing hunks of rent armor into the darkness like a smith pounding out an ingot on an anvil.

The vampyr was silent, desperately trying to turn intact pieces of his armor into those blows, swinging his sword in turn, trading blow for blow. Victor felt the sword smash into his armor, slash over his bare arms, slicing like a caustic razor into his flesh, but it only served to anger him further. Each wound the baron inflicted sprayed hot blood, and then it was closed, his flesh knitting together, closing those clean, precise cuts with hardly a scar. Meanwhile, Lifedrinker’s smoldering silver blade grew hotter and brighter with each smashing impact, and Victor could hear her screaming her fury in his mind. A tiny fragment of his consciousness wondered if others could hear her too or if her battle song was for him alone.

One thing was sure, Victor thought, as he and the baron beat on each other—the vampyr was a sturdy, sturdy bastard. Victor was pounding him with such force that the blows rang out like gunshots, boom, boom, boom, and though the baron’s armor was battered, dented, and torn, few of Victor’s blows got through to the flesh. When he did manage to cut his opponent’s gray, thick hide, it, like Victor’s flesh, seemed to have the power to regenerate. This furious, brutal

exchange went on for a handful of seconds, and then the baron regained his balance, digging metal spikes protruding from the toes of his boots into the soil and driving forward, shouldering into Victor's midriff, and careening past him.

Something feral was in his big red eyes, something insane about how he leered as he spun and greedily licked the blade of his sword, "Gods be good, but you've a rich taste!" he groaned, a weird orgasmic note in his voice.

"Come," Victor growled and opened his pathways wide, channeling a thick river of glory-attuned Energy into them, pouring it into his Banner of the Champion. Suddenly, the light cast by the baron's retainer was banished by his banner's glorious, pulsing sun. Blazing golden light bathed the hilltop, driving back the shadows and exposing every rend, dent, scrape, and muddy smear on the baron's armor. Eric shrank back from the glow, shielding his eyes, and suddenly Victor understood why his follower had earlier provided the illumination—some quality in it was comfortable for the undead creatures of the night. His golden, bloody sun, though, seemed to offend them on a cellular level. In fact, Victor could swear he saw smoke rising from the seams in the baron's armor.

"Kill him!" the vampyr shrieked. "Kill them all!"

Book 6: Chapter 13: Contested Ground

At the baron's words, Victor pounced. His already smoldering rage flared like coals under a bellows, and, in his blood-red vision, he could focus on only one thing: the cowardly liar with the smoking, bleeding flesh before him. In the light of his banner, much of the baron's supernatural vitality seemed to have fled, and when Victor fell upon him, he smashed his knee into his chin, sending him flopping back into the torn earth of the hilltop. He drove forward, crushing his prodigious bulk onto the baron's midriff and hacking Lifedrinker at the vampyr's neck with all his might. She was furious, her rage an echo of his own, and when her smoldering blade met the bent, chipped gorget at the baron's throat, she bit clean through.

Lifedrinker knew what to do at that point, and she jerked in Victor's hand, pulling deeper and deeper into the pale gray flesh while the baron bucked and screamed, trying to throw Victor off. Victor held onto his axe, pushing, aiding her in her desire to dig deeper and draw the Energy from his foe, but just as she'd sunk halfway through the sinewy neck, a massive form crashed into him, knocking him loose. Victor kept his grip on Lifedrinker, and as she pulled free of the baron's neck, great gobs of black, viscous, jelly-like blood flew forth in her wake. The baron screamed and thrashed, rolling about, reaching up to squeeze his wounded neck in an odd caricature of a man choking himself.

Victor saw the baron's throes as he slid on his back, another bulky vampyr driving him forward with thick arms around his waist. The creature was bigger than Eric. If Victor were guessing, he'd say it was Porter, the loyal giant. He was large, but Victor could tell from the force of his grasp that he was weaker than the baron, far weaker than he. Perhaps it was the light of his banner affecting the monster, but Victor had no trouble pulling on the creature's bulky neck, driving him down and to the side, and pushing him off. As he did so, he smashed Lifedrinker several times at the gap where

the vampyr's shoulder armor met the plates covering his arm. She tore through the thin links of the joint, sliced the gray flesh, and burned through the sinews and cartilage.

When Victor stood up, he held Porter's arm in one hand and Lifedrinker in the other. The huge vampyr screamed in outrage, thick, near-black blood pumping from his ripped shoulder as he scrabbled backward. Victor ignored him, scanning for the—hopefully—mortally wounded baron. He saw his friends fighting a defensive retreat down the hill's northern slope, the other five vampyrs pressing them with a brutal offensive. Victor wanted to help them, but he saw movement to the south, a dark form slithering downslope over the grass, and he pounced, unable to stifle his lust for a bloody victory and hoping his companions could hold out just a little longer.

He crashed to the ground just feet from the crawling form of the vampyr, and his banner's light exposed the baron, no longer huge and gray and monstrous, but man-sized, bloody, and screaming with pain as Victor's light burned his flesh. Victor felt the urgency of the situation and knew he was putting his friends—Valla!—at risk, so he was quick and efficient as he fell upon the wounded vampyr. He smashed Lifedrinker through an already bent and jagged backplate and buried her through the creature's spine, halting his writhing retreat.

“Bastard! Spare me, and I will plead your case with Prince Hector.” A gurgle of black blood chased Eric's words as he vomited onto the grass.

“Shut up.” Victor yanked Lifedrinker free, then grasped the man by the collar of his battered breastplate, flipping him onto his back. He lifted the axe high, aiming it at the side of Eric's neck where she'd already started the work he was about to finish.

“You can't stand against him, against the others . . .” the baron began to wheeze, but his words were cut short as Lifedrinker separated his head from his shoulders. Victor didn't gloat or savor the glory of the kill. He snatched the body into one of his storage rings and turned, charging back toward Valla and the others. Where he'd left Porter, he saw only a black stain on the grass. He raced past it, scanning the northern downslope, and he didn't have to look far. His friends were surrounded, beleaguered, losing . . .

Victor screamed with fury as he saw the giant woman, the one with the helm that hid all but her blood-red lips, lifting Edeya into the air, swinging her by one frail-looking ankle, smashing her with a wet thump into the ground. Victor's Core emptied itself of rage, flooding his pathways, his muscles, and his brain with its hot fury. He cast Energy Charge, and as he streaked over the last twenty yards to the enormous woman, he lifted Lifedrinker high, bringing her down at the point of impact. Like a guided missile, she impacted the big woman at the crook of her neck and left shoulder. Lifedrinker screamed, and her voice was echoed by the ripping metal of the vampyr's armor as she split the giant woman in twain, from shoulder to hip.

Hot blood showered the battlefield, and Victor roared his frustration, fury, and horror as an echo from his past floated through his mind, overlaying the battlefield—Yrella, dead, limp, the life gone from her eyes, as Victor watched on the sidelines. With desperation in his heart, Victor summoned his great bear, pumping the spell pattern with the mix of Energies needed to form courage. A cacophonous roar sounded, echoing over the hillside as the great bear burst into being. He was a

mighty, wonderful creature with blonde-brown fur, enormous gleaming teeth and claws, and eyes that shone with red-gold reassurance.

In the light of his banner, Victor saw the bear fall upon one of the three vampyrs pressing Valla, crushing him to the ground and savaging him. The great creature engulfed his entire head with his jaws and began to rip and jerk his neck like a terrier with a rat. Victor prayed Valla could hold her own for a moment, hoped Sarl and Kethelket could double-team the other vampyr, and then he knelt by his broken, battered friend. Edeya was still. One of her arms was bent awkwardly, a shard of bloody bone piercing the flesh. Her face was a mottled mess of bruises and cuts, and as Victor pulled her battered lips apart to try to administer a potion, he saw that most of her front teeth were broken or missing.

“¡Que horrible, chica!” he cried, the rage fleeing his body as horror and fear replaced it. Had he lost her? Was Edeya dead? He tipped the potion between her bloody lips into her swollen mouth. The thick silver-blue liquid shimmered and sparked as it flowed over her torn, bloody gums, and he saw the cuts pull together, her flesh knitting. He took it as a good sign; would it heal a corpse? Relief began to wash over him as more of her swollen bruises faded, and the cuts on her cheeks and forehead stopped bleeding and scabbed over. He could hear the sounds of combat fading away to his left and, no longer afraid that his delay had inadvertently killed one of his oldest friends, Victor looked up.

His bear had ripped the head from the vampyr and was lumbering toward Valla, bearing down on one of the two she was defending against. Part of Victor wanted to leap up and run to her defense, but another part was stunned, admiring her grace as she slipped between their swords, lashing out with Midnight, giving far worse than she got. When his golden bear crashed into the tall vampyr on Valla’s left, smashing him to the ground with a roar, Valla switched gears, taking the offensive, and rapidly slashing and stabbing her last remaining opponent, beating her down until she got a clean opportunity for an overhead cleave, ripping Midnight through the woman’s neck.

Victor scanned for Sarl and Kethelket and saw them fighting further north, off to his right. They had one of the transformed vampyrs between them, huge and monstrous. They stabbed and slashed it, Kethelket applying three devastating wounds for every one of Sarl’s, but the creature kept healing, lashing out and screaming its fury. Victor grunted, standing up with Edeya still in his arms, and began to trudge toward them. He was no longer Berserk, but his banner still hung in the air behind him. With one more glance toward Valla and his bear, ensuring they would defeat their two opponents, he summoned Guapo.

He gently laid Edeya over the stallion’s shoulders, then hopped up behind her. As he trotted toward Sarl and Kethelket, he wondered why some vampyrs had transformed and others hadn’t. Were they not all able to do it? He didn’t bother hopping down from Guapo as he came close to the furious battle the two captains were waging against the huge creature. He watched, smiling grimly, as it screamed and began to smoke in the light of his banner, and then Sarl and Kethelket cut it to pieces. Just like the baron, this vampyr couldn’t seem to heal with his banner’s light shining upon it.

In moments, the fight was over, and Kethelket removed the head from the smoldering, bleeding creature. Victor nodded to him and then pointed to the keep where a unit of soldiers was charging through the gates, rushing toward the scene. “Get back. I’ll get Valla.”

“Aye. Is . . . is she alive?” Sarl pointed at Edeya, frowning as his dragonfly wings twitched in agitation.

“Yeah. Hurt bad but alive.” Victor whirled Guapo and galloped up the hill toward Valla. When he arrived, he found his bear lying in the bloody grass near another headless vampyr and Valla strolling toward him, wiping Midnight with an oiled swatch of leather.

“Is she . . .”

“Alive, but another healing potion might not hurt. Let’s get back to the keep.” He held down his hand, and Valla took it, hauling herself up behind him.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and said, “They’re coming.”

“The soldiers? Yeah, they saw us fighting . . .”

“No, the other army. Look. Listen.” She pointed to the north, and Victor saw it—a darker shadow rolling over the night-clad landscape. They were still a mile out, but it seemed like the vampyr’s entire army was charging. He clicked his tongue, and Guapo broke into a canter, smoothly running over the grassy hills toward the keep. Victor yelled at Sarl and Kethelket to hurry as he rode past, but he didn’t slow; he wanted to get Edeya inside, check her out, and maybe give her another potion. He needn’t have worried, in any case. Before they reached the gate, the air brightened, and he turned to see a braided ribbon of thick purple-gold Energy flowing toward the three of them atop Guapo.

“Ah, shit,” he had time to say before it hit him. Guapo had the good sense to stop his forward movement as Victor and his passengers were seized by a paroxysm of Energy and euphoria. He howled inadvertently as he flung his arms wide, absorbing the lion’s share of the river of Energy. Still, quite a bit flowed into Valla and Edeya, and he saw his diminutive friend’s bent arm straighten and her eyes pop open before the wave of victory blinded him momentarily. When he came back to himself, the System had words for him:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 54 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned the skill Titanic Leap – Improved.*****

*****Titanic Leap – Improved: Whenever your form reflects the aspect of your titanic bloodline, you will find that you are able to leap quickly and powerfully, covering distances seemingly implausible, even considering your tremendous size and power. Foes who wish to**

contain you will find their efforts stymied by your ability to burst free from most mundane bindings.***

“Victor, are you there?” Edeya said tremulously, her high, scratchy voice lisping oddly. She was still face-down on Guapo’s shoulders in front of him, so he put a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m here, chica.”

“I . . . I almost leveled, but the System said I need to advance my race.”

“As you should.” Valla leaned to the side, peering around Victor’s shoulder at the young Ghelli. “You need to regrow some teeth along with those wings.”

Edeya gasped, and, as she gently bounced with Guapo’s plodding steps, she slapped a hand to her mouth, probing for damage. “I don’t remember anything after we . . .” She got quiet for a minute, then said, “That big one, she stuck her sword in my side, then she grabbed me . . . that’s the last thing I can remember.”

Victor steered Guapo through the gates and shouted down to the lieutenants standing there, waiting for news, “Get ready! They’re charging, but I don’t know if they’ll try to scale the walls or if they can fucking fly or something. Be ready for anything; Captain Sarl will be here in a few seconds.” He and Valla hopped down, and then he reached up and helped Edeya slide off Guapo’s high shoulders. “It’s good you don’t remember.” He gently pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger, turning her to look him in the eyes. “We need to toughen you up some more, or I’ll need to start making Valla do all my Farscribing.”

“That wouldn’t be my preference, Edeya, so please, go advance your race.”

“Here?” Edeya lisped, holding a hand in front of her mouth as her cheeks bloomed red.

“Yeah. We’re not going to lose this keep. Not if I can help it, and if we do have to retreat and you’re still out of it, I’ll carry you myself. Go find a quiet room, lock the door, and do it.” She hesitated, looking at the gate, at the walls, then back to Victor. He could see she wanted to protest, so he grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward the keep, giving her a gentle shove. “Now. It’s an order.”

“I don’t think she realizes how close she was.” Valla watched Edeya’s slight figure climbing the steps to the keep’s door.

“I thought I’d lost her. I thought I’d let another friend die.”

“Let?”

“Yeah. I chased that fucking baron and killed him instead of running to help you guys.”

“I’m glad you finished him. What scum! How could he betray the sanctity of parley like that?” Victor looked at Valla, surprised by her vehemence.

“That’s what you’re pissed about?”

“Among other things. Still, they’re all dead. They paid the price for their treachery . . .”

“Not all.” Victor sighed, shaking his head. “The biggest one. Porter? I took an arm from him, but he got away while I was finishing the baron.”

“Damn.” Valla frowned and turned back to the gate. “I was hoping that army would be leaderless.”

“Well, regardless of that dude getting away, I’m sure they left someone in charge of those troops. Someone must have ordered them to charge.”

“True.” Valla snapped her fingers. “The Farscribe book! I mean Edeya’s!” She turned and jogged after the Ghelli as Victor connected the dots—she wanted to see if Borrius had replied. She wanted to know if he was coming to flank their attackers.

“Come on, old man. We’re serving them up to you on a platter.” Victor turned to a stairway and stomped up to the parapet, intent on watching the enemies charge. He’d just reached the top when Sarl and Kethelket came through the gate. Victor had to admire the Naghelli for staying afoot, keeping Sarl company as they hurried back to the walls. He walked around the wall, toward the front, then stomped up the short steps to the higher section just above the gatehouse. From that vantage, he could see the southern hills clearly and the enemy forces flowing down their slopes.

None of the “reavers” were mounted, but they certainly moved quickly, somehow maintaining orderly lines as they ran. They seemed to effortlessly glide over the ground, holding a speed that was something close to a standard, mounted roladii. As they drew near, despite the dark, Victor could make out their individual shapes. He saw that every one of them wore shiny, black-enameled armor similar to the baron and his retinue. They ran in rows of fifty or so, each line capped with a standard bearer. It was hard to see the colors in the weird green illumination of the sky and the pale light of the moons, but it seemed the banners were deep red, stitched with a black fist under a crescent moon. He wondered if the symbol represented the now-dead baron or Prince Hector.

Victor could hear Sarl and his lieutenants shouting orders in the courtyard, and he saw soldiers running about madly, unloading and carrying munitions to archers lining up on the southern parapet. He pushed forward, making room for a row of them behind him, noting the humming Energy in their bows, primed to fire with the magic of their Class abilities. Even with the losses the Ninth suffered earlier that day, nearly six hundred defenders were in the keep. Did these thousand attackers think they could take the castle with such a garrison? Were

they suicidal? He remembered Porter's words to the baron, remembered how he'd seemed fiercely loyal. Perhaps he was suicidal. Perhaps the troops he was leading didn't know what they faced.

"He responded!" Valla's voice called from his left. He turned and looked at her, running toward him with Edeya's Farscribe book clutched under one arm.

"Borrius?"

"Yes! He's sent the fifth cohort, fully mounted. They're swinging out to the east and will flank the attackers."

"Shit. These guys don't know what they're in for if they attack the keep . . ." As he spoke, Victor watched the charging enemy come to a sudden halt. No horns blew, no drums sounded, but they all stopped running at nearly the same instant—an awesome exemplar of unit cohesion. They paused for a few seconds, and then, as though they'd heard every word Valla had just said, they turned to their right, the east, and began to run in that direction, every single one of them.

"Are they . . ." Valla trailed off, so Victor finished for her.

"Charging our reinforcements." He turned, pushed his way to the parapet on the courtyard side, and shouted down, "Sar! We have to get out there, or the fifth cohort is going to be wiped out!"

Book 6: Chapter 14: For the Love of Battle

"Are you mad? We have no mounts! We'll be caught flatfooted, outnumbered, fools for their feint!" Sarl's face betrayed the conflict he felt, standing up to Victor, a man to whom he owed so much.

"They aren't feinting, Sar! They must have scouts or magic or . . . something! They must know that the fifth cohort is coming around from the east. They'll crush them, just as you fear they'll do to us! If we can catch them from behind, though . . ." Victor looked around at the lieutenants, at Valla and Kethelket, then back to Sarl. He hated how he sounded like he was pleading. He was the boss here, right? He supposed the problem was that part of him feared Sarl was right. He wasn't totally sure it was the right move to charge.

"But we can't catch them," Sarl sighed, his voice losing its edge, clearly troubled by the idea that another cohort was going to die out there without his troops' aid.

"We can catch up, though!" Victor felt his frustration mounting and heard the rumble in his voice as his rage began to seep into his pathways. "They'll smash into the fifth, probably do some damage, but we can get there in time to make a difference, to turn the tide."

“And if we march forth,” Kethelket interjected, “gain some distance from the keep, and they turn to charge us? You saw how fast they run! We don’t know how close the fifth is. They could be an hour or two distant.”

Victor stood straight, squared his shoulders, and looked at the dark sky. He inhaled deeply through his nose, and with its exhalation, he sent his doubts and frustrations into the air. While everyone watched him, waiting for his next words, he cleared his mind and listened to his instincts.

Everything in him said to summon Guapo and charge after the black-plated, pale warriors—the late Baron Eric’s reavers. With a calm, steady voice, he said, “Valla, you will ride with me. Bring the command Farscribe Book. Captain Yarsha isn’t responding to the messages we’ve sent to the fifth; perhaps they’re already fighting, and she can’t check her book, but you have yours, right, Sarl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will ride after the invaders, ensure they aren’t laying a trap for you, and Valla will send word via the Farscribe book. When you see the command to march, you will double-time it onto the field, and you will smash into the reavers. Get your troops ready to move.” Victor turned to the gate, hardly registering Sarl’s salute or the troubled look in his eyes—if Victor had to guess, the captain was worried that he’d burned a bridge with him by challenging his command in front of his soldiers. Victor was too stressed to think about it; it was a problem for a more peaceful night. He reached into his Core, pulling forth a ribbon of glory-attuned Energy, and summoned Guapo.

As the great Mustang burst into being, leaping out of the shimmering golden pool of Energy, Victor reached into his ring and pulled out the corpse of Baron Eric Gore Lust. The dead vampyr still gripped the smoky, evil, deadly-potent sword as it flopped onto the hard-packed gravel outside the gate. Valla and the others who’d been following behind gasped at the sudden reminder of what Victor had slain earlier that night.

“What are you . . .” Valla started to ask, but Victor was already acting, building the pattern for Honor the Spirits. The big, oddly bloodless corpse, clad in battered dark plate, and the wicked, probably living sword, flared with bright white flames, eliciting gasps and curses from the officers and soldiers nearby. The flames lingered longer than usual, flaring and surging as they consumed the man and the sword. The baron’s body was gone before the sword, almost as though it fought against the workings of the spell, but Victor’s spirit magic was strong, and with a final burst of brilliant white flames, it winked out of existence, and nothing but ghostly smoke remained.

Victor swung atop Guapo and held out a hand, hoisting Valla up behind him, and then he turned to Sarl. “Get them lined up and ready to march.” Guapo didn’t need him to kick his heels or flick any reins; he knew what Victor wanted, and he delivered, bursting into motion, streaking over the dark rolling hills, leaving a trail of golden sparks where his hooves struck the ground. Victor had ridden Guapo flat-out a few times, and he knew what he could do. Still, it brought a surge of adrenaline into his blood as the wind screamed past his face, and the moonlit countryside became a blur.

Valla squeezed her arms around his waist, burying her face in his back. Victor would have worried about her, wondering if she was afraid or angry, but he couldn't think of anything other than the idea that he had soldiers out there who needed him. He hadn't felt any pangs from his Battlemaster feat, but something told him he had to get out there, had to make a difference; those troops were coming to help him—how could he leave them to hang?

The wild ride through the dark proved mercifully short. After just a few minutes, they mounted a sizeable grassy hilltop with a solitary tree at its crest, and on the other side, all of Victor's questions and concerns came into focus. At his urging, Guapo slid to a halt, tearing up a deep furrow of sod, and Victor looked down into a wide, grassy meadow upon which hell was breaking loose. On the far side, perhaps three or five miles distant, he saw the fifth cohort, beset by massive wolf-like creatures in the hundreds. Nearer, still charging toward the fight, were the black-plated reavers. In a minute or less, they'd pile into the fight, and the fifth would surely be destroyed.

"Get off," he grunted.

"Victor . . ."

"Get down and tell Sarl to hurry." His voice had become a growl.

"Will there be any fifth left to save by the time . . ."

"Now, Valla!" Victor reached behind himself to nudge her with one big hand, pushing her to the side until she relented and slid off Guapo's back. "Wait here for the Ninth."

"Victor! I know I won't stop you from acting, but promise me you aren't going down there to die! Think about why you aren't taking me with you!" Valla's words were pleading and had taken a desperate edge. They gave him pause, and he looked down at her, into her beautiful eyes, and he resolved to talk to her about his feelings again, really talk to her, not just play around with hints and hugs.

"I'm not planning to die, Valla, but I have to slow those pendejos down." She nodded, taking the small victory, and with those final words, Victor summoned his banner and, almost simultaneously, cast Iron Berserk. As the brilliant light of his banner's sun burst into being, illuminating the hilltop like a fallen star, he exploded with furious Energy, and Guapo grew with him. Victor urged the Mustang forward and, responding to an instinct that ran deep in his blood, roared into the night, "Ancestors! Watch me fight these mother fuckers!"

Sized as he was to accommodate Victor's titanic form, Guapo devoured the distance between the hilltop and the charging reavers. As they tore over the grassy meadow, Victor pulled Lifedrinker free of her harness and held her high, ready to lay about himself with her smoldering blade. "Come on, boy!" he urged, willing the great Mustang to run even faster. As they thundered over the ground, everything became a blur, everything except the rear ranks of the reavers—the center of Victor's focus. In seconds, they were upon them, and then Guapo was trampling through them like a draft horse running through a schoolyard.

The reavers screamed and flailed as the Mustang smashed through them, crushing them to the ground and sending many more flying left and right, all while Victor's banner seemed to ignite their exposed, pale flesh. In the chaos, Victor could see smoke billowing out of helmets and the seams of dark armor, and he knew these reavers suffered even more than their late baron in his glorious light. He howled and roared, mad with wild battle lust as Guapo trampled through rank after rank. He cleaved left and right with his axe until he and his mount finally burst through the far side of the reavers' formation.

The Mustang had suffered many gashes and cuts in his passage, but he was snorting, prancing, neck arched in a proud display of resilience as he whirled and paced in front of the host of reavers, he and Victor the only obstacle between them and the beleaguered fifth cohort. Even so, the reavers had slowed their mad charge and taken pause to examine this new threat. Victor could see dozens of broken forms lying in Guapo's wake—victims of the mighty Mustang's hooves and Victor's vicious axe blows.

The idea that he was facing down nearly a thousand enemies filled him with mad battle lust, a hunger for glory that dwarfed anything he'd ever felt. Victor wanted to leap off Guapo's back and wade into the host, wanted to feel their bones and flesh breaking under the blade of his axe, and wanted to bathe in their blood and howl with their screams of defeat. Part of him was rational, though—part of him knew he would kill many of them, but that eventually, he'd run out of Energy, and they'd overwhelm him. As Guapo pranced in front of the army, up and down their front rank, as his banner bathed them in its light, forcing them to shrink back and shield their eyes, that lucid part of his mind urged him to shout, "I've killed your leaders. Will you be next?"

If he'd been hoping to send them running, he was disappointed—his words seemed to enrage them. Whatever bond they'd had with the baron was still there, or at least their loyalty to his faction had survived his death. Victor could feel them gathering their Energy, could see many of them, dozens, hundreds exploding with growth, taking on vampyr forms like the baron and some of his retinue had done. He saw weapons bursting into flames or limning with other kinds of Energy, from frost and lightning to acid. Some of those who shrank from his banner's light straightened up, shimmering with magical defenses, perhaps banking on killing Victor before their Energy ran out.

Victor saw that his shout hadn't cowed the horde, and his heart sang with the news—it was time to get bloody. He slid off Guapo's back and slapped a massive hand on the Mustang's shoulder. "Good boy. You did enough. Go recover in the Spirit Plane, and I'll call you again soon." The horse, part of Victor's spirit, nudged him with its muzzle, perhaps unwilling to leave him, but Victor chuckled and severed his connection, sighing deeply as the horse dispersed in a shimmering fog of golden Energy.

Victor turned to the horde of reavers and saw that the transformed creatures were starting to rush toward him, pushing past their smaller brethren. He could feel the gathering Energy of spells and knew the momentary standoff was nearly over. Soon he'd be surrounded, and though he was much larger and more powerful than these lesser vampyrs, he knew he couldn't hold off a thousand of them for long. As he hefted Lifedrinker in his fists, channeling rage-fueled Energy into his arms and into her, he grinned. "Hope you're hurrying, Sarl." The reavers and vampyrs screamed in a cacophonous frenzy and charged him.

Rather than meet the elite of their number as they shoved to the front ranks of the host, Victor bunched his legs and launched himself into the air, soaring over the first several ranks. Missiles of fire and ice, lightning and magma, acid and metal tore through the air at him. Many struck home,

but he shrugged them off. His mass, his durability, his armor, and his magical belt did much to mitigate the attacks. The damage that got through was quickly mended by his incredible ability to regenerate while Berserk. When he landed at the center of the armored reavers, none of whom were even half his size, he flattened one outright, and then he began madly hacking at the screaming horde.

Lifedrinker was ablaze with her own fury; her silvery blade was magma orange, and black smoke roiled in her wake. She split the reavers' enameled plate like it was made from porcelain. She burned their flesh and shattered their bones, and with each wide cleave Victor made, she left broken, writhing, screaming reavers lying and flailing on the ground. Victor felt impacts on his back, against his impossibly dense helmet, and from every other angle. He began to amass wounds on his legs and arms, and though he was seeing red and focused on slaughter, a corner of his mind suggested he seek more armoring if he meant to battle this way in the future.

The stray thought brought wild laughter out of him, and as blood showered up from a terrible cleave he laid into a reaver's chest, Victor wondered if there would be a future for him. Despite the broken mounds of enemies, despite the mist of their blood hanging thick in the air, the host of enemies stretched away from him in every direction. He was alone, and as fast as he could kill them, they kept coming. They, too, were wild with the desire to kill. They'd seen his devilish work, seen how he'd destroyed their comrades and boasted about killing their lord, and whatever else might be true about these invaders, they weren't cowards.

At some point, Victor summoned his mighty bear, fueling it with fear-attuned Energy, and the powerful beast gave him some respite, clearing one of his flanks, so he turned his back to the monstrous black bear with its indigo eyes. He listened to its roars and responded in kind, the two of them drowning out the din of the hundreds of reavers as they fought. When he'd summoned the totem, Victor had seen how his fear-attuned Energy was more prevalent in his Core than the others, so he decided to use it, throwing out waves of black terror with Project Energy. The effect varied, causing some reavers to flee, others to stand stunned, and others only to grimace in discomfort.

The transformed vampyrs were the least affected, and though Victor killed them in the dozens, they were the ones to leave the deepest, most painful wounds on Victor's flanks as they fought through their allies to get at him. He took spear stabs, axe wounds, crushing blows, and gashes everywhere he wasn't covered by Tes's amazing wyrm-scale armor. If not for that armor and his helmet, Victor knew the fight would have ended far sooner.

He did all he could to prolong his fight. He used Energy Charge to make space for himself, smashing through several ranks of reavers, crashing into a vampyr or large reaver with a devastating explosion of Energy, giving himself a brief break before more unwounded enemies filled the gaps. He used Titanic Leap to much the same effect; when he felt he had too many powerful enemies nearby, he'd jump away, smash into a distant section of the reaver horde, and work on those laggards for a while, slaughtering them while their stronger comrades worked through the ranks to get at him again.

So, the incredible, wild battle dragged on. Victor couldn't possibly count the number of reavers he slew, couldn't count the number of wounds he'd healed from. He knew he'd have a new patchwork of pale scars on his body if he managed to survive, but he was starting to believe that wouldn't be a concern—his Energy was running low. He could feel his rage waning along with the rest of his

affinities; he'd been trying to spread their usage, and he'd done a good job, but they were all drawing down, and he knew it was soon going to be over when his Titanic Leap would no longer activate.

In his blood-red vision, things seemed darker, and he wondered if it was a result of him losing so much blood; was he starting to fade? Then, it clicked when he saw that the reavers and vampyrs nearby weren't smoking and that their wounds were mending before his eyes—his banner had faded. Victor thought about trying to choke down a heart, an arachnid one from Zaafor, perhaps, or—he laughed madly at the idea—the Ridonne heart he'd ripped out not long ago. As his deep, insane laugh rumbled out of his blood-soaked face, some of the reavers in front of him shrank back, triggering more laughter from the titanic berserker.

“What fucking fun!” he roared, and then he forgot about his Energy; he forgot about his Core and his spells, and he began to dance in earnest. He felt Lifedrinker's joy in battle echoing his own, and the two of them began to move with a new kind of grace and rhythm. He moved with speed and power that was a pile of thermite burning next to the wax candles of the reavers. He wove between them, smooth and easy, ducking hacks and stabs and carrying with him a shard of death and destruction, leaving bloody bits and broken armor in his wake.

As the last of his rage burned up in his pathways, and his vision returned to normal, Victor found himself surrounded by vampyrs that were more massive than he and reavers he could no longer shove aside or fling about, but he didn't care. His laughter rang out as he continued his dance. In his joy of battle, he almost appreciated the wounds that no longer near-instantly healed. He relished the bloody, painful work of fighting, and he savored each hard-fought victory. Still, the injuries began to mount, his vigor began to fade, and he knew it was nearly his time to join Old Mother on the Spirit Plane.

“Good!” he screamed, proud of his efforts—surely Sarl and his foot soldiers were nearly there. Surely, they'd come in time to mop up this army of reavers and join with the fifth cohort. They'd see what he'd done. They'd tell stories of his last battle. Valla would be sad, but she'd be free. She'd live a great life, and maybe Victor would meet her in the next one. A huge vampyr smashed a spiked mace into his stomach, puncturing his vest with one of its long barbs, and it growled savagely as Victor's wind was knocked out.

“He fades! Kill him!” it screeched. Of course, those words brought more laughter from Victor; hadn't they been trying to kill him?

“Come on, you fucking pendejos!” He whirled, rolling his shoulder to the left, jerking the mace from the vampyr's grip, and then, with the weapon still hanging from his midriff, he continued his bloody dance between a pair of reavers. Lifedrinker took the head from one, and he kicked the other down to the torn, bloody sod. He whirled in a circle, swinging his wonderful axe in a wide arc, and the reavers and vampyrs hung back; they knew he was dying, but they also

knew he had what it would take to bring more of them with him. “Come on! You pinché rat fuckers!” he screamed, “Abuela! Ancestors!” Tears sprang into his eyes at the thought of his grandmother among the rest of his ancestors. “I’m coming to you!”

Is your bloody work over? I don’t think so, child of the Quinametzin. I am Chantico, brave son, and I lend you my strength and my fire. Stand tall among these undead fiends. Teach them what it means to corner a titan!

Book 6: Chapter 15: Ancestor's Fire

Kethelket gestured to the hillside bordering the western side of the vale, directing his thirty brothers and sisters to land next to the lone, armored woman. He recognized the shimmering scales and knew it was Valla. He wasn’t surprised to see her with sword in hand, staring into the narrow valley where her—their—leader was streaking over the grass on that magnificent mount of his. How fast it was! Even airborne, on wings and magic, he and his squadron couldn’t match its pace. The mad giant was charging directly toward the rear ranks of the reaver army, more than a thousand strong, and beyond them, Kethelket could see what had prevented the fifth cohort from responding to messages; they were beset by enormous hounds.

“It’s madness,” Rincella cried from his right as they descended toward Valla.

“Aye, a mad scene, indeed.” Valla looked up at the sound of their voices, and he called down, “Do I need to send word to Captain Sarl?”

She watched him and his folk land lightly on the grass, shaking her head. “I spoke to him through the book. He marches. How long will it take?”

“If they double-time? Over these hills, maintaining some semblance of order? Half an hour? Three quarters?” Kethelket shrugged. He wasn’t an expert on foot soldier speeds.

“That’s what I feared, and look.” Valla pointed as Victor’s incredible charge neared the enemy ranks. Kethelket held his breath, wondering if the madman would veer at the last instant, taunting the enemies, trying to get them to slow or chase him. He heard Valla’s intake of breath as she, too, braced, watching the distant figure and trail of sparks his horse threw up in its wake.

“Gods!” she cried as he smashed right into the charging reavers, trampling through them. The explosive impact took a heartbeat to reach them, and in that gap, Kethelket looked at Valla, wondering where she’d taken the strange habit of invoking gods. Then the sounds of crashing metal, screaming men and women, and the thunderous roars of the mad titan echoed up the slope to them, and those wondering thoughts were chased from Kethelket’s mind as he watched the incredible, giant mount smash through the entire formation of reavers.

Gasps, cheers, curses, and various other exclamations broke out among the Naghelli flanking him and Valla. “I yearn to join him, but we’d be slain. There are too many; we’d be swarmed.” His

words weren't only for Valla; he knew some of his kin would want to join the titan in his madness. "His size gives him mobility among their host that we could not match."

"I know, but I won't stand here and watch him die. I hope he's in control of his rage. He's seemed so much better lately, but tonight . . . tonight he seemed different."

"Lord," one of his men said, forgetting that he was no longer a true prince, "will we not at least join the cavalry on the far side of the vale? There, we may make a difference against those giant hounds."

"Good question, Givahn. Yes. Go. Rincella, you will lead these thirty to aid the fifth cohort. I will stay with Tribune ap'Yensha."

The dark Naghelli lifted her fist to her heart and leaped into the air, her shadowy wings with their amber markings streaking into the sky as the rest of the thirty flew after her. Kethelket watched them, trusting they'd be wise enough to avoid death among their soil-bound comrades. Quick strikes, feints, and retreats were the order of the night—Rincella knew as much.

"You don't have to stay with me."

"No, but I will." Kethelket followed Valla's gaze to the giant, now riding his bloodied, prancing mount to and fro before the line of reavers who'd come to a halt and were cringing in the light of his enormous, blazing banner. "You wish you were with him."

"Of course!" Valla spat the words, and Kethelket's suspicions that she saw more in Victor than a leader began to deepen.

"He can break free. His size and speed . . ."

"I know." Valla sighed in frustration, turning to look back toward the west, perhaps trying to spy some sign of Sarl's troops.

"On a positive note, it seemed the fifth cohort was holding their own against those giant hounds. With my squad of Naghelli aiding them, they may prevail while Victor delays these reavers. Ancestors!" His outburst came as Victor slid from his mount, sending it away, and then charged into the thick of the reaver army with explosive force. More sounds of smashing metal and screaming soldiers echoed over the hillsides. "Did he actually dismiss his mount?"

"It doesn't surprise me." Valla now sounded resigned, though her eyes darted about, following Victor's movements, and her breaths were slow, each one held until her body forced her to exhale and take a new one. Kethelket watched the giant and realized he didn't seem so gigantic anymore; many of the reavers, hundreds of them, had exploded with their own growth, taking on vampyric forms like the baron and his kin they'd met earlier in the night. "Shit!" Valla cried, using

one of the strange legate's favorite curses. "Some of those vampyrs are nearly his size!"

"He's far mightier than they, however." Kethelket tried to sound reassuring, but she was correct; there were so many of the creatures. How could he hope to win? He attempted to answer his own question, "They can't match his explosive power and speed, his ability to leap great distances. He merely bides his time, tormenting and slaying many of them. Without question, he'll fight free before he succumbs to their numbers, and, hopefully, he'll have delayed them long enough for Sarl to come."

"Yes." Valla looked up at him, gratitude in her eyes; she knew he was trying to reassure her. "If I didn't think it would be a distraction, if I didn't think I'd be overrun in minutes, I'd charge down there."

"As would I, Lady Valla. If there were but a hundred for me to slay, I would try it." Kethelket rested his hand on the pommel of his off-hand blade, Gevel, and listened to the hunger in her song as it trilled through the bones of his palm. She wanted to fight, but then, she always wanted to fight. Valla didn't respond, and Kethelket allowed his mouth to rest while his eyes followed the mad, beautiful dance of destruction the titanic legate wove among the reavers. At this distance, it was hard to see details, but he could see the orange streak of his massive axe as it ripped, smashed, and tore among the reavers and the dark mist that clouded the air in its wake—smoke and blood.

Victor smashed through row upon row of the reavers, never standing still long enough for them to pile on. Still, it was clear he took wounds, and Kethelket couldn't imagine the kind of Energy he had coursing through his pathways to mend him so quickly. Aside from his rapid healing, he was unfathomably sturdy. Kethelket saw spears, driven by large, powerful men, strike the giant's legs and fail to penetrate enough to find purchase, falling away or shattering under the sweeps of Victor's axe.

"He's like an iron colossus."

"He's a true titan while Berserk; his bloodline is rich. Still, he bleeds, Kethelket, and the spells he weaves to bolster himself take a toll. He's been fighting too long, been cut so many times. If not for his armor . . ."

"Such armor. Yours is the same?"

"Not the same, but crafted by the same artisan."

"Wonderful stuff. Might I know the name of . . ."

"Not now, sir." Valla's words were clipped, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the battle below, and Kethelket felt a fool for trying to make small talk about

armor while such a great man battled for his life. In the hope of redeeming himself, he launched into the air and turned to the west, scanning the hillsides. Sure enough, perhaps a mile distant, he saw the lights of the ninth cohort, the Glorious Ninth, as Victor had styled them.

He quickly descended, announcing as he did, “I see the Ninth—only a mile distant.”

“A mile over shrub-covered hillsides. Ten minutes, maybe? An eternity for Victor. Ancestors, damn it! Why doesn’t he break free? Look at how he slows . . .” her voice rose in a near-panic, “Oh no! His banner!” Kethelket saw what she meant—the blazing light of Victor’s glorious banner had winked out. Valla jerked her sword up, pulling its point from the sod, and began to jog down the hill. Kethelket hurried after her and grabbed her by the shoulder, darting back as she reflexively lashed out at him. “Unhand me!”

“Lady! Hold! Use your reason—would Victor want you to charge now? Would you even be able to get near him? Hundreds of reavers stand between us and him! Surely, he has a plan! Surely, he doesn’t want to die this night.”

“He . . .” Valla stopped pulling, some of the anger fading from her eyes, bright moisture pooling there to take its place. “He’s not so easy to predict! Something comes over him when he’s fighting—he loves it. His heart, his spirit, there’s so much conflict there! Rage, fear, glory, inspiration! It’s what he is, he’s . . . I can’t see him running, dammit!”

“He still battles, despite the banner’s fading, by all the dead and the spirits that claw at the gates, look! He’s no longer a giant, yet he fights on!” Kethelket pointed, and Valla, perhaps accepting that she couldn’t get to Victor in time to make a difference, joined him in his appreciation of Victor’s prowess. He was remarkable; the skill he showed among that host of enemies was the seed of a legend being born. Kethelket might fight so beautifully against a single foe, a dance of skill and grace with his two living blades, but he couldn’t hope to move that way among a horde of clamoring armored enemies. He’d be overrun, unable to find or create the gaps to move about like Victor did.

“He’s gotten so good with that axe. He’s making fools of them. Look how he ducks and weaves—I taught him that one!”

“I pray he’ll win free so I may yet spar with him.” Kethelket’s voice was hushed, watching how Victor, just a dark shadow at this distance in the moonlight, moved among the reavers and vampyrs, large and small, his glowing axe hacking limbs off, smashing skulls, and ripping in wide arcs, spraying steaming blood in misting clouds. “He truly is like a dancer . . .”

Every so often, Victor would explode with light and speed, ripping through more of the reavers, thunderously colliding with an enemy, and driving the hordes back with the concussion of his

impact. Now, after just such a move, Victor paused, leaning on his axe, and, in the bright, green-tinted moonlight, Kethelket could see his shoulders heaving up and down with his inhalations—the man was exhausted. He knew if he were closer, he'd see that he was covered with wounds, that he was dark with blood, and that he must be near the end.

He glanced at Valla, saw tears streaking her cheeks, and turned to the west to see that the Ninth was close, cresting a hilltop only a quarter of a mile distant. "I will go to him. I'll try to pull him free; fly off with him!" Valla's eyes focused on him, and she nodded emphatically, something like desperate hope springing to life in them. Kethelket leaped into the air, streaking toward the army and the lone, heroic warrior at their center. He'd only covered half the distance when it seemed like Victor burst into flames.

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Is your bloody work over? I don't think so, child of the Quinametzin. I am Chantico, brave son, and I lend you my strength and my fire. Stand tall among these undead fiends. Teach them what it means to corner a titan!

At his ancestor's words, Victor's eyes began to smolder with deep, yellow-orange flames, and his vision took on a bright, yellow tint. He felt a warmth in his belly, an echo of the fire in his chest where his breath Core smoldered. At first, it was an echo, but as the reavers closed in, overcoming their fear of Lifedrinker's edge, ready to finish him, the fire in his belly grew hot, turned into an inferno, and then exploded through his body.

His pathways blazed with the Energy, and Victor arched his back, screaming his enthusiasm for the fire, welcoming it as it invigorated his tired muscles and fueled his body's healing. Victor's dozens—hundreds—of wounds were cauterized on the spot, sealed beneath hot, new flesh, and, though the fiery Energy wasn't compatible with his Core, and he struggled to bend it to his will, to push it into his spell patterns, Victor could feel his breath Core yearning for it, could feel it pulsing and throbbing, aching to absorb that hot Energy.

Had his ancestor known that he had an affinity for magma, for fire? Had she known about his breath Core? Had she gifted him this Energy for that use or simply to heal and revitalize him? Victor began to dance again, moving with grace and power, slipping blows, hacking limbs, and weaving between his many, many foes. All the while, he felt that fire burning, felt his breath Core yearning, and he wished he knew how to bring them together. Could he solve the puzzle before he was overwhelmed? Did it matter? He'd slain so many! Surely, his ancestors were proud. Surely, he'd left his mark on this world. Sarl must be close—the fifth cohort would be saved, and Rellia would have her foothold in these lands.

Valla . . . Valla would be proud of him, though she'd be angry at first. He was angry that he wouldn't hold her again, and that thought made Victor turn more of his attention to his pathways, to his breath Core. "What's the fucking deal?" he growled, shouldering aside a massive Vampyr and hacking down with Lifedrinker, carving a groove through its femur as he danced around it and spun, cleaving in an arc, driving back several reavers. Even with half his attention pointed inward, he and Lifedrinker were making fools of these pendejos.

He'd looked at his pathways so many times that he didn't need to look now to know how they traversed his body. They rose from his Core to his head and out to his arms and hands. They went down from his Core to his legs and his feet. They branched into little tributaries that touched different parts of his body—his heart, his lungs, his . . .” Victor paused, and he felt like a spark had ignited in his brain. His lungs . . . his “breath” Core . . . Victor exerted his will, gathering all the Energy in his pathways and pushing it, driving it into the pathways that went to his lungs, driving it harder and harder until he forced new openings like he had in his hands.

He was a man, a titan, and he was used to doing things with his hands. He directed his magic with his hands, and he pulled it in through his hands. Humans and titans didn't naturally have a breath Core; they didn't naturally pull or push their magic with their lungs. “Time to change that!” Victor roared as he split the head of yet another reaver. Lifedrinker screamed with fury and pleasure, excited to still be fighting, proud of Victor for finding a second wind. Victor pushed the fiery magic in his pathways into his lungs, and then, with a deep inhalation, he willed it to flow into his breath Core.

He'd never felt anything like what happened next. It was, for lack of a more eloquent analogy, orgasmic. Pure pleasure radiated through his being as his breath Core swelled, as it split a shell Victor didn't know had held it, and it expanded, flaring like a miniature, fiery sun, sending heat through his body. Victor felt his chest swell as he inhaled, felt his breath ignite, and savored the feeling. It was like all his life he'd been breathing something dead and lifeless, and now he had a living, dancing, raging wind in his lungs, and it wanted out.

Whatever fiery magic his ancestor had sent into him, Victor knew it was potent beyond his means, something epic and magnificent, something not meant for the world of Fanwath. The gift brought tears to his eyes as he realized what he'd received, as he tasted the life the flames had filled him with. He spread his arms wide, expanding his chest as he strained to fill himself with as much air as possible, savoring the pleasure as his Core continued to ignite it, as he swelled with the potent flames of his ancestor. His inaction encouraged the reavers and vampyrs, and they began to creep close, weapons and claws raised. Then Victor exhaled, and the world burst into flames.

Fire streamed out of Victor's mouth like water from a fire hose. It cooked the flesh off the reavers before him in a thirty-foot cone, blackened their bones, and reduced them to ash. Victor wasn't done—he turned in a circle, blowing that terrible, wonderful, awful yellow-white fire in a circular cone, utterly destroying hundreds of reavers and vampyrs. He wasn't sure if it was the potency of the fire his ancestor gave him or a particular weakness to fire, but his enemies crumbled before his efforts, and the ones outside his cone, who only felt the heat of his flames, fell back, scrabbling to get away from him.

By the time he'd turned full circle and the awesome fire had fled his breath Core, Victor stood at the center of an enormous black circle of smoldering corpses. The reaver host was in disarray as they fought over each other to put more distance between themselves and the one who'd breathed the

fury of a sun onto the battlefield. Victor lifted Lifedrinker high, and he roared his enthusiastic thanks, praising his ancestors with an ululating, howling scream. The reavers were broken, their will to fight demolished by the display of destruction, and that's how the Glorious Ninth found them as they charged down the slope and smashed into them with Valla and Kethelket at the center of their front rank.

Book 6: Chapter 16: Masters of the Axe

Lesh'ro'zellan sat by his solitary campfire, and he contemplated. Campfire was a generous term for the handful of smoldering coals and hot rocks. He sat upon a partially petrified log, more stone than wood, and he gently caressed the smooth, polished handle of Belagog, his cudgel. His mind was in turmoil, his usual drive blunted, his heart and soul torn, and his contempt and hatred of the System soared to new heights. Things had been going well until earlier that night. He'd been set to isolate and slay Victor, had been ready to call him out and challenge his honor, sure the warrior would take the bait. That had been before Lesh saw him breathe fire that would give even a full-blooded dragon pause.

"A breath Core! A mighty breath Core. And the System wants me to slay him? For what?" Lesh spat into the coals, watched his saliva sizzle, and tried to contemplate his options. It had taken him more than a month to catch up to Victor's army. He'd stalked them—no small feat with those shadowy flying scouts—for further weeks, and then, when they'd finally crossed that damnable frozen pass, he'd used every trick in his bag to slip by their encampment to follow the titan-blood further into these new lands.

It had been a surprise when the System offered him the conquest quest. Still, it explained why Victor had come to these lands with his army. Lesh hunkered down over his coals, adjusting his mottled gar viper cloak, peering out through the voluminous hood at the sickly mists that fought to cover the tiny island of warmth his coals created. Without the cloak, he'd have been spotted several times by the titan's scouts, but it hid him well, and thus far, he'd managed to avoid slaying any of the soldiers that followed the giant warrior.

After he'd witnessed the epic battle between Victor and an entire army of undead, Lesh hadn't felt right about piling on. He hadn't thought it would be an honorable way to gain victory. Only a fool would presume that Lesh would jump upon a beleaguered rival, only a fool who didn't understand Lesh's pride, his honor, and his determination to be the best. Could he claim such if he had to fight his enemy when he was near death, surrounded by a horde of enemies? No, if anything, Lesh had been tempted to aid the berserker. He'd been tempted to try to fight to the center of those undead warriors, hoist the battered human, and fight free, giving him a chance to recover—before Lesh challenged him, of course.

That was putting aside the feelings that had begun to roil in Lesh's chest as he watched Victor battle, though. He'd never seen such a contest, such a desperate battle that seemed so hopeless yet dragged on, one new surprise after another. He'd never seen someone, not even his mentor, Thov'kinal'rovessi, fight so artfully, so gracefully while surrounded by so many enemies. It was clear that Victor was made for war, made for the battlefield. He'd never looked afraid, never seemed discouraged or weary, even when he'd been drenched in his own blood and covered with wounds, one arm hanging limply by his side, the axe warrior had worn a grin, his eyes shining with

excitement—eagerness. Then he'd breathed fire, such fire, that when it ended, Lesh had been surprised to find himself kneeling, mouth agape in awe.

"And the System wants me to kill this man?" He snorted, reached down, and poked at the coals with one long, black claw, shifting away some ash to expose the red heat. "No. Not yet, at least. I think I'll watch this man for a while longer. I think I might try to puzzle out why you want him dead. Do you hear me, System?" Lesh spat again, hawking up phlegm from deep in his throat. He doubted the gods-damned System listened to him—doubted it would spare him a thought until he'd done its bidding. Still, it felt good to voice his disdain, his bitterness. Watching his mucus bubble on the coals, a new thought occurred to him. "Do you want him dead, or do you want me dead?"

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Victor stood at the center of his blasted wasteland, the remains of corpses and molten armor steaming and smoking in a wide circle around him as the Glorious Ninth smashed into the remnants of the reaver army. He was tired; the breath attack he'd pulled off had been exhilarating, incredible, but it had pulled all of his ancestor's Energy out of him, leaving him standing at the epicenter with just his slowly replenishing Core to sustain him. He could still fight, but hadn't he done his share? He chuckled at the idea, lifting Lifedrinker to rest on his shoulder while he watched Sarl's troops use their discipline and fresh reserves of Energy to dominate the battlefield.

He wasn't surprised when, amid the screaming fighters, crashing weapons and shields, and explosions of Energy, he saw Valla dancing through the combat toward him. She ran on gusts of wind that sparkled with bursts of lightning, and soon she was before him, concern in her eyes as she looked him up and down. They stood in an area of relative calm; the remaining reavers seemed to want to avoid the place he'd burned to ash, and the Ninth was driving them further west, away from the scene of his one-man war. "Are you all right?"

In answer, Victor smiled and shrugged, pleased that most of his wounds had been mended by his ancestor's fire. "Thanks to my ancestor."

"You're an asshole!" Valla growled, and Victor, probably angering her further, couldn't help laughing.

"I'm rubbing off on you!"

"You were going to fight to the death!" Valla didn't look amused, standing before him, lightning dancing behind her eyes, Midnight naked in her hands, held ready, almost like she meant to swing the dark blade at him.

"I don't know about that . . . I had some hope that my ancestors might step in. You heard me call out to them when I charged."

"Some hope," Valla growled and leaned close to him, her face livid beneath the eyeholes of her helmet. "And if they chose not to aid you? If you died on this field, you were okay with that? No thought of retreat? No thought of me?"

“I thought of you. You were in my mind the whole time.” Victor frowned. What more could he say but the truth?

“I was?”

“Yeah, of course. I was . . .” Victor sighed and turned, looking to where the Ninth was driving the reavers, further and further westward, toward the fifth cohort. He couldn’t see it from where he stood, but he hoped the Naghelli and the cavalry had been able to hold their own against the giant wolves. He hoped they’d come together and smash the remains of the reavers. He looked back at Valla; the noise of combat had lessened, and they were, surprisingly, quite alone. “I was full of regret.” He reached a hand, caked in dried blood, to her chin and tilted her face toward him. Her eyes were brimming with tears—relief, frustration, anger, fear? Victor didn’t know, but he thought they were beautiful. He leaned toward her and softly said, “I wished I’d at least kissed you.”

To his relief and immeasurable delight, she didn’t pull away, didn’t say anything. He touched his lips—probably disgusting to her, covered in blood and gore—to hers. It was a simple gesture, a soft pressure, nothing overly amorous, but it meant everything to Victor. Her lips were soft and warm, and she pressed them into his, and when he pulled back, she leaned toward him, eyes hungry. When he continued to straighten, though, she smiled with a corner of her mouth and said, “If you think that gets you out of trouble, think again.”

“Nah. What would I do with myself if I was out of trouble? I wouldn’t know how to act.” He looked inward to his Core, saw that he’d regenerated nearly a fourth of his Energy, and said, “Come on, let’s go help them finish this. I think I have enough in me to summon my banner again.”

Victor called Guapo using inspiration-attuned Energy, and the Mustang burst into being from a simmering, white-gold mist. He was beautiful, with brilliant, blazing eyes, a tawny coat, and a long, flowing white mane. Victor hopped onto his back and pulled Valla up behind him. Then, as they charged toward the ongoing battle, he summoned his banner. If they’d been winning before, driving the reavers across the meadow, when the soldiers felt Victor’s presence and the effect of the sun blazing over his shoulder, they truly began to slaughter the exhausted reavers and vampyrs.

Victor rode wherever he saw clusters of the huge gray vampyrs still putting up a fight, and when his banner’s light touched them, the soldiers of the Glorious Ninth bore them down, hacked them to pieces, and continued on to the next. Soon, the two cohorts came together, and Victor got his first good look at the pony-sized wolves that had been holding the cavalry in check. Their corpses littered the field, yet those that survived fought on mindlessly, rage in their eyes, and Victor saw that they, too, were undead; bones showed through their ragged fur, and the flesh, as often as not, was missing from their snouts, leaving their fangs exposed in perpetual snarls.

Once Sarl’s troops provided some relief and took the pressure off their flank, the fifth began to put their mounts to use, breaking free, whirling, and charging into the enemy’s exposed flanks. In just minutes, a strange calm fell over the blood-soaked meadow until, in the relative silence of soldiers

catching their breath and the coughing wheezes of the dying, cheers began to break out, and the men and women of Fanwath celebrated another, hard-fought victory.

Sarl and Yarsha, the captain of the fifth cohort, began to bark orders, and their lieutenants passed them around, and soon, the field was busy with squads combing the piles of bodies for survivors and collecting their dead comrades. Other units began to pile the undead, stripping them of weapons, jewelry, and pieces of armor—many of the reavers still wore plate that was largely intact, and there wasn't any denying its fine craftsmanship. With the soldiers performing after-combat activities, the System must have decided the battle was over because a sea of golden Energy motes began gathering in the little valley, and the soldiers' cheering started again.

Victor, still sitting atop Guapo, his banner blazing at the center of the bloody field, felt Valla's arms tighten around his waist, and she said, "I think I should hold onto you; maybe some of the ocean of Energy coming your way will bleed into me."

"Hah! If the System would let me, I'd be happy to share."

"I know you would." She squeezed him harder, and Victor felt a different kind of warmth ignite in his chest, right next to his breath Core. He savored the feeling for a few moments, but then a cascade of Energy unlike anything he'd felt before washed over him, and he was made insensate, lost to the world, as rivers of golden light poured into him from all corners of the battlefield, lifting him into the air like a rising star, blazing in the night. Victor's consciousness departed his physical form for a while, a sensation not unlike when he'd advanced his race and had visions of his ancestral past.

This was different, though; he didn't have the feeling that he was traveling anywhere, be it through space or time. Instead, he felt like he was hovering between places, on the edge of universes or planes of existence. He felt presences nearby, beings he could barely comprehend as such and whom he could not fully fathom. In a way, it felt like he was being looked at, studied, and perhaps judged. He didn't feel threatened—just as he couldn't fully grasp those entities, he felt they couldn't entirely interact with him. He was being glimpsed through a veil, and, in his titanic pride, bursting with Energy as he was, he shrugged and willed them to know that he didn't give a shit.

Victor had the immediate impression that some of the entities departed. He felt the ones that lingered more strongly and, in the less crowded space, became aware that they were struggling with each other, a contest of wills nearly beyond his comprehension. As he hung there, suspended in that weird in-between, nothing but angles of light and strange swirling patterns to occupy his mind, the entities around him winked out, one by one, until he felt the looming presence of only one being. As if through a great tunnel, echoing and vibrating with the passage, a voice came to him. Despite its odd, reverberating nature, it was masculine and powerful, and it said, "I am Golgothaz, and I am pleased with your axe dance, young warrior."

Victor opened his mouth and tried to respond, to at least say thank you, but he couldn't form the words. The voice came to him again, "Do not try to speak; you haven't the will to make your voice heard in this place. I can read your intent: you desire to give me thanks. Instead, I will thank you—when we masters of the axe felt your contest and your breakthrough, we watched your dance, and it was entertaining. Great spans of time often pass betwixt the occasions when I might consider

myself entertained. I will give you my blessing, a mark upon your soul. It will help you to shape a destiny of true mastery with your weapon. Good hunting, young warrior!”

As the voice faded, Victor saw a point of light pierce the strange fabric of the place he hung in, and then it lanced forth, searing into Victor’s chest. It was painful but nothing close to the worst thing he’d ever felt, and as the burning sensation began to fade, so too did the limbo he hung in. Bright lights filled his vision, and Victor found himself lying on his back in the bloody grass of the battlefield, hundreds of soldiers encircling him, watching with rapt attention as he struggled to sit up. Valla was nearby, and she spoke, but her words didn’t register—Victor’s attention was on the System messages that filled his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 55 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! Your mastery of the axe has advanced: Epic.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Breath Core has evolved beyond the seed stage. It is now an active Core.*****

*****Congratulations! Your Breath Core has advanced to Base 5.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new Class Feat: Battlefield Presence.*****

*****Battlefield Presence: Your Battlemaster Class has allowed you to expand your presence on the battlefield. Any aura, bolstering, or debilitating effect that you radiate will affect an area twice as large as normal.*****

As he finished reading the messages, a slow smile spreading on his face, Victor became aware of the cheering of the soldiers surrounding him. They were chanting, stomping their feet, and smashing weapons against shields as they thundered, “Victor! Victor! Victor!”

Victor leaped to his feet and saw that Sarl, Kethelket, and Captain Yarsha stood nearby. Of course, right next to him was Valla, and she wore a bit of a frown, probably annoyed that he’d ignored whatever she’d been trying to say to him when he snapped out of his trance. He reached down to rest a hand on her shoulder, then he snatched Lifedrinker out of her harness and held her high. Of course, the axe was happy to put on a show, bursting into furious yellow-orange heat, igniting the air around her blade, and sending black smoke into the night. The soldiers’ cheers grew louder and more frenzied.

Victor turned slowly, making eye contact with as many soldiers as he could, and then he brought the axe down next to his side, and the cheering died down. The soldiers wanted to hear him, and Victor couldn’t deny them. He felt terrific, fully replenished by the post-battle Energy, his high affinity allowing his body to make instant use of it, healing his wounds, banishing his fatigue, and replenishing his Core. More than that, he was exuberant about his gains, about having his ancestors act through him, and, most of all, about being alive with Valla by his side.

“That was a hell of a battle!” he roared. He probably could have said anything—announced he loved warm tortillas or that cold beer was best, and the troops would have gone mad with more cheering. In any case, they screamed their bloodlust and their pride, and Victor basked in it, fed off it, and nearly cast Iron

Berserk and summoned his banner, but he saw the fatigue on the officers' faces, and he felt Valla reach up to grip his thumb with her cold fingers, and he knew not everyone was as fresh and full of joy as he.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker and brought her down, and again, the soldiers ceased their raucous cheering. "I'm proud of you, soldiers! We've surely put a dent in the invaders' armies. That said, we need to get back to the keep we captured. We need to secure this land, and we need to make plans for how we'll keep up this momentum. Listen to your captains, your lieutenants, and your sergeants."

He turned, figuring he'd summon Guapo and ride back to the keep with Valla, but some brave soldier shouted, "We love you, Legate!" Victor turned, trying to find the speaker, but he couldn't make him out. He saw many eager faces meeting his gaze, many soldiers who looked ready to claim ownership of the words, so he sighed and smiled.

"Do you think I'd face down a thousand reavers for men and women I didn't care about? You're my soldiers, and I'm here to fight with you every inch of the way to that bastard green star! I'll never leave any of you hanging. If I'm the only backup I can bring, then dammit, I'll be there." The soldiers erupted in cheering again, and Victor gave up trying to calm them. They'd settle down when he wasn't around. He summoned Guapo, and after the glorious Mustang burst out of his puddle of sparkling Energy, he mounted and reached down a hand for Valla.

"Where will you go?" Sarl asked, shouting to be heard over the din.

"Meet you at the keep!" Guapo began to walk, and the soldiers made way for him, those close by reaching out to run their fingers over the great stallion's silky coat as he passed.

"You need a bath," Valla said as they finally broke free of the clamoring soldiers, and Victor urged the Mustang into a trot.

Victor twisted in the saddle and looked into her eyes. "Yeah. I'll set my house up in the courtyard and take one. Maybe you should join me." She looked down, and if the light were a bit brighter, he might have seen her pale blue skin darkening. She didn't say no, though, so Victor's grin broadened, and Guapo began to gallop.

Book 6: Chapter 17: A Full Life

When Victor and Valla dismounted from Guapo, she ran over to Uvu, who, uncharacteristically, was still lying in the same spot near the courtyard gates where Victor had last seen him. He patted Guapo's shoulder and sent the spirit totem back to his realm, then stood there, pondering Valla and her giant cat. Could he do anything to help the creature?

Sarl had left fifty soldiers to hold the fort—a risky number, but he'd obviously not wanted to arrive short-handed to help Victor and the fifth cohort. The watch commander, a young Shadeni lieutenant, had greeted Victor and Valla at the gates and, after asking about the battle's outcome, had returned to patrolling the ramparts. Now Victor stood alone, trying to decide if he should set up his travel

home or speak to Valla. He'd been on such a high when they rode back toward the keep, rich with the endorphins of post-battle Energy, victory, and the hope of amorous activities—at last!—with Valla. Things weren't so clear now.

His feet crunched on the gravel-strewn cobbles as he approached her and the big cat. He saw dark smears in her hair where it had come loose during combat. The bottom edges hanging beneath her helmet had soaked up some of the blood that had splashed her way. Her armor, however, glimmered in the moonlight, shiny and fresh-looking, the enchantments having mended the damage and cleaned away the gory residue of battle. She knelt beside Uvu, who lay on his side, a listless look in his saucer-sized eyes as he made odd cat grumbles. "He's no better?"

"Something ails him. Something clouds my connection to him." She looked up at him, and he saw her eyes brimming with unshed tears. Her voice was thick with emotion, and Victor could hear the strain in it; her earlier relief at his survival and the army's victory had fled before a renewed concern for Uvu.

"There's nothing stuck in his wounds? I mean, under the scars, a bit of the creature's harpoons, maybe?"

"Nothing I can feel. I used an expensive healing salve; I've seen it pull broken arrows from a soldier's ribs."

"Huh. If it's not physical . . ." Victor knelt beside her, Uvu's forelegs between them. He held out a hand toward the big cat's nose, and the beast lifted his head, snuffled at it for a moment, then dropped his chin to the ground and closed his eyes, apparently comfortable enough with Victor's presence. "Let me see here." Victor thought about when Thayla had been infected, overtaken, really, by Belikot's spirit. He remembered how he'd been able to force that spirit out of her and back into the skull where he'd locked it away. Could Uvu have a similar affliction of his spirit?

He leaned forward and rested his hand, palm down, on Uvu's side. As the cat inhaled and exhaled and Victor felt his ribs moving up and down, he closed his eyes and turned his mind inward toward his pathways and his Cores. He could see them both now, his Cores. The multi-colored constellation of his primary Core outshone his fiery breath Core, but it was there, smoldering comfortably, a single orb north, in his weird mental sense of direction, of his spirit Core. His pathways ran between them and outward, like highways ready for the powerful traffic of his Energy. He traced the one that led out through his arm and hand to the opening, where it met with Uvu's flesh.

As he'd done with Thayla, Victor sent a trickle of Energy through that pathway, some inspiration because, of all his Energies, he felt it was the most benign. He let it pour forth from his hand, tracing over Uvu's flesh, seeking an opening into the cat's pathways. Did animals have them? Victor didn't know, but he assumed they must. Hadn't Valla told him that Uvu was an "evolved" creature? Did they not use Energy like people? Before he could doubt himself further, his probing Energy found an opening. He should have guessed where it was—in Uvu's mouth. Thinking about it, he didn't doubt the cat had openings in his paws, too, but it didn't matter; Victor had found what he needed.

He sent his Energy gently probing into that opening, into the wide, straight pathway that led from Uvu's mouth toward his Core. He wondered at the ease with which he did so; Uvu didn't resist at all. Could he? Victor would think so, would assume the cat's will, in his own body, should have been difficult to overcome. Had he recognized a friendly touch? Was his will too taxed? As Victor's inspiration-attuned Energy progressed, his mind's eye became aware of everything it touched. He saw Uvu's Energy pathway; he saw how wide and simple it was, not convoluted and twisting like his own. It was a highway straight to his Core, which Victor could see like a smoldering campfire in the distance, a dim light down a dark road. "What kind of Energy is that, hermano?"

He heard Valla say something, but her words didn't register. Victor was too focused and too intrigued by what he was seeing. He let his Energy progress, probing toward that distant Core, exploring the pathway, illuminating it. Victor felt no traces of Uvu's Energy. Shouldn't there be some in there? Victor's pathways were never totally empty. As his consciousness pressed on, he soon began to realize that Uvu's Core wasn't exactly smoldering, as he'd first thought. He'd seen the sensation of flickering or pulsing, but the closer he got, the more he realized that it was the result of something moving about the Core, something dark and gray, something translucent that let the light of Uvu's Energy through, but not clearly.

"Ah, I see what that fucking thing did!" he hissed as he pushed his Energy further, nearly at the cat's Core now.

"What is it?" Valla asked, her voice loud and clear, impossible for Victor to ignore.

Before he got too engrossed with what he knew he had to do, Victor answered her, "There's something around Uvu's Core. Give me a minute to fight with it." That said, Victor released his hold on his own Core; he let the trickle of Energy he'd sent into the cat swell into a torrent, and he pushed it forth with all the strength and determination of his prodigious will. His body began to glow with a white-gold aura, and then Uvu's did as well. He knew why the cat hadn't resisted his initial intrusion; he couldn't. His Core was bound up, his will utterly spent in an effort to keep that gray . . . shit from thoroughly corrupting him.

Victor drove his inspiration-attuned Energy like a spear into the weird, sickly membrane around Uvu's Core, and it recoiled. It thrashed and lashed out, but it was like a puppy trying to maul a grizzly bear. Victor wrapped it up and bore down on it with his will, twisting his Energy like a boa constrictor around that gray blob, crushing it into oblivion. Uvu's Core immediately brightened, though it was obviously worn down. It pulsed with pure golden Energy, and Victor could feel the cat's spirit start to recover and probe at his Energy. He began to pull away, back into himself, still holding onto that compressed blob of gray corruption.

Victor wondered what he should do with it when he dragged it back into himself. Then he had a thought. He tugged it through his pathways and pressed it toward the new opening he'd made leading to his lungs. When it was through, Victor inhaled deeply and pulled that corruption right into his smoldering breath Core. He felt it flare as the magma-attuned Energy ignited it. He felt the

urge to cough as soon as that bright flare faded. As he hacked, he lost his concentration and resumed his normal perspective of the world through his eyes. Some black smoke hung in the air, and more joined it as he continued to cough out the burnt corruption.

Uvu stood up suddenly, arched his long back in a tremendous stretch, and then began to lick Victor's face. Victor laughed and pushed at the cat's big head, still sputtering, still trying to take a breath that didn't tickle his lungs. "Thanks for the kisses!"

"Victor! You healed him?" Valla practically tackled him as she threw her arms around his neck and squeezed him into a hug. She was standing, he was still kneeling, and Uvu was purring loudly as he tried to get in on the affection, rubbing his long body on them both as he pressed into them, walking in a circle, looping his tail around Victor's and Valla's necks. Victor was still sputtering, trying not to cough on Valla as her hug transitioned to gentle kisses on his cheek, then his forehead. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she kept saying between each kiss.

Victor wasn't someone who'd complain about affection, not from a woman and not from a giant cat. He laughed, waving away the cloud of lingering smoke, and then he stood, hoisting Valla up with him, holding her pressed tight to his chest as she continued to shower him with kisses, tears streaming freely down her cheeks. Uvu chuffed and yawned, making big cat sounds as he continued to circle Victor, pressing his big body into him. Pretty much anyone else would have been knocked over by the cat's enthusiastic affection, but Victor stood tall, hugging Valla close, and let the pony-sized monster cat show his gratitude.

He came to realize they'd drawn a small crowd; the garrison troops had turned their attention toward the inner courtyard, and many were staring, smiling, and laughing. They could recognize an occasion of joy when it was in front of them, and they were happy to join in. The mood in the keep was good enough already, what with Victor's news of the Ninth's second victory of the day. The happy Legate and his Tribune Primus were just icing on the cake. After a long moment of celebration, Victor finally set Valla down and gave Uvu a big, friendly shove. "Okay, big guy. That's enough. You're welcome."

"You've earned a true friend this night, Victor." Valla leaned into him, grasping one of his hands with both of hers.

"I thought you were already my friend . . ."

She shoved him playfully. "Always joking around." She turned to the center of the courtyard.

"Where's your house?"

"Ah, yeah." Victor's smile broadened, and he took his home off his belt, walked toward a particularly empty corner of the courtyard, and placed it on the flagstones. He activated it, and as it rumbled and jumped, expanding to its full size, he stood with Valla and watched Uvu as he worked on cleaning himself in earnest. "He seems happy."

“Of course! You healed him! I can feel him just as before. What was wrong with him, Victor?”

“Something was wrapped around his Core. Something . . . vile.” It was a word Victor wasn’t sure he’d ever used, but it fit. “I burned it in my breath Core,” he chuckled.

“The smoke?”

“Yeah.”

“I wanted to ask, how did you find your breath? I mean, how did you do what you did in the battle? Such flames; I’ve never seen anything like it, not even from a tier-four Pyromancer . . .”

“It wasn’t me. I mean, the breathing of the fire, that was me, but the fire was from my ancestor.” Victor searched his memory, the name coming to him easily. “Chantico.”

“Chantico? Was it a woman?”

“Yeah.”

“She saved you, I think. You were . . .” Valla grew quiet and then gestured to the house, now fully enlarged, sitting quietly in the courtyard. “Let’s speak within.” She tugged his hand, and following behind her, Victor cast Shape Self, reducing his size to something more like he’d been when they first met. Valla led him straight to the stairs toward his bedroom, and Victor felt his stomach start to flutter, a nervousness like nothing he’d experienced in a very long time. As they walked through the long hallway that led off to branching, empty rooms, Valla continued, her voice small. “You were going to die, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to. I was going to fight until I couldn’t anymore. I think I’d come to accept that I might die.”

“I know I already said this on the battlefield, but, well, maybe I didn’t say this— Victor, I don’t want you to die. I don’t want you to be okay with dying!” She still wasn’t looking at him. She walked before him, still holding his hand, but he could tell she was having a hard time finding the words to match what she was feeling.

He tried to help her out. “I thought about you a lot while I was fighting. I thought about you with regret, angry at myself for not acting on my feelings more. I know I’ve told you how I feel about you, but, well, I let you think you weren’t the most important woman to me. I let you believe I was stuck on Tes.”

“Weren’t you?” Valla had stopped before his door, and now her back was to it, and she looked up into his eyes.

“I think I was confused. Like you were.”

“I wasn’t . . .”

“Yes, you were,” he said, leaning toward her, one hand on the door next to her head, his eyes inches from hers. “You were confused about yourself. You were comparing yourself to Tes, and for some reason, you were coming up short in that comparison. Valla, you’re every bit as incredible as she is. She’s had more time to gain levels, to learn things, but you, shit, I bet you’re twice the woman she was at your age.”

“Truly?” She looked up at him, her big, turquoise-green eyes staring into his soul as she delicately bit at her lower lip, and Victor felt his heart jump in his chest.

“Yeah. Truly.” He leaned closer and stopped, his lips a hair’s breadth from hers, and waited. Valla inhaled through her nose and then pressed her lips to his, and this time, their kiss was far deeper, more passionate. Victor felt like he couldn’t get enough. He savored her warm, soft skin, her hot breath, and the tender, gentle way her hands grasped the backs of his arms, holding him close as they stood, locked together.

Victor wasn’t exactly experienced in love. His one “serious” girlfriend back on Earth had been a girl he texted and hung out with now and then—nothing like the women he’d met on Fanwath. His feelings back then were different; they were kid feelings. Even his affection for Chandri felt small and shallow compared to what he felt there with Valla. When he thought about shallow feelings, he couldn’t help thinking of Teil, but he couldn’t find any regret; she’d needed him, and he hadn’t suffered for their night together. Still, what he felt with Valla was different; he knew her so well, her quirks, her dreams, her fears. She’d been with him through thick and thin. She’d watched him nearly die half a dozen times, and she’d always been there to support him. He swore, in that moment, while they kissed, he could feel her spirit.

Victor felt like his heart would pound out of his chest, like he was high on something better than anything he’d ever tried, even better than the euphoria following a System-granted Energy rush. He could certainly feel Valla’s Energy, hot and vibrant, electric under her skin, tickling his flesh. He let his hand slide down the door to the handle. He pulled it open, then he pushed her through, still trying to kiss her while they stumbled into his room. Valla pushed him off, then ran a hand over the front of her hauberk, slipping out of the armor and letting it fall to the hardwood floor with a clatter. She was panting, breathless, as she started pulling off the rest of her clothes. Victor did the same, proving he’d had more practice with rapid clothing changes by getting naked several seconds before she did.

They never made it into the bathtub, at least not at first. They didn’t even make it to the bed; they fell to the floor on a plush gold and crimson rug that had come with Victor’s travel home. Valla wrapped her legs around him, and they shared every part of themselves. Though they were both breathless and eager, hungry for each other, Victor tried to take things slow, and again, he reflected on how different the experience was for him. It meant so much more to him than the other sex he’d

had that he couldn't find a valid comparison. Nothing he'd ever done came close to the mixture of physical and emotional release he went through that night.

For her part, Valla seemed just as happy, just as engrossed by their amorous activities. After they'd exhausted themselves there on the floor, they'd bathed, but then Valla started things up again, and they wound up in his bed together. Sometime later, they lay together, and though the room was dark, and Victor was on his back, staring at the ceiling, his mind wandering through a replay of their activities, he knew Valla was staring at him. He cleared his throat and asked, "Are you regretting anything?"

"Me?" Her hand snaked under the thin linen sheet, and she rested a cool, soft palm against his chest, over his heart. "I regret nothing."

"Do . . ." Victor struggled, trying to coax out his thoughts into words. "Don't you regret waiting this long?"

"What? No. That's like asking if I wish I'd eaten a meal before it was cooked."

Victor rolled to his side, trying to find her eyes in the near-total dark. Almost without thinking, he summoned a tiny Globe of Insight and let it float toward the ceiling, casting their bed in its dim, pale light. He smiled as she shifted to look him in the eyes better. "Are you comparing me to a meal?"

"A big, hearty, stomach-filling meal, aye." She grinned and leaned toward him, then her eyes widened, and she touched his chest. "What's this?"

"Hmm?" Victor looked down at his pectoral and saw what she pointed at. It looked almost like one of the many dozens of pale scars on his body, but it was darker and had a definite pattern, like a crescent moon with a straight line descending from the bottom point. "Huh. A weird scar?"

"It looks almost like an axe . . ."

"Ah! Golgothaz!"

"Excuse you!"

"No! It's a name, a being who spoke to me when I finished the battle. I guess when my axe skill advanced to epic . . ."

"Epic?" Valla's eyes widened.

"Yeah! Some beings were interested in my fight, and one of them, well, I think he chased the others away, and then he said he was giving me his mark." Victor rubbed a finger over the scar. "This must be it."

Valla flopped onto her back and got quiet, and Victor wondered if something was bothering her. "Something I said?"

"Something I let myself forget for a little while."

“What?”

She sighed and turned back to him. “You’re born to fight. Every time you push yourself to the breaking point, you come out stronger. Like a piece of rare metal being worked over and over, heated and cooled. You’re not going to stop, are you?” She stretched out her pale blue fingers to trace his jawline as she spoke, and Victor reached out to her, resting a hand on her hip.

“Here come the regrets?”

“No.” She smiled. “This is you, and it’s nothing new. I have to accept that you’re going to be pushing the edge. You’re not a small man.” She chuckled. “I don’t mean physically. You have large goals, and you’re not meant for small things. I like that about you, Victor, despite the risks. Besides, if you or I die in this life seeking and tasting glory, then we’ll meet again in the next one, yes? Isn’t it better to live a life like that—a full one of our own choosing, of our design, out from under the thumbs of those who would control us?” Victor knew who sat heavy in her mind with those words—Rellia, the Empire, the responsibilities thrust on her since she’d been strong enough to hold a sword.

“Damn right.” Victor leaned toward her and kissed her forehead. “This life or the next.”

Book 6: Chapter 18: Making Time

Victor wasn’t sure what time he and Valla finally fell asleep. If the soldiers returned, they didn’t bother him, and when he slept, Valla’s soft hair tickling his nose, sharing the same pillow, he’d really slept, deep and untroubled. When he woke, Valla was awake, but she was sitting in bed beside him, writing in one of her Farscribe books. She smiled at him, raising one feathery, seafoam eyebrow. “Must have been tired.”

“Well, I had a big day. Had to slay a monster, and before that, I fought a whole army . . .”

“A monster? Slay?” She reached out and snatched his ear between her thumb and forefinger, giving it a tweak.

“Just a euphemism,” he laughed.

She smiled and let go. “You have a good vocabulary when you want to. It seems to me that sometimes you curse and roar just because you think it’s what we expect of you.”

“Is this you trying to change me? Is it happening already?” Victor grinned, his white teeth bared as he shifted to look at her better, a mischievous arch to his eyebrow.

“Oh no.” She held up a hand. “Don’t start, not this morning. Rellia and Borrius are on their way, Lam too.”

Victor groaned, shifted to his back, and arched into his pillow, stretching his spine and sucking in a deep yawn. “I figured it was too much to hope we’d have more than a night to forget about this

campaign.” When he turned back to Valla, he let his mouth get away from him, “I like that you’re cool hanging out naked with the lights on.”

Valla was sitting up, pillows piled behind her, and she looked down at her breasts, then narrowed her eyes at Victor. “You expect me to get dressed while in bed?”

“Nah, ‘course not. Some women would, though. Wear something, I mean.”

“Would they?” Again, that eyebrow shot up. “Know the sleeping habits of many women, do you?”

“Uh, no . . .”

“Just how many women have you spent time with? In bed?”

“Oh, wow!” Victor looked at his wrist. “Sheesh! Look at the time! I promised Kethelket some sparring, and I should probably check in with Sarl.” He shifted his legs to the side of the bed and started to stand up.

“I’m teasing! You don’t have to flee!”

He looked back at her, and as he took in the sight of her there, pale blue skin against white sheets, he silently thanked God and his ancestors for his luck. “Nah, I know you’re messing with me, but we should get out there, don’t you agree? I keep thinking of this campaign like a fight, and one thing I know about fighting—when you’ve got your enemy on his back foot, you should push the attack.”

Valla’s book disappeared into one of her rings, and she stood up, nodding. “You want to find the next keep and attack.”

“Exactamente.” Victor started pulling clean clothes out of his ring and dressing. When he looked up, he saw Valla was also dressed and already shrugging into her scale armor. “That was fast.”

“As you said, there’s much to do.” She smiled then, scales clinking, stepped over to him, and pointed her face up. Victor didn’t need an invitation; he kissed her softly, and she pulled away. “Come, let’s check on Edeya.”

“Right!” They stopped by the kitchen for a glass of cold water, magically dispensed from a dimensional container that held a massive reservoir. The container was built into the ground beneath the basement level, and next to it was an identical one holding hot water. Victor had learned of these little features after purchasing the home, and sometimes, he wondered what other little secrets the place held. As they drank their water, he perused the cold cabinet, or fridge, as he liked to call it, bothering Borrius to no end. “Nothing great in here unless you want me to cook up some bacon and eggs.”

“I’m in the mood for something sweet, and I have some pastries in my ring from Gelica.”

“Gelica? Those are old as hell . . .”

“The ring preserves them!” She scowled at him as she produced a woven basket lined with a pale linen cloth and stuffed with frosting-covered pastries. Victor’s mouth began to water as he smelled the warm, sugary dough. “You don’t want one?”

“Yeah, I want one,” Victor grumbled sheepishly.

He was halfway through his second helping when a voice called out from near the front of his home, “Victor! Are you up?” He recognized Lam at once. Only a handful of people had access to enter his home unaccompanied, and she was one.

“In the kitchen,” he called, covering his mouth to keep from spraying bits of pastry. He heard her boots before he saw her, and then she came into view, walking around the long, empty table to the kitchen counter that separated the dining and cooking spaces.

She sat in front of the counter. “Where’s Edeya?”

“In the keep.” Valla leaned forward and pushed the basket of pastries toward her. “She consumed her racial advancement reward yesterday.”

“Really? Here?” Lam delicately plucked a pastry from the basket. “No milk?”

“In the fridge.” Victor’s voice was muffled because he’d stuffed the second half of his pastry into his mouth.

“The fridge? Oh, right.” Lam walked over to the cold cabinet and fished out a bottle of milk.

“We thought she needed to do it; she almost died again in a skirmish on the field, and Victor wanted her to level; she’s nearly thirty.”

“Well, I’m glad someone finally pushed her to it. She’s been dragging her feet long enough. Did she . . . suffer much?”

“From the injury?” Valla asked.

Victor shrugged. “She got beat to hell and knocked out. She didn’t remember much of the fight.”

“And you? You seem different.” Lam glanced Victor up and down, and then her eyes drifted to Valla. “You too. What did I miss?”

“Victor leveled and gained some abilities last night. He, well, didn’t anyone give you a summary of the battle?”

“Not exactly. I heard you beat another army to the east. Caught ‘em between the ninth and the fifth, if I’m guessing, yeah?”

“Sort of.” Victor shrugged.

“Victor held off an army of a thousand reavers—undead heavy fighters with some ability to transform into more deadly monsters. They were close to pouncing on the fifth cohort while they dealt with an army of hounds.”

“More like wolves.” Victor leaned his elbows on the table, watching Lam eat.

“Well, they seemed like boyii hounds, but the size of roladii. I guess they weren’t colorful, and I didn’t see any with more than one tail . . . does that sound like wolves?”

“Yeah . . .” Victor frowned at her. “You’ve never seen a wolf?”

“They don’t come to this part of the world,” Lam interjected, obviously trying to move the side discussion along.

“Anyway, Victor rode his steed down among the reavers and fought them until Sarl could arrive with the Ninth.”

“The Glorious Ninth.” Victor smiled, pleased with the moniker he’d given Sarl’s cohort.

“You fought off a thousand heavy troops?” Lam gave Victor another appraising look.

“I had help from my ancestors and probably would have died anyway if not for the Ninth arriving.”

“That’s a discussion for another time.” Valla frowned at him, and he figured she didn’t like being reminded that he’d been ready to fight to the death. Victor had been trying to downplay his heroics, but he’d gone a while without putting his foot in his mouth, so he just shrugged and picked up another pastry.

“So, you destroyed three armies yesterday?” Lam pulled a stool out from beside the counter and sat down. “I don’t know if I should be annoyed or pleased. On the one hand, I’m glad we’re making headway in this conquest, but on the other . . . I’d like to get some of the action!”

“Victor improved his axe skill to epic!”

“Probably not helping . . .” Victor mumbled as Lam turned wide eyes his way.

“Polo Vosh was decades between advanced and epic if I’m not mistaken . . .”

“Well, he didn’t have an axe like Lifedrinker. I think she’s taught me as much as anyone I’ve trained with.” Victor rested his hand on the warm, gleaming metal of Lifedrinker’s bearded blade.”

“I certainly chose the right man to give that weapon to.”

“You gave him Lifedrinker?” Valla joined Victor, leaning forward over the counter, resting on her elbows, and letting her gaze travel between Lam and Victor. “Why haven’t I heard that story?”

“I never thought . . .”

“The axe wasn’t awake back then. I thought I was giving Victor a decent blade, an old weapon I no longer used. He was the one who woke her up, so I take none of the credit.”

Victor, your she-wolves speak about me?

“That’s right, beautiful.” Victor smiled at the expressions he received from Lam and Valla. “Not you guys! She wanted to know if you were talking about her.” He almost told them what the axe had called them but decided he didn’t feel like having his skin flayed off. He shrugged and turned back to the earlier topic. “I wasn’t exaggerating when I mentioned how much I’ve learned from her. When we get into a really good fight, it’s like she and I move together as one. Like a dance, almost, but bigger. Shit, I can’t think of the right words.”

“Well, if that’s helped you advance so quickly, you are a lucky man.” Lam took a drink of her milk and contemplated the remains of the pastry in her hand.

“I am lucky. No argument from me.” Victor glanced at Valla, and they shared a knowing smile. Then he asked, “Where are Rellia and Borrius?”

“En route. They march with the army. We’re leaving the Shadeni and the reserve cohort Borrius made from surplus troops. All eight cohorts will be here within the hour to join the ninth and the fifth. Talk to me about your losses.”

“Let’s get Sarl in on this; he’ll have more concrete info. Valla and I were . . . out of it last night.”

“Oh?” Lam raised an eyebrow and narrowed her eyes as she looked between the two of them but said no more.

Victor shrugged and led the way out of his house, unwilling to expound on the subject. They were met with a flurry of activity when they stepped into the courtyard. Soldiers were sparring in loose circles, others were cleaning, and still more were carrying items to and fro—sacks, barrels, boards, even furniture. Victor flagged down a passing sergeant. “Where’s Captain Sarl?” Several soldiers passed by in a group, interrupting the man’s answer, and Victor reflected on the fact that the keep was overfull—it was meant to house a force smaller than a single cohort, not two.

“He’s outside the gate, sir.”

“Fetch him, please. We’ll be in the . . . map room on the second floor.” Victor turned away from him and said to Lam, “You gotta see this.” He led the way into

the keep, up the spiral stairs, and down the long hallway to the weird round room with its raised dais depicting, in three dimensions, the contested lands of the Untamed Marches.

“Wonderful!” Lam said, walking around it, her dragonfly wings twitching and fluttering with excitement. “So, the unobscured lands are the ones we hold.”

“Right.” Valla pointed to the little model of the keep. “That’s us. Up the road there, that’s the pass. Victor, look!” She pointed to the grassy, hilly area east of the keep. “Wasn’t more of this obscured yesterday? I think we opened up more land when we beat those armies last night.”

“Makes sense.” Victor stepped around the dais and pointed to the foggy area west of the keep. “See those trees there? You can just make them out on the edge of the fog. I think it’s a forest, and I’m betting Hector’s forces have another stronghold in there. If we take it, we’ll have the northern edge of the Marches under our control. Then we can start pushing south.”

He’d just finished speaking when Sarl and Kethelket came into the room. “Legate!” Sarl saluted. “I’m glad you’re well. Quite the heroics you pulled off last night . . .”

“I was stunned, Victor. Sir.” Kethelket, too, saluted. “I was determined to try to fly you out of that melee. I was on my way in when you burst out with those . . . incomparable flames.”

“It’s true.” Valla smiled at Kethelket. “He was on his way into that madness. It was when you paused, your Berserk gone, your banner . . .” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Let’s not dwell on it. Sarl, can you report on the losses for the ninth and fifth cohorts?”

“Of course. The fifth suffered heavy losses at first but rallied and soon took control of their fight with the great wolves—that’s what the Naghelli have been calling them. They lost, in total, a hundred and twelve soldiers. “We fared better. The reavers and vampyrs were demoralized when we smashed into them. Only seventeen losses, sir.”

“The Ninth grow harder and harder,” Kethelket said, grinning at Sarl.

“And what about your troops, Captain?” Victor asked the lanky Naghelli.

“They are ready for action, sir. I wondered if you wanted to put together a scouting force to prepare for the next offensive.”

“I do. We’ll wait for Borrius and Rellia, but I have some ideas. Speaking of . . . sometimes my head is clearer after some exercise. Kethelket, while Lam grills Sarl and Valla, how about we get in some weapon practice?”

“It would be my pleasure, sir.”

“Right.” Victor nodded and turned to the doorway, refusing to look directly at Lam or Valla, fearing the daggers that might be lurking in their eyes. “We’ll be in the courtyard!” He called over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, we’ll stop as soon as the other commanders arrive.”

To his surprise, Lam called back, “Thank you, Victor. I’ll try to get up to speed so I can help brief Borrius.”

“Huh. How about that.” Feeling decidedly braver, he turned to get a final look at Valla. She stood tall and serene, arms folded on her glimmering wyrm-scale armor, watching him depart. He saw amusement in her eyes, though, so he winked, then hurried ahead of Kethelket to the stairway, down, and out of the keep.

“You seem well, Lord. My apologies—sir.” Kethelket hurried to walk beside him, and Victor looked over at the man; they weren’t too different in height, with his size reduced as it was.

“I am well, Kethelket. I had the most epic battle of my life last night. I was blessed by my ancestors. I broke through to epic with my axe, and, well, things are just going well for me. Hope I didn’t just jinx things by talking about everything like that . . .”

“Jinx? As in curse? Excuse my bluntness, sir, but that’s nonsense. It’s important to acknowledge our blessings. Welcome them in, share them; in a world of war and despair, good tidings should be welcomed by all.”

“Huh.” Victor eyed the ancient warrior and gave him a nod. The more he spoke to Kethelket, the more he liked the man. He wasn’t what he’d imagined when he’d learned about the Naghelli and when Vellia had told him about the leader of her “faction.” He’d pictured him as old-looking and stodgy, not fierce and eager to engage with the enemy. He led him to a relatively quiet corner of the courtyard, an area behind Victor’s travel home in the rear northwest corner. Standing, facing each other, he asked, “Do you remember a lot about the world, I mean yours, before it was joined to Fanwath?”

“I remember much. What I don’t remember is the joining; the System either made us dream or forget, but one day, we were fighting our own small fights, and the next, we were part of something far greater. It was world-shattering. I mean, personally. Our small wars became large ones. My servitude to Belikot saw me embroiled in a massive conflict with peoples from all four worlds. Oh, how I regretted the bargain I’d struck with that man!”

Victor contemplated his words, unslinging Lifedrinker and limbering up his shoulders. “Are there many like you? I don’t think I’ve met anyone else who was alive before the joining.”

“You’ll find many in Tharcray. There are others around the world, though, if you take the time to look for them.”

“Were the Ridonne from the old worlds?”

“Oh yes. How do you think they gained the upper hand so quickly? The Shadeni and Ardeni outnumbered the civilized peoples from the other worlds by a factor of four. The Ridonne were the strongest among them, other than the Vessi, but they’d been at war for centuries before the joining, and the Vessi were all but gone by the time the System brought us together.”

“The Vessi . . . an Ardeni bloodline, yeah? Supposedly as strong as the Ridonne? Did you ever meet one?”

“Aye, I did, Victor! You’re full of questions today!” Kethelket’s words were friendly, and though his large, strange, black eyes were hard to read, Victor thought he saw kindness in them.

“I’ve wanted to talk more for a while now. I always feel so driven, though, worried about expectations of me. I’m going to start putting a change to that. I need to make time for life while I’m living it, you know?”

“Indeed, but you also have the right intensity when it comes to winning battles; you seem to know when to push an enemy, and you have an instinct for finishing things.”

“A killer’s instinct?” Victor raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a good way to put it.” Kethelket nodded. “Shall we see how you fair against Gevel and Uthac?” He drew his two dark metal blades, and they danced with flickering, swirling blue-yellow Energy.

“They’re both awake?”

“Aye, have been since before the joining.”

“Yeah, let’s dance, but hang on! I was curious—what did the Vessi look like?”

Kethelket let his blades hang down, and he looked up at the sky, somewhere beyond Victor’s head, his eyes going distant. “They were every bit as impressive as the Ridonne, Victor. Where the Ridonne are golden and red, the Vessi were blue and silver.” His voice grew soft with remembered wonder, “Beautiful, fast, taller than other Ardeni, with silver-feathered wings that cut the air so fast I couldn’t begin to follow. My wings are better now than they were then, but I still am no match for their soaring glory . . .”

“Sounds awesome.” Victor grinned and lifted Lifedrinker. “All right, come on!”

Victor soon realized he'd been missing out when it came to weapons practice; he'd had access to Kethelket ever since the battle on the plains with the Ridonne, and he'd squandered that time. The Naghelli prince was a dervish with his blades, easily outclassing Victor's other sparring partners. He was faster, more versatile, and somehow just as strong as Polo. With Midnight, Valla's skill level was described as "epic," but Kethelket soon showed Victor that she had much to learn. He had a way of moving those twin blades of his, one always seeking an opening while the other parried or redirected Victor's attacks.

The man was clearly at an epic level with the sword, and had Victor not recently had a breakthrough of his own, he figured Kethelket would have had to hold back considerably. As it was, though, Victor found himself stretching himself to new heights, finding the rhythm of combat that rarely came to him during a practice session. Usually, he had to be dancing the killing dance, the all-out, full-contact frenzy of combat that came to him when the stakes were high, and he was pushed to his limits on the battlefield. With Kethelket as his partner, Victor began to find that rhythm and began to feel the changes in himself since his skill had broken through to the epic tier.

As he wove Lifedrinker in and out of clashes with the Naghelli, using her size, power, and his near-absurd ability to move her about in lightning-fast cleaves that cut the air in whooshes and snaps, he began to enter a battle trance that excluded the rest of the world. Kethelket seemed similarly engrossed, his face serene, his body flowing with his movements, his swords like extensions of his arms. He and Victor were similar in size and reach, and though they both knew the match would be different if Victor released his Shape Self spell and let himself stretch to his full potential, that wasn't the point—they were trying to work on their weapon skill, and having Victor dominate the contest with size and overwhelming power wouldn't serve either of them in that regard.

A Globe of Insight hung over them, feeding their creativity, pushing their already brilliant weapon work to the limit, and, as they clashed, soldiers began to gather, their faces slack-jawed in wonderment to see the skills on display. Later, sergeants and lieutenants would report that many soldiers had breakthroughs of their own simply by observing the two masters at work. While Victor and Kethelket danced, moving about their corner of the yard, pushing, retreating, circling, all the while weaving their weapons in an elaborate contest of feints, parries, slashes, thrusts, and cleaves, something extraordinary began to happen.

At first, Victor didn't realize it was happening, but eventually, he became aware of his cuts extending beyond the physical dimensions of his blade. Lifedrinker was mindful of the friendly nature of their bout, so she hadn't burst into smoldering orange heat; her silvery edge was cool in the air as she cleaved the wind, but something new was happening. Her blade was limned with a shimmering, ghostlike edge that extended outward a hand's breadth from her metal and even further from the top and bottom. That blade of force cut the air like a laser, creating tiny concussions in her wake as the air hurried to fill in the gaps she sliced.

Kethelket's eyes widened as he realized what was happening, and Victor's axe became harder and harder to counter. He seemed to begin to struggle to get his swords into position fast enough to match the blurring speed of Lifedrinker's ghost edge, and when he did, his parries were rebuffed, and he had to hustle to move with the force to compensate for the extra speed and power of Victor's

attacks. To his credit, he maintained his defensive dance for several long minutes before his constant giving of ground began to wear him down, and he finally backpedaled out of the “circle” of their contest and, with a flourishing salute, said, “I yield.”

Victor, a huge smile plastered to his face, was almost startled at the end of their dance. Lifedrinker hummed in his hands, light as a feather, eager to keep going, but he brought her around in a weaving cut, slicing the air between him and Kethelket, then let her hang from one hand as he, chest heaving with the healthy exertion of their efforts, said, “What a match! Thank you, Kethelket!”

Before Kethelket could respond, the soldiers who’d gathered in the courtyard, both on the flagstones and up on the parapets, began to clap and cheer, whistling and shouting their excitement. As the noise died down, Kethelket stepped closer to Victor and said, “You were manifesting a paragon.”

“The what?”

“The Paragon of the Axe. The essential spirit of it. It was projecting forth from your fabulous weapon, there.” He nodded to Lifedrinker, still hanging from his hand. “I could feel Gevel and Uthac strain to deflect it; I fear that had you been intent on harm, you may have shattered one or both of them. Certainly, you could have done some damage.” Kethelket spun both of his swords in his wrists, then held them up, scrutinizing their blades. “They’re fine, however. I thank you.”

“I didn’t even know . . .”

“Few can manifest a paragon of a weapon at will. I, well, what I know is only through the lips of old masters; I’ve seen the Paragon of the Sword a time or two, but not in my own hands. My first master, Inderiga, brought it forth during her duel with Queen Aledra. I was just a boy, but the memory is burned in my mind.” Kethelket shook his head and smiled at Victor. “A time long gone, my friend. Thank you for this wonderful exercise; I feel I’ve gained some ground in my mastery of the sword for the first time in a long, long while.”

“Are you kidding me?” Victor’s voice was light with the pleasure of good, rich fun. “I’ve never had such a good match. I’ve only felt that . . . I don’t know what to call it. Trance? I’ve only felt that connected to the axe, to my fighting, a couple of times, and that was when everything was on the line, like, I was near death. I have a feat, Desperate Grace, that sometimes kicks in, and in our match just now, I felt even faster and smoother than it makes me. Shit, I don’t think I’ve ever seen that paragon before. That’s the right word? Paragon?”

“Yes!” Kethelket looked around, taking in the crowd of observing, listening soldiers. He raised his voice so others might hear, “You all witnessed something rare today! Your Legate manifested the Paragon of the Axe. Mark this moment well in your minds; you’ll be telling your grandchildren about it!” If he hadn’t had

enough cheering directed his way, those words pushed Victor's love for attention to the limit, and he cleared his throat, chuckling and shaking his head a bit sheepishly.

"All right, everyone. Show's over. Get back to your duties." The soldiers began to disperse, but Victor knew there weren't really all that many "duties" to get to; the outpost was overcrowded with troops, and two-thirds of them were free of active obligations. Thinking of obligations, he realized he'd lost track of time while sparring. Glancing at the sky, searching for the sun's position, he wondered what time it was. He looked back to Kethelket. "Wonder if Borrius is close."

"Aye, the army approaches." Victor had begun to turn toward the gate, but he gave Kethelket a second glance, narrowing his eyes.

"How can you tell?"

Kethelket pointed to the parapets where a pair of his Naghelli stood talking quietly. "I saw Cheksi arrive. She's part of the main group of my people, one of those I'd left in the pass."

Victor nodded and reached up to connect Lifedrinker to her harness. "Speaking of your people, I've hardly seen Vellia. Is she well?"

"Aye." Kethelket nodded, stroking his chin. "Well, but busy. I've given her most of the responsibility for governing our people. She's constantly dealing with disagreements and making decisions I'd rather not be troubled with."

Victor chuckled. "Smart." He led the way over to the stoop outside his travel home, and the two sat there, drinking water from containers they each produced from their storage rings, and waited for the madness of the main army to arrive. The opposite of Victor's expectations came to bear, however, as a messenger arrived, calling the fifth cohort out of the keep and out to the field where the army was setting up an encampment. As half the soldiers in the garrison filed out, things became a lot calmer in the courtyard, that is, until Borrius and Rellia arrived with their retainers.

When Victor saw Darro, he remembered Edeya and wondered how the young Ghelli was doing. With luck, the racial advancement was a potent one, and she'd be out for a while yet, perhaps days more. Still, he wanted to look in on her and resolved to do so after he'd spoken to the commanders about his plan. Lam, Valla, and Sarl came out of keep to greet Rellia and Borrius and arrived at the front of Victor's home at nearly the same time. "Greetings," Borrius called from the saddle of his vidanii, sliding down to allow one of the staffers to lead it away.

"Borrius, it's good to see you." Victor stood from the step, and Kethelket followed on his heels. He took a minute to shake hands with Borrius and Rellia. Then he gestured to the jade travel home. "Shall we?"

"Don't you want to show them the map in the keep?" Valla stepped forward and pulled her mother into a brief hug. Rellia responded warmly, a look of surprise on her face; such affection wasn't something Victor had often seen between them.

“I do, I do, but it’s easy enough to describe for now. We have a lot to discuss, and that room isn’t exactly comfortable. Let’s go sit around my table; I bet Tribune Borrius could use a drink after that ride.”

“Indeed!” Borrius nodded enthusiastically. The ride down from the pass to the outpost keep was a short, easy one, but the older man was happy to behave as though he’d had to battle for every inch of land between the two places.

Soon enough, the commanders of the army were sitting around Victor’s table, and Victor had included Kethelket in that number, though he only held the rank of captain. He’d grown to value the man’s opinion and experience, and Kethelket held a unique position as the leader of an entire culture. Additionally, he invited Sarl because he had the firmest grip on the logistics of the previous night’s battles and the garrison of the outpost.

He began the meeting by describing, for Rellia and Borrius, the previous day’s encounters with the undead. The retelling of their fight with Baron Eric and his reavers took a while; Borrius and Rellia had many questions and interrupted the account several times. After that, Victor tried to hurry through the fight with the reaver army as they attempted to crush the fifth cohort, aiding the animalistic great wolf army. Borrius, of course, wouldn’t allow the story to unfold without interruptions.

“So, they were using their superior mobility to turn our maneuver against us! They wanted to slay the fifth and then perhaps catch the ninth outside the keep, destroying them as well?”

“I believe that was their hope, aye,” Sarl said. “I’m embarrassed to say I was so fearful of such a maneuver that I argued with our Legate about whether we should rush to the aid of the fifth.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of!” Borrius growled, slapping a hand on the table. “Every good Legate needs clever commanders who aren’t afraid to speak up! Your reasoning was sound, but it seems none of us quite understood Victor’s ability to catch and, single-handedly, distract and delay an entire army.”

“Delay, sure, but not beat. I owe the Ninth and the Naghelli for my life.”

“Well said.” Rellia nodded to Victor.

Victor could see Sarl start to open his mouth, perhaps to object, to try to expound on Victor’s exploits, but he spoke first, “So, now you’re mostly up to speed. We beat three of the invaders’ armies yesterday: the undead horde, the reavers, and the great wolf ‘cavalry.’ I believe we caught Prince Hector unprepared. It seems he’s had little resistance here in the Marches, and his armies are spread out, holding various ‘points of conquest.’ I want to move quickly to the next. I want to keep our momentum.”

“And you know this how?” Borrius frowned, sipping his chilled wine.

“I don’t know it, exactly, but I have a feeling. My every instinct is saying to keep pushing, to keep him on his back foot until we knock his ass down.”

“This isn’t a duel, Victor.” Borrius shook his head. “You can’t treat a general with many armies at his disposal the same way you would a brawler in the arena.” Kethelket snorted, and Borrius turned to him. “Something to say, Prince?” His use of the title came out as a sneer, and Victor frowned at the older man; he hadn’t acted so petty in the past. Was he upset about something? He wondered if the one-time legate was upset that he’d missed all the action so far.

“I do.” Kethelket cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. Victor thought it looked like he wanted to stand up. He settled for leaning forward, gripping the tabletop with both hands as he glared from Borrius to Rellia to Lam and then back to Borrius. “This man beside me led us to victory not once but four times yesterday. He fought a great monster that called itself a vampyr, and then he, against the arguments of myself and Captain Sarl, rushed to save the fifth cohort. He nearly died and wouldn’t have come nearly so close to defeat had we rushed forth with our troops as soon as he suggested it. Instead, we chose caution.” Victor liked how he was saying “we” in support of Sarl, even though he’d flown out with his Naghelli almost immediately.

Kethelket paused for a moment, then he continued, “His instincts were spot on. He knew the fifth was in trouble. He knew the right move was an aggressive response. He’s a natural-born fighter, sure, but he’s also a natural leader. If he says the right move now is to push our advantage, to drive on to the next target, I will be there with my people.”

Victor saw Rellia nodding and knew he had her vote, but clever as she was, she didn’t speak up. She looked at Borrius and waited, perhaps hoping, perhaps betting that he’d read the room, see the tide changing, and row with it rather than against it. Victor knew he could bulldoze the situation, especially with Rellia’s support, but he followed her lead, holding his tongue, waiting to see if Borrius would come to the correct conclusion. If the old commander came to see things his way, he’d be a lot more helpful than if Victor had to cow him by flexing his rank.

Borrius looked at Kethelket for a long moment, then sighed and shrugged. “I, too, would have held the army in place, just as Sarl argued. It was the right, conservative move, one that any Legion commander would make. Being baited out of the keep and then, potentially, turned on by the larger, more mobile force could have been disastrous. I appreciate that Victor, our Legate Primus, didn’t force Sarl to march immediately but compromised, offering the solution of scouting out the situation. Still, it cost him dearly, nearly cost us our champion. Perhaps a bit more trust in our leader’s instincts is in order. I’ve been wrong to rely on my Imperial training several times on this campaign.”

“So?” Lam asked after a pregnant pause in the conversation. “What’s your order, Victor?”

“I’ll take the Naghelli and the Ninth to the west, into that forest, and we’ll take the conquest point there. I’m sure there is one. Meanwhile, Borrius and Rellia will lead the bulk of the army straight south where, if I’m not wrong, Prince Hector is going to be amassing more of his armies in a plan to come here to crush us. I’ll strike first, and when he sees that we’ve conquered yet another territory, he’ll either split his force or hurry northward, hoping to recapture this outpost while we’re occupied to the west. You’ll fall upon his forces from a fortified ambush.”

“So, we won’t march all the way south but lay in wait?” Rellia clarified.

“Right. You’ll find a good choke point near the edge of the land we’ve conquered and lay in wait.”

“You’re certain you can conquer another outpost with just the Ninth?” Borrius asked, though his head was nodding, his eyes distant, perhaps picturing an imaginary map.

“The Ninth and the Naghelli.” Victor amended.

“Might I suggest leaving some of my people with Borrius to act as scouts? They are able to hide and have excellent mobility.”

“Thank you, Kethelket, that won’t be . . .” Borrius started to say, but Victor cut him off.

“Borrius, if you have to cut down a tree, would you turn down the use of a saw just because you held your favorite hammer?”

“I . . . no, Legate.” He turned to Kethelket and nodded. “Some of your people would be well-received by my captains.”

“All right.” Victor turned to Kethelket. “Can you send some troops out scouting now? Try to find a good ambush site to the south and begin scouting out the forest that lies in the mist to the west. I’d like to leave as soon as possible. Sarl, how quickly can the ninth be ready?”

“We’ll be ready in a day, sir. Thanks to the Farscribe books, Borrius and Rellia brought reservists to fill our ranks, and we’re at full strength; I just need to integrate the new troops with their units.”

“Sounds good. If you study the map in the keep—we’ll adjourn soon, and you all can check it out—you’ll see that the contested area is about ten times the size of what we control here on the northern edge. There’s no way Hector will be able to gather all his forces or a significant number of them from the various areas he’s holding within a day. Not without using portals or something, but I don’t think he can do that. The Baron we killed, the leader of the reavers, suggested that the

mindless undead horde was here ‘holding’ these lands for him while he gathered his forces from their home world.”

“Which would imply some travel time was required.” Rellia nodded.

“I’d like to come with you this time, Victor.” Lam leaned forward earnestly, and Victor could see that old hunger in her eyes, that look he’d seen so many times back in the mines. It sparked a similar one in him, a desire for exploration, growth, and glory. Perhaps Lam was more like him than he’d ever noticed before.

“Of course, Lam. We’ll go into that forest and mess up some undead pendejos.”

Book 6: Chapter 20: Ghostly Guardians

Victor grunted as he lifted his helm to his head. He stood outside the gates, Guapo huffing out plumes of hot breath in the chilly morning air. The idea of his spirit horse breathing hot air brought a lot of questions to his mind, but he was distracted from the thought as Valla came bounding into view, riding atop a very spirited Uvu. The big cat was full of energy, a definite spring in his loping passage, and lots of grumbling, groaning, big-cat noises emerging from his broad chest as she directed him over to Victor.

“He wanted to chase every animal he heard! It feels like when I first started training him!” Valla’s flushed cheeks and big smile let Victor know she wasn’t upset with the cat’s enthusiasm. Rather, she was thrilled by his exuberance.

“So, he’s feeling good, huh?” Victor swung himself up onto Guapo’s back. They were going to ride out, just the two of them, while Lam, Sarl, and Edeya marched with the Ninth. Kethelket and two hundred of his Naghelli were already gone, leaving before sunrise to scout the edges of the forest to the west.

“He is! Speaking of exuberance, did you see Edeya yet?”

“Nah, she was in the bath when I went to check on her. Lam said I’d see her soon enough, so I packed up and headed out to find you. Looks like, as usual, you found me first.”

“I was with her when she woke.” Valla leaned forward, resting her elbows on the front of her cat’s soft, burgundy-stained leather saddle, and stroked his furry shoulder. As he began to rumble a definitive purr, she said, “You heard she gained five ranks, yes?”

“Yeah, I heard. Lam said she’s showing signs of a bloodline, too—Cobalt Wing? Is that right?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen one, but I think they’re rather revered among the Ghelli. Instead of the yellow Energy motes like Lam’s wings give off, Ghelli with the Cobalt Wing bloodline have distinctive blue wings and give off azure motes.”

“Is that the only difference?” Victor clicked his tongue, and Guapo started moving, trotting away from the keep, away from the sunrise.

“No!” Valla laughed as Uvu pounced into motion, swerving so much toward Guapo that Victor thought they’d collide. The cat chuffed and pulled away, just coming close enough for his furry side to rub against Victor’s leg. “It’s more than the color of their wings; it also changes their Core! Edeya is gaining an affinity for water, though she says it’s not as strong as her pure Energy affinity yet. However, if she keeps advancing her race, she should be a formidable Elementalist someday.”

“Huh, that’s cool.”

“Cool.” Valla shook her head and snorted.

“Hey, that word did a lot of heavy lifting in my old life.”

“I can tell!” Valla laughed, but then, as a bit of silence grew between them, and they rode without speaking for a few minutes, she spoke up. “Are you worried about our . . . disparity?”

“Huh?” Victor frowned at her.

“Every time you do just about anything, you grow in power. I heard about your ‘sparring’ session with Kethelket. You displayed some sort of paragon? I never knew such a thing was possible.” Victor started to try to explain, but she hurriedly kept speaking. “It’s not just that; you fought off an army the other night, an army of foes, any one or two of which would have given me a difficult battle. I’m not weak, Victor. I’m strong, maybe stronger than nearly anyone else in our army, save Kethelket. I think I could beat Polo, my mother . . .” She trailed off, sighing and shaking her head. “I’ve lost my train of thought. I think what I’m trying to say is . . .”

“You think I’m going to leave you behind.”

“Not intentionally!” She was quick to protest, but Victor could see the worry behind her words.

“Like how, then? You think I’ll just kind of become so powerful that I’ll ascend into a new realm or some shit?” Victor was, perhaps irrationally, irritated by the turn of conversation. Things had been going so well between them lately that he couldn’t help but feel she was inventing a problem where there wasn’t one.

“No, you Urghat-brain!” she growled, and Victor barked a short laugh; she’d never called him that one.

“Urghat? I think I fought some of those in the pits way back in the day . . .”

“Don’t change the subject! I’m not saying you’ll ‘ascend’ or anything like that. I’m saying that you’re going to keep facing challenges that I’m not ready for. You’re going to look at me and think about how risky things are for me, and then you’ll want to leave me behind. ‘For my safety,’ you’ll say. ‘I’ll return when it’s safe,’ you’ll say, and before we know it, you’ll spend more time away than with me, all the while growing more powerful, creating a larger and larger disparity between us.”

“Holy shit, Valla! Take a breath. Tell me something; were you feeling too happy? Did guilt have something to do with this? Did you speak to Rellia? Did she warn you about our ‘disparity?’ I’m asking because things were going great this morning when we woke up together and . . .”

“What if she did?” Valla asked, frowning, eyes stormy. Her voice was a little muted, though, and Victor could tell he’d made her think.

“You know she’s got ulterior motives, right? She doesn’t want you to leave her. If —when—we conquer these lands, she’s going to have governing to do. She raised you to be her right-hand woman. I think she knows I’m not planning to stick around, much as I love some of the people here. I fully intend to return, to visit, to share what I gain in my explorations of the larger universe, but I have bigger plans than the Untamed Marches. You do, too! Don’t lose sight of that.”

“I know. But . . .”

“But she was convincing. I get it. You’re worried about our disparity? Then get stronger! Shit, you never thought you could do what Tes showed you, improving your affinity, learning to use your affinities together, fighting with ranged abilities. What level are you now?”

“Fifty-eight.”

“Fuck yeah! Two more and you get a new class. You think you won’t see huge gains after all you did in Coloss? Everything we’ve done since? You’re going to get an awesome class. Oh, what about your race? Have you ever told me what rank you’ve gotten it to?”

“I’m at improved-five.”

“That’s enough for you to get level sixty, right?”

“I think so.” She’d lost some of her steam and looked contemplative as she answered his questions.

“Let’s get it up to advanced, anyway, just to be safe. I’ll share my tokens with you; I’m pretty damn sure one of those conquest awards was a racial advancement. My mouth started watering when I smelled it.”

“Aye, mine too! But, Victor, you should use it.”

“That’s the first of many. It feels like the System is treating this conquest like a game or a contest, and if I know anything, things are going to get harder, and that means bigger rewards. I’ll get something like that advancement cake or even better. Believe it.” He laughed and reached into his storage container, pulling out a blood-soaked, white linen towel. He held it in his hand, hefting the weighty contents. “I still have this to eat, too.”

“Ancestors!” Valla wrinkled her nose. “Is that . . .”

“That huge Ridonne’s heart. I got it out of him before he shrank again.” Victor stowed it away again and shrugged. “Looking forward to seeing what that one does.”

“What if it’s not good? Could you absorb a negative trait?”

Victor snorted and shook his head. “A Quinametzin absorbs the strength of his foes by eating their heart, not their sickness or weakness.”

“Always? Can you be so sure?”

“I know it like you know how to breathe. When I had my vision, I was inside my ancestor’s mind; I was him! I knew what he knew, and he knew this. You understand?”

“Aye.” Valla smiled and nodded, locking eyes with him as though to convey her trust in his words. “I haven’t had a vision like that.”

“Yeah, well, things are changing for you, Valla. You’re on the road to some great shit, and just because I’m leading the way a little right now, you’re with me; you’re taking every step I’m taking. Let’s get you to sixty, get you a racial advancement or two, and see how things are shaping up, hmm? I mean, with Midnight, your sword skill is already epic, yeah?”

“That’s true. If I can push my true rank to epic, I wonder if Midnight can carry me to legendary.”

“That would be fucking badass!” Victor yelled his enthusiasm, and his voice echoed through the grassy hills. Valla laughed and looked around, perhaps wondering if they were as alone as they seemed. Victor wasn’t worried; the Naghelli had already scouted this way, and they had an army coming behind

them. If some undead wanted to challenge him in broad daylight, it would be their funeral.

They rode for a while in relative silence, just a comment about the countryside here and there. The landscape was pretty, almost idyllic. Victor came from a country where green wasn't so common, and what green there was existed on tough, hardy trees and bushes. He'd experienced massive grasslands, extensive forests, and even the twilight plains of the Spirit Plane since then. Still, this landscape reminded him of what he'd always imagined fantasy worlds to be like. They passed through rolling green hills dotted here and there with clumps of trees, some of which bore fruit that resembled apples or pears.

The influence of the undead seemed to have wholly fled the lands, and the greenery seemed no worse for its previous presence. While he watched the trees and grass pass by, noting that the blue tint was much fainter here than in the lands north of the pass where he'd done most of his adventuring, Victor's mind drifted toward his sparring bout with Kethelket and the paragon he'd somehow brought into being through Lifedrinker. He'd seen it, like a ghostly overlay on Lifedrinker, but he'd been so absorbed by the perfection of his movements, his oneness with his axe, and the dance they performed with Kethelket and his swords that it hadn't registered in the moment.

Looking back, though, Victor wondered what that paragon had been doing for him. What exactly was it? Was there an actual spirit out there, some essence of all axes? That's what Kethelket seemed to think, but it seemed so wild to Victor. Axes weren't even alive, in general, so how could they have a spirit? Was the paragon more like an idea? "Or an ideal," he muttered.

"Hmm?" Valla looked up at him.

"Just trying to think through this idea of a paragon. Kethelket said he'd seen an old master summon the Paragon of the Sword, so I know it's not just axes. Is there a paragon for everything?"

"I don't know. For perhaps the first time, I know even less than you on the subject." She chuckled. "Let me know if you figure it out."

"I think maybe that something needs to have a lot of devotion and energy put into it to create a paragon. People, me included, have spent a lot of time, big parts of their lives, working to master the axe. I think that kind of energy and effort helps the paragon to come into being. I doubt there's a Paragon of the Fork."

"Some people devote a lot of energy and practice to the art of eating . . ." Valla chuckled, but Victor had to concede she had a point. Were there people who made the use of the fork an art? He doubted it, but he had to wonder.

"It's got to be more than that. Maybe it has something to do with the mortal intent of the axe or the sword, the lives they take. The different arts and styles clashing, perhaps. You might love to eat and practice with that fork, but will you

ever clash with another eater? If so, it doesn't happen with the bloody results brought forth by the clash of weapon wielders."

"One would hope." Again, Valla chuckled, and Victor looked at her with a smile of his own.

"Glad to see your mood has improved. It's almost like with distance from Rellia comes an increase in good humor."

"Look!" Valla pointed, conveniently spotting a reason to change the topic. Victor followed her finger with his eyes and saw what had gotten her attention. They were riding down a long, sloping hillside, and not too far ahead, perhaps three miles, a dark line of mist began to cloud the horizon.

"Here we go." Victor loosened Lifedrinker in her harness despite the sunny sky and the fact that the Naghelli were already scouting the area ahead of them.

"Should we wait for the Ninth?"

"Nah, let's see if Kethelket left a scout behind to fill us in."

"Right." Valla urged Uvu forward, and Victor let Guapo keep pace, though he had to exert his will to get the Mustang to settle as he began to snort and lunge, lengthening his stride; the big horse didn't like to have another mount leading the way. In minutes, they were kicking up wisps of foggy mist as it gradually enveloped them. They slowed, and after another couple of minutes of walking, large, wide-boled trees with high, broad canopies began to blot out the sun, further darkening the foggy area. Everything grew quiet; even Guapo's big hooves were muted as they crunched down on soggy, dead leaves and damp earth.

The branches were high, hanging over even Victor's head, and the ground between the big knobby trunks was free of undergrowth; if not for the mist, they would have had an easy passage between them. As it was, their visibility was low, and they had to keep their mounts moving slowly lest they ride into a trunk or get separated by the need to maneuver around the trees. After just a few minutes, Victor was wondering if they should stop and light a fire or something. Then Valla spoke up, and he slapped himself on the head. "Why not summon your banner?"

"I'm an idiot!" He laughed and channeled his Energy into his pathway, summoning the glorious banner. It blazed to life, palpable heat radiating from its sparkling, pulsing, blood-drenched sun. The mist recoiled like a living thing, falling back from the circle of light the banner cast, and Valla laughed, a sound Victor had come to love, though he heard it all too infrequently.

"It's like the light of your banner burns it off."

"Well, if it's created by the same Energy that powers the undead, that's not surprising. My banner has a way of messing those dudes up."

“We should hold here, no? If we get too deep in these woods, the army will have the same trouble finding us as we were having before you summoned the banner.”

“Yeah. I suppose the Naghelli can find us . . .” Victor let his words trail off as several dark shadows with glowing ochre wings drifted into the light of his banner, seeming to fall down from the heights.

“Lord,” one of them said, offering a salute. “We saw your banner and made haste to report. Kethelket has eyes on the next fortification.”

Victor almost corrected the man, explaining that he wasn’t a ‘lord,’ whatever qualified someone for that title, but thought he’d spend his time better asking about Kethelket. “What’s the story? How far is the keep? What kind of defenders?”

The Naghelli looked left and right at his compatriots, his eyes wide with something like apprehension, perhaps dreading what he had to say. He sighed, straightened his back, and opened his moth-like wings wide, maybe to give himself confidence. “The keep is not more than three leagues further west. We’ve slain dozens of undead in these woods, but something else lurks on the parapets, Lord. We saw figures cloaked in mist and shadow but oddly illuminated. Kethelket sent two of our number to try to subdue one, a single guardian on the southeastern corner. My brothers fought valiantly, but it was plain to see that their weapons could not touch the being. We watched, aghast, as invisible knives slashed them, their blood pulled from them in great fonts. Their bloodless corpses hang above the gates.”

The Naghelli scout bowed, folded his wings, and stepped back, waiting for Victor’s response to the news. “Ghosts?” Victor asked, looking from the dour-faced scout to Valla. She wore a puzzled, pensive expression and narrowed her eyes at his question.

“Ghosts? Like haunting spirits?”

“Exactly. If they’re spirits, but they’re hurting people here outside the Spirit Plane . . . is that possible? Does that happen?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think so. You can’t interact with this world when you Spirit Walk, can you?”

“Forgive me, Lord, but Prince Kethelket said we need not despair. He said that you would know what to do, that you were a master of the spirit, and that if anyone could face these beings, it would be you. Did he speak true?” This question came from one of the other scouts, a woman that Victor recognized; she’d been one of the scouts who’d first spotted the reaver army.

“Well, I’ll be honest.” Victor took a moment to look each of the five Naghelli scouts in the eye. “I don’t know what those things are, but if that’s how they’re doing what they’re doing—avoiding the weapons of your brothers by lurking on the Spirit Plane, then, yeah, I know what to do about ‘em. I’ll go into the Spirit Plane, and I’ll fuck their shit up.”

