

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

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

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

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

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

Guapo rapidly climbed the steep road, approaching the rear of the ragged column, and slowed. As the thunder of the spirit horse's steps faded, he heard a cheer rise up from the soldiers, and it twisted something in his gut. It took him a moment to realize he was scowling, that he'd let his inner disappointment and guilt show on his face. When the cheer faded and some of the soldiers stepped back, uncertainty on their dirty, haggard faces, Victor forced his brows to even out and spread his lips into something like a smile. He nodded to the cluster of men and women to his right and called out, "Are you just arriving?"

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

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

"You remember me, sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

He saw Lieutenant ap'Lissa standing before the gate, nodding to her troops as they went by, speaking quietly to other officers, one of whom was writing in a command book. When Victor jumped off Guapo with a massive *thud* and dismissed his trusty mount back to the Spirit Plane, she stopped what she was doing and snapped a smart salute. All of them did. Victor wanted to ignore her and rush inside, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. It wasn't her fault that all of this had happened. Instead, he nodded to her and barked, "At ease." He stepped up to her, cutting off the flow of soldiers who all stopped, staring openly at their giant commander. "Lieutenant, I've been unconscious, it seems, after my battle with Hector. How much time has passed since the mountain blew?"

"Nine days, sir!"

"And our losses?"

"There are currently two hundred and sixty-three members of the ninth cohort, not counting those we left behind as garrison troops."

Victor wanted to exclaim, wanted to cuss, but he wouldn't let the soldiers think he was disappointed in them. "A tragic loss, but you should all be proud." He spoke loudly, ensuring the soldiers gathering behind him could hear. "And the Naghelli?"

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

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

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

"And Captain Kethelket?"

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

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

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

"I killed them."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are they all getting awarded, too?"

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

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

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

"Green?"

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

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

"I think Chandri's dead. I passed the soldiers. You . . . you would have known if she was here." He balled up his left fist and pounded it on his forehead. "Dammit! She was so full of life, Valla! She had dreams! I know that's stupid—everyone has dreams, but she just sat down with me and told me about them." Victor leaned forward, hands on his knees, and Valla gently stroked the back of his neck. "What am I going to tell Thayla and Tellen?"

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

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

"You in there?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Robot?”

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

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

“Victoria did this?” Victor growled, scowling.

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

“Tell me what happened.”

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

Valla provided the word she was struggling with, "Phylactery."

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

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

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

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

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

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