

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

She could feel it, the mounting pressure of Hector's will. Soon his reserves would be pouring down that mountain road, over the bridge, and then through the gates, poor, pitiful Sarl hoped to bombard in the morning. She almost laughed aloud, thinking of his surprise as this little camp was overrun and their great hero was brought low by the Prince of Heart Rot. "Now, to find that blue-winged, simpleton of a girl." Catalina allowed her misty form to flow and merge with the tainted tendrils of fog clinging to the cold soil outside her tent. She drifted through the camp, picking up snatches of conversation as she peered into clusters of soldiers and drifted toward the command tents.

". . . first thing in the morning."

"Then we'll get old Troff to carry it, 'cause my back's had enough . . ."

". . . this mist, it gives me . . ."

". . . the Legate will show 'em . . ."

"Makes me wonder about them lights . . ."

Catalina swept past the last cluster of soldiers stationed near the inner perimeter of the camp, and, as she flowed between two large, vaulted tents, she paused in the shadows, her form nearly invisible as she clung to the cold, grassy soil, observing the green jade house where Victor had first imprisoned her. She was sure she'd heard passersby mention the commanders were meeting in there tonight. Had they already left, or was this a good place to wait for the girl?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As Victor said it would!” Lam laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

She peeled back a bit of her grip on the girl’s mouth and neck, still holding the rest of her tightly, wrapped up like a warm, pulsing meal. Her glowing flesh and ruddy cheeks had turned ashen. Her brightly sparkling, blue dragonfly wings were dull and lusterless. Catalina hissed a

graveyard breath into the girl's ear, "Fading so quickly? No, no, love, not before I have my answer."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His banner drove it back for a hundred yards, and Victor, encouraged by his easy progress, leaped and slid down the slope. He held Lifedrinker's spirit form in one mighty fist, ready to visit his rage upon the Death Casters and their creations that must surely lurk within. Soon, the slope leveled off to rough stone, the leavings of ancient eruptions, no doubt, and Victor increased his pace, jogging deeper and deeper into the caldera, frustrated by the mist that hugged the limits of his light, making it impossible to gain any perspective on distance or see any sign of what lurked further into the Caldera.

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

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

"Find me that *pinché* green star, *hermanos!*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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