

Victor stalked through the night, hunting amid the great, ancient trees, ripping the life and Energy from one foe after another. They were fleeing; he could feel the fear drifting to him through the forest like a bloodhound might catch a scent. While rich, it grew fainter as the spirits took flight, and he hung back, gorging on one downed spirit after another. Something was happening inside him, something in his Core; it grew fat and throbbed, seeking an outlet, and he knew, instinctively, he was supposed to do something with it. That awareness and the pleasure he drew from savoring the Energy kept him from charging wildly into the deep woods.

As the light faded from the spirit he held beneath his massive talons, he arched his back, causing his great, shadow-clad spine to creak and pop. He shook his head and shivered at the pleasure of it, feeling the fur and feathers that lined his form vibrate with the movement. Somewhere in his mind, Victor still existed, still fought for dominance over his fear and rage, and that fragment of himself had the wherewithal to wonder why he had fur and feathers. Why not one or the other?

The question felt like a clue. It felt like it had something to do with the enormous, swelling maelstrom of fear-attuned Energy that sat in his Core. He'd harvested so much Energy and drained so many spirits that night! To what end? He felt the answer to the riddle was right under his thumb, no, his talon—that he was on the verge of making a breakthrough. He could feel the drifting ribbons of fear growing more distant, though he wasn't worried; hundreds or thousands of prey yet lingered, hiding in the tall grass or among the trees. There would be no going hungry for him.

He continued to stare inward, mind entranced by that throbbing ball of densely packed fear. He'd begun to tease at it, to pull some forth, when a wild, mournful cry echoed through the night and was taken up by hundreds of other throats. What was this? More prey? Victor lifted his beaked snout and tasted the air, tasted the sound, and found it lacking sustenance. No, these sad creatures felt no fear. There was nothing for him in them. Nevertheless, they were intriguing. Where had they come from? Would they compete with him for the spirits? Their wails wound down, but he heard them crashing through the night, charging away from the forest toward the tall grass.

Should he give chase? Something in him loved the idea, but what was the point? Why hunt something that had no meat for his hunger? Besides, hadn't he decided to please the bright spirit, the one he recognized? "Valla," he grumbled, sniffing again, seeking a taste of fear. There was a great deal less of it on the wind. What was going on? Had so many spirits escaped? He sniffed again, and though the totality of the fear was lessened, there were some strong scents very nearby.

Victor slowly turned, snout raised, drawing the fear in; one, two, three, four, five spirits slowly approached him, five fear-filled morsels. They came closer despite their terror; this was new! Victor lowered himself, stalking along the frost-rimed, leaf-covered duff. His movements were cloaked in shadow, silent as a whisper as he moved toward the nearest spirit. He was halfway to it, his haunches straining with the urge to spring, when the spirit, and the others converging on him, ceased their movement. He felt a surge of Energy, something clean and bright, no taint of attunement. Rather than wait to see what they were doing, Victor leaped, crashing through a stand of saplings to fall upon the hazy spirit, weak compared to some of the others he'd consumed.

The poor thing wailed as he smashed it to the ground and tore into its shoulder with his beak and fangs, pulling the suddenly ripe, rich flow of fear-attuned Energy into his Core. As he

consumed it, he felt the other four fleeing. He chuckled, a dark guttural sound that rumbled in his chest, as blood dripped off his beak. As he feasted, something began to tickle the back of his mind, a feeling of urgency, easy to ignore at first but stronger, more persistent with each passing second. What was this? He had his mission—feast on the fear of these fools, punish them, and please the bright spirit.

He stood taller on his long, shadowy limbs, once again tasting the wind. Something new was coming to him, a taste of fear that hadn't been there before. He stood up further, on his hind legs, stretching his spine, reaching his head into the sky, and stared north toward the grasslands where he'd first rampaged. The other spirits, those not meant for his feasting, were afraid. They were exuding the emotion. It rose like a nebulous cloud over their walled encampment. Again that feeling at the back of his mind scratched at him, less a tickle than a claw now, a sharp reminder of his duty, a pang to wake up his sleeping self—he was Victor, and his men needed him.

The maelstrom of darkly-attuned Energy in his Core forgotten, his hunger for fear abandoned, Victor reached to sever the spell that bound him to the Aspect of Terror. Before he could cut it loose, though, a great roaring avalanche of man and metal fell upon him, cracking his bones, ripping his feathers, and sending him tumbling over the frosty ground to smash into the bole of a gigantic tree. His crashing impact was tremendous, cracking the wood, shaking loose old branches and thousands of leaves, and Victor knew nothing but fury. Who had dared to strike him so?

He needn't have asked; a Ridonne, taller than the one he'd met, stood where, moments before, Victor had been, a great shield on his left arm and a thick, golden broadsword in his other fist. It wasn't only the sword that was golden; the *man* was golden, from his armor to his shield to his very flesh. Victor felt his bones snap back into place, felt the shadows wrap around his torn limbs, and, before a heartbeat might be counted twice, he launched himself at the golden warrior, streaking like a shadowy missile through the night to smash into him. The Ridonne looked surprised, and Victor saw his spirit start to bleed through his physical form. It was brilliant.

Victor's hunger reignited, and he almost forgot about his duty, about his troops, but that pang in the back of his mind returned, ripping into his thoughts, pushing the nightmare away and bringing Victor forward. He couldn't play with this fool. He had somewhere he needed to be. He'd locked his talon-like claws on the Ridonne's shoulders, and as they tumbled through damp, frosty, dead leaves, he stared into his eyes, willing him to be afraid. He might have seen a flicker of doubt in those golden orbs, but the man held firm, hacking his sharp, terribly heavy sword into Victor's side.

Victor wanted to fight, wanted to rip that arm off and shove that sword down the Imperial's throat, but he felt that godawful pang again, and he knew he must hurry back to the encampment. In those desperate seconds, while they thrashed and struck at each other, he began to imagine Valla in danger, Deyni being killed, and Thayla being taken. "Enough!" he roared, and, acting on pure instinct, he pushed the massive torrent of fear-attuned Energy out of his Core into his pathways and willed himself to take flight.

A new kind of shriek erupted from Victor's throat—louder, higher-pitched, and loaded with primal memories that stirred the bowels of all those who tarried nearby, turning them to water and pausing the very beats of their hearts. Once again, he felt his limbs stretching and changing. He felt the fur coating his shadowy, skeletal form fall away, replaced by more of the glossy black

feathers, and then, with yet another terrible shriek, he raked his talons down the Ridonne's chest, rending his fancy armor and tearing deep, festering grooves through his flesh.

As the Imperial cried out and released him, Victor snapped his massive, shadowy wings and launched himself into the black night. The Ridonne sobbed, rolling to his side, writhing in agony. Blood turned black from corruption seeped out of the deep, horrible wounds in his chest. With wide, panicked eyes, he scanned the sky, looking for the monstrosity that had wounded him so, marring his perfect flesh, and ruining his peerless armor. Only darkness met his gaze, and that fear, that feeling he'd only felt a hint of before, grew in his chest, darkening his heart and bringing a cold sweat to his flesh.

Victor knew none of that. He didn't bother to look back at the golden warrior. He didn't care. His people needed him, and he could see why. From his new winged vantage, he saw hundreds of dark, twisted shapes leaping over the barriers outside the encampment. He cracked his wings again, shrieking his fury at their audacity, and then, he dove, streaking like a nightmare raven, swooping down to snatch a mouse. He crashed into one of the contorted figures, his talons gripping opposite shoulders, and he ripped it in twain, showering the dark grass with blood and entrails.

Another figure charged past him, then another, and soon he saw there were nearly a dozen already fighting on the wall, battering the bright spirits—his allies. Understanding drove the hunger from his mind yet again, and Victor reached into his pathway, severing the spell tying him to the Aspect of Terror. As the magic left him and the shadows obscured his transformation back to his human form, Victor began to cast Banner of the Champion.

When the shadows fell away, Victor stood tall, and a blazing standard erupted behind his back, washing the blood-soaked plains in its glorious light. Victor lifted Lifedrinker, roaring his enthusiasm for battle. Before he joined the fray, before he leaped upon a cluster of the twisted men and women, he called forth his great bear totem, fueling him with a tremendous torrent of inspiration-attuned Energy. As the bear burst into being from a cloud of glimmering white-gold motes, Victor urged his companion to slaughter the twisted men and women assaulting the encampment. Then he used Titanic Leap to send himself flying toward the nearest parapet.

Now that his vision had returned to normal, he noted the red-orange glow all around and realized the soldiers hadn't stood idly by to be slaughtered. Fires burned out on the plains where they'd launched fireballs at the charging, horribly mutated men and women. "What the fuck are these things?" Victor roared as he split one in half with his axe. The being was clearly once a Shadeni, though he'd been twisted beyond easy recognition. He had a long, tooth-filled lower jaw, one eye much larger than the other, and a weird, twisted horn that grew from one side of his head, winding around the back to jut out the other side. His body was similarly disfigured—one limb larger than the others ending in an enormous, clawed paw.

As Victor smashed one and then two of the creatures to bloody fragments, the soldiers nearby cheered and redoubled their efforts. He didn't know what had happened to these people and didn't care. Victor charged at another group of the monstrosities, hacking them to bits and spreading the bolstering effect of his banner. He felt an urgent need to go farther into the camp, and he jumped from the wooden parapet, landing with a ground-shaking thud near the central pathway. He saw a great cluster of the twisted humanoid figures, hundreds of them, not far away, and ran at them. A glimmering, lightning-wreathed sword flashed among them, and he knew it was Valla.

Victor roared, cast Energy Charge with rage-attuned Energy, and exploded over the ground, erasing the distance between himself and the monstrous figures. He was easily three times the mass of one of the weird, misshapen men, and when he crashed into the crowd of them, he sent several careening into others with such force that the impact split their flesh and pulverized their bones. The chain of collisions was so violent that when Victor recovered from the rapid movement to look for Lifedrinker's next target, he saw that he'd killed several and wounded twice as many.

Valla, Rellia, and Lam fought back-to-back, Edeya lay, broken and bleeding at Lam's feet, and Borrius crouched, shielding his head near Rellia. Victor realized he was lucky he hadn't smashed any of the aggressors into his friends, but he only thought about it for a second; he had work to do. He and Lifedrinker began to dance, then, and what a bloody waltz it was! He worked among the horror-born men and women, cutting limbs, cleaving necks, and smashing through skulls, painting himself, his friends, and the nearby tents red with sprays of hot, misty blood.

The attackers were fearless, unrelenting, and willing to fight with mortal wounds. Victor knew men and women were dying all over the encampment, but he also knew the greatest number of the monsters were there, at that location, trying to kill the leaders of his army. In the clarity of battle, he'd come to realize the pangs he'd felt were from his Battle Awareness feat, urging him to go where he was most needed, and he felt nothing from it now; he was exactly where he should be.

His banner and his arrival greatly bolstered Valla, Rellia, and Lam. When he cleared a swath to them, giving them the freedom to stop guarding their backs, they went on the offensive, and the disfigured one-time soldiers began to dwindle in numbers as the fierce women helped him cut them down. The monsters were tough, mentally and physically—Victor's banner didn't seem to affect them, but it didn't matter; it did its other job perfectly, encouraging and strengthening his friends and, more importantly, all the soldiers in the camp. Even if they were too far from him to get the direct, magical benefit, anyone within a mile of him could see that Victor was fighting the monsters, that his banner stood and blazed.

As was his habit, Victor roared and screamed as he crushed, cleaved, battered, and threw the attackers. Echoing him, out on the grasslands, his great, brilliant, inspiration-born bear did the same, and Victor found his love of battle and joy in conquest wouldn't allow him to keep from laughing like a madman during his slaughter. As the creatures mounted the wall, most were killed by the troops atop it. Those that fought their way through, leaping down to charge toward Borrius and Rellia, met their demise on the end of Victor's axe, the edge of Valla's sword, the point of Rellia's rapier, or the terrible smashing Energy of Lam's warhammer.

The stream of mutated men and women became a trickle, and when the last of them died screaming and crying with Lifedrinker draining it of Energy, a break appeared in the black night, and sunlight slipped through. Throughout the encampment, soldiers and civilians began to cheer, and Victor, heaving for breath and grinning wildly, allowed his Iron Berserk to fade. He was nearly out of rage-attuned Energy.

Leaning on Lifedrinker, leaving her buried in the monster's chest, he watched as Lam rushed to Edeya and administered a swirling, golden potion to the girl's pale, colorless lips. Victor's joy of battle rapidly faded as he saw the poor injured Ghelli, remembering all he'd done to save her once in the Greatbone Mine. He began to wonder how many other allies had died or been injured in the attack.

He started toward her, but then, like a secondary sunrise, golden motes gathered on the hundreds of corpses nearby and the hundreds out on the plains and the walls. As the System determined the battle over, the reaping of rewards was nigh, and soon those globes of Energy coalesced, streaming over the plains, through the camp, and into the victors. True to his name, Victor was the clear champion when it came to tallying the killing. A torrential river of Energy rushed through the brightening dark, washing him with its current, lifting him into the air, and filling him with its power.

Messages from the System began to fill his vision, and while he hung in the air, helpless to do anything else, he read through them:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 51 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Guard Ally - Basic.*****

*****Guard Ally - Basic: You expend some Energy to create a barrier around a nearby ally for a short time, transferring damage they take to yourself. You will suffer double the damage intended for your ally. Energy cost: 100, Cooldown: Long.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Aspect of Terror - Advanced.*****

*****Aspect of Terror - Advanced: Prerequisite: Affinity - Fear or related affinity. You change your appearance to represent something terrifying, an aspect molded from the deep roots of your primogenitors. Using the force of your will, you have refined this form, mastering it and shaping it into something truly terrible that sparks fear in the hearts of those who behold it. While wearing this form, you will passively harvest and cultivate fear-attuned Energy emanating from those who perceive you and cannot resist your will. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Impart Nightmare – Basic.*****

*****Impart Nightmare – Basic: While wearing your Aspect of Terror, using gathered fear-attuned Energy, you can corrupt the spirit of another being with a seed of fear, sending it to dwell in their Core where it will grow and fester. This ability will fail upon those whose will can resist your intention. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 – scalable. Cooldown: Dependent on harvested fear.*****

When he came down, Victor glanced at Edeya and saw she was standing, leaning on her knees, apparently recovered. Even so, he saw she was missing two of her four wings, and his heart ached for her. Lam was leaning close, speaking softly to her, and he knew there wasn't anything he could say at that moment to make her feel better. In any case, he wouldn't have had the chance—Valla hurried to him and smashed him into a hug.

“You made it back!”

“Of course,” he said, pulling her tight, savoring the feel of her, even through their combined wyrm-scale armors. “Come on. We need to see how many we lost. What the fuck are these things?” he asked for the second time, nudging one of the dead monstrosities with his boot.

“They’re Imperial soldiers,” Borrius said, walking over to them, running a hand through his blood-slicked hair.

“What?”

“The pact,” Valla said, her voice quiet, almost hushed.

“Exactly. Just as we made our soldiers sign a contract, so does the Legion. Theirs has harsher consequences for desertion than ours.”

“They were deserting?” Rellia asked, coming to join the conversation.

“I guess so,” Victor said. “I could feel them fleeing, the soldiers out there. I mean, not all of them, but a lot. So, their contract did this to them?”

“The commanders of their army would have to invoke it, but yes.” Borrius didn’t seem upset; in fact, he wore a savage grin as he continued speaking. “There must be a thousand,” he said, looking around. “This will profoundly affect their morale, much greater than just the number of losses. A thousand dead Imperials is wonderful, but thanks to the fear you invoked, we aren’t looking at a thousand dead foot soldiers. We’re looking at a mix of soldiers, officers, and even cavalry.”

“Roots,” Lam said, looking up from where she’d been tending to Edeya. “He’s right. Look here.” She pointed to a nearby corpse. “He’s wearing captain’s livery.”

“We should talk about what’s next,” Victor said, eyeing Edeya, still leaning against Lam, her cheek on her shoulder, looking away from the group of commanders.

“Can you tell us about their numbers? Their fortifications? Anything?”

“Nothing concrete.” Victor shrugged, then tried to elaborate, “It’s not that I’m trying to be difficult. It’s just that when I’m in that form, when the spell takes hold, I’m different. When I come out of it, the things that happened are like a dream. A nightmare. I’m pretty sure I fought the other Ridonne, but I knew there was trouble here, so I left him.” Victor paused, his face puzzled as he tried to remember the details, then he glanced at the sky, at the rapidly diminishing black clouds, and said, “Holy shit, I was fucking flying.”