

As Victor raced through the camp, building up momentum, planning to leap the fortification between himself and the distant, gigantic form of the skeletal dragon, he berated himself for being a fool. It was obvious the camp had been overrun at one point, obvious the soldiers had managed to rally, but not without cost—bodies were everywhere, scattered among the piles of pale, naked, ghoulish undead. How much of this assault had been due to his entrapment? Would Hector have sprung this assault if Victor hadn't Spirit Walked into the caldera? As if it could hear him thinking about it, the volcano rumbled again, sending him sliding into an overturned wagon.

The stumble brought his thoughts back to the present, and he growled, shaking his head. "Focus!" He sprinted several steps, bunched his legs, and leaped over the rough stone wall the soldiers had spent the last week building. When he landed, sliding over the hard-packed, gravel-strewn ground outside the wall, he caught his first full view of the gigantic draconic skeleton and the battle it waged. In a flash of red lightning, his sharp eyes caught sight of Valla's silhouette, flying in an arcing dive, trying to hit the cloaked figure atop the dragon's horn-crowned head. She was rebuffed by a curved shield of red Energy, sent spiraling to the ground and tumbling into a nearby gully.

The sight of her going down cleared Victor's mind, driving out all thoughts, leaving behind only a hunger for battle, a thirst for vengeance, and a deep, pulsating fury at the idea that this worm would dare to harm the woman he loved. As he burst into motion, his gigantic, powerful legs driving him into a mad sprint, he was sure Hector would turn his mount to pursue Valla, to finish her while she was down. He jumped a narrow, scrub-filled gully, and when he mounted the last hilltop between him and his foe, he realized there was another combatant on the field. A huge, powerfully built man was standing toe to toe with the giant skeleton, smashing aside its swiping claws and snapping maw with a rod-like cudgel, its impacts resounding with thunderous *cracks*.

The dragon skeleton wasn't as big as the elder wyrm Victor had helped to slay on Zaafor. It wasn't even half as large, but it was massive. Even in his full titanic aspect, Victor doubted he could manhandle it, but if that man, big as he was, could stand against those swipes, Victor knew he could do better. "Come on, beautiful!" he growled, lifting Lifedrinker high and furiously pumping his legs into a sprint. He was channeling Sovereign Will into his strength and agility. He wanted to move quickly and powerfully and had a target in mind.

As he closed the last hundred yards, his opponent utterly oblivious to his approach, Victor focused on the joint where one of the dragon's wings met with its spine. Victor was fast when he sprinted. His strides devoured the distance, covering half a dozen yards at a time. As soon as he felt close enough, Victor channeled rage into an Energy Charge and exploded through the air, ripping a furrow in the rough scrub and grass. He and Lifedrinker impacted the skeletal dragon with such a thunderous impact that it rumbled over the countryside like a bomb going off.

He'd kept his focus on his target, and when he hit, Lifedrinker sank into that joint, cleaving into the bone, sending fragments flying like razor-edged daggers. Victor felt the Energy being sucked out of his Core, summoned by the spell to protect him from the horrific forces generated by his violent impact into the airliner-sized pile of animated bones. His Core was ready for it; brilliant, furious Energy expanded in a ball around him, and he felt none of the devastating concussion. The same couldn't be said for the skeleton or its rider.

Lifedrinker's edge served as a focal point for the ruinous energies unleashed by Victor's charge. They entered that gap and, having found purchase, expanded between the bones into the cavity

of the skeleton's animated ribs, blasting them apart. The dragon's wing crumpled into its thousands of component pieces, flying in every direction. Its spine rippled with the impact, dozens of gigantic vertebrae flying through the air, and, riding the shock wave of Victor's freight train charge, the entire skeleton tumbled sideways down the hillside, the sickly green Energy animating its wings and bones flickering, fading, and winking out as Hector fell, bouncing onto the ground.

"Well-timed, Titan!" the hulking, club-wielding stranger hollered, though Victor hardly registered the words; he had eyes only for his tumbling enemy. Lifting Lifedrinker, exulting in her furious war cry, he leaped after him. Hector didn't lie still, waiting for him. More of the bright red lightning-like Energy Victor had seen him flinging about burst into existence around him. It shimmered and flashed, a tremendous whirling maelstrom of destruction that spun around Hector's darkly cloaked form for a dozen feet in every direction. Victor didn't care, and neither did Lifedrinker. She burst into molten fury at the proximity of their foe, and Victor ran straight into that maelstrom of lightning.

If he'd been expecting to shrug it off, Victor might have learned a lesson. He hadn't been, however. That would have required thought, and Victor wasn't thinking about anything other than reducing Hector to a pile of bloody chunks. When he entered that red whirlwind, the lightning surrounding Hector seemed to pause in its flickering random discharges. The lightning hung in the air for a fraction of a second, brightening to the point of painful brilliance, and then, in unison, a hundred different bolts exploded into Victor's chest.

Victor had yet to see Hector's face, but he dimly heard his echoing, maniacal laughter as his vision went black, his body went numb, and he lost all sense of direction, tumbling through the air. He didn't even feel it when he crashed to the ground, sliding through the dirt, his helmet and armor scraping over rocks and prickly, rough scrub brush. Victor lay insensate for several long seconds, and Hector's laughter grew increasingly mad as he recloaked himself in red, sparkling Energy, lifting himself into the air, hovering as easily as a person might float in placid water.

If he'd thought Victor vanquished, he must have been disappointed when, with a *thump* that resounded through the ground beneath him, Victor's heart began to pump, no longer stunned by the electrical burst of Energy. As light flooded his eyes, Victor was immediately cognizant of the heat around his waist, the furious ticking of his dragonsteel belt—it had absorbed its fill. Still flat on his back, Victor looked up, saw Hector floating toward him, and then heard the crunch of gravel as heavy feet stepped close. He glanced to his left and saw the tall, hulking stranger, noticing for the first time that he was covered in dark scales and that his face was reptilian with a short snout and bright yellow eyes.

Victor noticed how horns swooped back along the sides of the stranger's head as he glanced down at him. "Get up, Titan. This isn't over."

"No shit," Victor growled. He flexed his core muscles and lurched to his feet, staggering a little. The lightning blast had broken his concentration, extinguishing his banner and his berserk, but he felt fine, if a little numb. Hector still hovered twenty feet in the air, maybe three times that distant, facing the two large men. He'd stopped short at the reptilian man's approach, and when Victor regained his feet, his laughter died down.

"So you broke free of your prison, hmm?" His voice reverberated in the air, hollow and grating, almost like it echoed out of a metal pipe. "No matter. I can still feel the veil star, so you failed in that regard. You'll learn you're no match for a true Death Caster, pitiful Berserker."

“He dares to mock you? After you freed the spirit of my ancestor with a single blow?” The stranger’s words rumbled, deep and powerful, and Victor could hear the fury beneath them. He thought about what he’d said—did he mean the dragon skeleton? Was he related to dragons? He eyed Hector and his cloak of lightning. Would it strike so powerfully a second time? How big were his reserves of Energy? Surely, he must be running low on that caustic lightning. Victor glanced at his Core and saw that most of his Energies were full, that his rage was recovering quickly, perhaps fueled by his frustration.

Movement caught his eye behind Hector, and he saw Valla limping up the slope, Midnight gripped in one hand. One of her wings was held askew, and he thought it looked injured. The sight of her like that, dressed in bloody white rags, limping, injured, clearly on her last dregs of Energy, Victor felt his fury stoking to new heights, and he began to channel it into his pathways, ready to cast Iron Berserk again. Hector, too, had noticed Valla and turned toward her, lifting a hand high. Victor bunched his legs, ready to leap at him, ready to interrupt whatever attack he meant to deliver, but then the ground shook more violently than ever, and Victor stumbled, falling to a knee.

The stranger completely lost his footing, sliding and tumbling for several feet, and Valla, too, fell, slipping out of view back down the slope she’d just mounted. Hector might have pursued her, might have turned his lightning on Victor or the stranger, but, along with the rumbling of the ground, a plume of orange, fiery magma erupted from the high slope of the volcano. It sparked into the night like a fiery geyser, showering down, backlighting the high citadels. The magma flew through the air, falling to the slope, gathering in clump-like pools not yet thick enough to flow.

Hector had frozen at the eruption and how he whirled, turning to face Victor as he regained his feet. “Fool!” he screamed, and for the first time, Victor saw his face through the shadows of his robes and the glare of his red-lightning crown—he looked like a human man, pale with sunken, black eyes and flesh so thin and stretched that Victor could see the contours of his skull and the rictus grin of his exposed, black-gummed teeth. His death mask said it all—he wanted Victor dead, and he intended to kill him, but he had to deal with an emergency.

When he felt Hector gathering a massive torrent of Energy, Victor lifted Lifedrinker and pulled her back, ready to throw her, but Hector’s flight was more abrupt and quicker than he’d expected. He streaked through the air in a flash of red sparks, flying like a bottle rocket straight toward the top of the waking volcano. “*Pinché* motherfucker!” Victor roared, then sprinted to where he’d seen Valla fall. He found her at the bottom of the slope, tilting a healing draught to her lips. Blood, soot, and tears streaked her face, but she smiled when she saw him approaching.

“I knew you’d come.”

Heavy footfalls told him the stranger was approaching. He turned to him just in time to see his draconic, fang-filled mouth snarl out a curse, “Shit-eating undead. He fears the volcano will demolish his portal and his source of strength, that green star.”

Valla clambered to her feet while Victor regarded the stranger, turning to follow his gaze toward that venting tendril of lava on the side of the volcano. “Thank you for your aid, stranger. I’d have been in trouble but for you and that mighty weapon.”

“Belagog enjoys a good challenge.” The man lifted his rough, metallic cudgel, and Victor could see how it throbbed with Energy.

“I have to go up there. I can’t let him recover. I can’t let him calm the volcano. I can finish waking it.”

“No! Victor . . .”

“I have to, Valla. This attack is my fault. I got stuck in the Spirit Plane by that fucker. Please help the troops rally, gather the survivors, and get away from here.”

“We can help you, Titan,” the stranger said.

Victor shook his head. “No. No one can help me with this. I’m going to be mad with rage. Nothing will be safe near me.”

“But you can control your rage . . .”

“No, Valla, this is different. I’ll explain later, but I have to hurry. It’s going to take me a few minutes to climb that slope, and I don’t want that asshole to have any more time. Please! Get the troops to safety. Trust me.” Victor turned to the big, draconic warrior. “Thank you, stranger.”

“Lesh’ro’zellan. Lesh.”

Victor felt a wave of gratitude to the giant fighter when he heard Valla thank him. Had he really saved her? He held out his hand, and the man took it in his rough, calloused grip. His hand was nearly a match for Victor’s in size, and the two men nodded, locking eyes for a minute while they squeezed against each other’s might.

“Victor, is there no other . . .”

“I have to do this, Valla. Get Edeya out of the house before you pack it. Please! Go now!” He turned and started walking, getting ready to cast Volcanic Fury. He didn’t know exactly how it would work, but he knew that if he wanted to encourage the volcano, if he wanted to keep Hector from somehow stopping it from waking, he had to let it feel his answering fury. He’d taken two steps before he felt Valla grab his elbow and jerk, forcing him to turn toward her if he didn’t want to send her sprawling.

Her eyes were pooled with tears, and she practically screamed at him, “I don’t know what happened, where you were, but I need you to know that I was desperate to help you. I . . . I didn’t want to leave you but the others . . .” She shook her head, grimacing at her struggle to find the right words. “I want to help!”

“I’m sorry, Valla, but the best help you can give me is to save these people. I care about them, and if I know you’re saving them, I can focus on stopping Hector!” He started walking again, and she kept hold of his arm, running beside him.

“How will you get free if you wake that volcano? How will . . .”

“Valla!” Victor stopped, grabbed her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. “The volcano is not going to harm me. I promise you that much. Let me get up there and fuck this asshole up, please!”

“I love you!” She said, almost like she was pleading, and Victor couldn’t help his hardened, angry heart from melting a little. He grabbed her into a hug and squeezed her tight, his arms enveloping even her wings. She sobbed, “I want you to return. You have to survive!”

“I’m not planning to die!” Victor kissed the top of her head, still smashing her into a hug, then he let go and began to jog up the slope, and this time Valla didn’t follow. When he’d made a dozen long strides away from her, he formed the pattern for Volcanic Fury and let it pull the Energy out of his Cores.

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Valla stood, watching Victor run up the slope toward the gravel and dirt road leading up to the first citadel. He’d just reached the crest of the first low hill when she felt a surge of Energy, felt his aura break loose of his constant hold, and, as she reeled from the weight of it, she saw him expand, growing into his titan-sized form, but something was different. As his mass more than doubled, as his corded muscles bunched and piled atop each other, his body exploded with red-orange flames. He stood, limned in fire, drops of magma falling to the ground around him, scorching the rocks, burning the grass and scrub.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker high, and her metallic head burst into answering red-hot brilliance. He arched his back, arms wide, and screamed a furious, horrible challenge at the mountain. His voice rumbled and echoed over the hillsides, crashing off the high rocky slopes and cliffs. Valla was distracted, at first, by the warcry, but then she saw that Victor had turned back toward her. He stared at her for a long, terrifying moment, his eyes burning like white-hot flames, smoke flowing out of his nostrils as his chest heaved and pumped. The worst part of that gaze, of those blazing orbs, was that she saw not a single hint of recognition in them. She didn’t dare move, fearing that he’d change course and fly down that hill, intent on ripping her to shreds.

As he seethed and stared, fire dripping off his hands, the ground burning under his feet, a distant rumble shook the hillside, and the magma flow high on the mountain erupted again, showering the night with its orange glow. Victor turned away from Valla and, on seeing the eruption, roared his fury again and began running up the slope, loping over the near-vertical climb like it was nothing. “That was scary.”

“He’s awe-inspiring. I haven’t felt that cold bite of fear in my heart since I was a hatchling.” The stranger’s deep voice rumbled beside her, and Valla turned quickly, startled by the stranger’s—Lesh’s—proximity.

“Thank you again.” She turned to the encampment. “I have to do what Victor asked.”

“And I will aid you.” Lesh turned, looking over Valla’s head toward the distant signs of battle. “The dark-winged warrior, the one with twin blades, has led the soldiers in an offensive, driving back and crushing most of the remaining undead.”

“You can see so far?”

“Aye. I fear you’ve lost many soldiers this night, but if the titan can destroy the undead base, their lives will have been well spent.”

Valla frowned, not liking the gigantic fighter’s pragmatism. “I’ll fly ahead. I have to get my friend out of our travel home before we hurry away from here.”

“Yes. I’ll run quickly behind. Best if I stay with you so the soldiers know not to attack me.” He nodded, his dark eyes bright in the darkness. Then he turned back to the slope where Victor still climbed, a bright, humanoid torch leaving a trail of fire, and he added, “We have enough time to flee. He’ll be a few minutes making that climb, and then we don’t know how long it will take him to succeed in his task. Even so, I’ve seen many a volcano in my day, and this one is old and sluggish. We’ll win free of danger. Go now! I will hurry behind.”

Valla nodded, stretching her wings, relieved to feel only a slight stiffness; the healing potion had done its work. She snapped them downward, sending Energy into her pathways, and soon she was soaring upward and then, almost immediately, angling down to glide toward the glimmering jade travel home. She’d just begun to descend when another rumble shook the night, and a new plume of lava erupted from the side of the mountain, this one higher, nearly at the caldera. Seeing it, Valla realized most of the green-tinted fog was gone.

She could see clearly all the way to the summit of the high, volcanic mountain, and much more easily, she could see the citadels outlined in orange light from the rapidly gathering lava high on the slopes. As her eyes fell on the first, closest of the keeps, she saw its gates were burning, smashed open. Victor had already broken through. “Go, love. Go with speed and vengeance and destroy them all,” she breathed, spiraling down to land outside the travel home. “Destroy them all and hurry back to me.”