

A distant rumble sounded off to his right, muffled by the trees, and Valla said, "The ship went down."

"Yeah. Shit!" Victor grimaced and ground the knuckles of his left hand into the tree's rough bark, squeezing out sticky sap and sending crumbs to the soft, needle-covered ground at his feet. "I should have done something to help them!"

"You acted quickly. What could you have done? Leap into the air and try to block all the fireballs? I'm the one who should have stayed! I should have waited for the riders to get closer and struck them with lightning!"

"Nah," Victor said, his thoughts clarifying as he heard Valla's self-recrimination. "They weren't coming into range until all their little flaming missiles hit. They knew what they were doing."

"No, they didn't, not if they were sent for you. Did they really think a crashed airship would stop you?"

Victor grunted in response, scanning between the trees, trying to see any sign that the strigai riders had landed and were searching for him. They must have seen him leap free; he wasn't exactly small. A flicker of movement downslope caught his attention, and he held up his hand for silence, staring at the spot. His eyes were good, amazing, really, if you compared them to how he remembered his vision back on Earth. The flash of movement must have been half a mile distant, glimpsed between trees and underbrush, but he'd seen it, and as he stared, he caught another sighting of something bright, glinting in fading sunlight.

He pointed toward what he'd seen, and Valla nodded, shifting behind a tree, Midnight held ready in her two hands. Victor motioned to the right, then pointed to himself. When Valla nodded, he pointed to the left and then at her. She didn't wait for further instruction, slipping away through the trees, silent as a ghost as she glided down the hillside. Victor altered his Sovereign Will boost from strength and vitality to agility and dexterity and, surprisingly quiet for a giant, began to work his way through the trees to the right, downslope, trying to flank whomever he'd seen down there.

He held Lifedrinker ready in his hands and kept his rage-attuned Energy at bay in his pathways, ready to surge and explode into violence. Anyone seeing his face would have felt a near-irresistible urge to turn and move quickly in the opposite direction. His brows were heavy with fury, his mouth twisted in a grimace that promised violence. As he skulked through the trees, Victor channeled some fear-attuned Energy and cast Manifest Spirit, summoning a pack of silent, menacing, purple-black coyotes. With a thought, Victor sent them out in a wider net, looking for his foes.

He'd covered half the ground toward the spot of color he'd seen and was moving between two massive blue-green needle-clad trees when, in a haze of white heat, a ball of flames erupted from the undergrowth not twenty yards ahead of him. Victor roared and stepped into the ball of fire, swinging Lifedrinker at it as though he meant to hit a baseball into the stands. The projectile of flame was larger than it appeared, and though he smashed Lifedrinker directly into its center, it exploded into a conflagration that stripped the area around Victor of life, blistering plants, blackening bark, and doing a fantastic job of stoking Victor's fury.

The impact with the fireball had awoken Lifedrinker, and her glowing, molten-metal fury came to the surface, rippling the air around her with waves of heat. Victor jumped, more forward than up,

lifting Lifedrinker's smoldering, white-hot axe blade over his head in a two-handed grip. His armor was untouched by the flames, though his pants were singed, and his arms and face reddened by the exposure.

He streaked through the air, trailing smoke, the forest behind him ablaze, and when he crashed through the shrubs, his knee impacted a tall Shadeni wearing heavy red robes, smashing him to the ground. Victor could feel bones snapping and guts bursting as his enormous titan-sized form bore down on the man. Still, he stood, fluid and graceful with his heightened agility, and brought Lifedrinker down, severing the man's head from his shoulders.

Victor lifted his face toward the reddening sky and roared, his great lungs bellowing his fury. The sound echoed and reverberated among the trees and, distantly, off the far side of the valley. Suddenly the forest around him was filled with howls and yips as his hunting companions responded, unable to resist the urge to sing with him. Victor's soot-stained lips pulled back in a feral grin, exposing bright white teeth, and he charged into the trees, scanning for any sign of his next enemy.

His coyotes found someone before he did, and Victor could feel their excitement and hear the success in their howls and yips, so he turned sharply to the right, sprinting toward them. Somehow, he knew where they were, the knowledge coming from somewhere deeper than his bones. When he burst through a thin stand of saplings, sending twigs and leaves flying and slender trunks snapping and whipping in his passage, he found three of his coyotes growling and circling an Ardeni man, one different from any other Victor had met.

The man was tall and slender, wearing form-fitting, gleaming silvery armor—some kind of metal that looked impossibly fine and light; could it really provide protection? Victor's mind only had a moment to contemplate before he noticed the man's cat-like ears, oversized, angular eyes, long, black claws, and swishing, blue-furred tail. He was so startled and drew so many amusing connections to jokes Thayla and Valla had made about growing tails that he almost lost hold of his rage. A demented chuckle escaped his throat before he got a grip on himself, and, in that brief moment, the blue-skinned and furred man, striking like a viper, dispatched one of his coyotes with a long, curved knife.

Victor surged forward, filling the gap left by his vanquished companion, stepping through the black mist the poor coyote left behind and whipping Lifedrinker in a sideways cleave, aiming to separate the man's top half from the bottom. He was slippery, though, graceful in a way that even Valla would struggle to replicate. As Lifedrinker smoked through the air, the Ardeni slipped under her arc, came up close to Victor, and brought that wicked blade around as though he meant to cut Victor's kidney out.

Victor was no slouch, though, no novice of the axe. When Lifedrinker didn't make contact, he quickly recovered, and, as his opponent came close, really only standing about as high as Victor's waist, he released his grip on the axe with his left and reached down to grasp the slender man's shoulder. The Ardeni's blade skittered and scraped against his wyrm-scale vest, and his eyes went wide with surprise. Had his wicked stab never been defeated before? Victor wasn't surprised; he could feel the Energy in the man's movements—he'd conducted a powerful attack.

Still, the blade didn't penetrate his armor, and now Victor had a hold of him. "Game over," he growled, then bore down with all his might, squeezing the slender shoulder until he felt bones grinding against each other. He lifted the struggling cat-Ardeni from the ground and, choking up

his grip on Lifedrinker with his right hand, hacked the blade sideways, burying her gleaming edge deep between his enemy's ribs. The man gasped and clawed at Victor's arm, dragging those long claws along his flesh, raising welts, but nothing more.

"No," he moaned, his voice a snarl of disbelief as the light faded from his eyes. "No! How?"

Victor released his shoulder, dropped him to the ground, and pressed him to the soil with Lifedrinker's handle, watching his face. "Who are you?" he growled, giving the axe a bit of a twist.

"Oof!" the man hissed, blood spattering out of his sharp-fanged grimace. From the corner of his eye, Victor saw the man's long-clawed hand twitch, and a bright red, swirling bulb of liquid appeared in it. Seeing the potion and not knowing where his other enemies were, Victor decided to seek his answers elsewhere. He pushed down with all his weight, driving Lifedrinker's edge deep into the man's chest cavity, and then he gave her a savage twist. Wet cracks sounded as the Ardeni's ribs spread apart, and gouts of dark blood watered the forest floor.

Victor pulled Lifedrinker free, her blade gleaming with inner, molten fury. He smiled at her and growled, "You didn't have trouble with that armor, did you?"

*Let us hunt! There are more foes about!*

"Right," he growled, whistling and gesturing for his coyotes to take up the hunt. He'd been so focused on finding the source of movement and color he'd seen earlier, so caught up in his two quick skirmishes, that he hadn't spared Valla a second thought. Now, though, he began to worry a bit. If there were five attackers, and he'd dealt with only two, Valla could be in trouble. "Valla!" he called, turning in the direction she should be coming from if she'd been able to flank this foe with him.

Victor didn't see a sign of her, and, as he thought about it, he didn't see any sign of the winged mounts the two men he'd killed should have left behind. Frowning, he began to jog across the slope, slipping between trees, looking and listening for any sign of his friend. He'd run for about thirty seconds when he felt something from one of his coyotes—a target and a hint of something like recognition. "Valla!" Victor elongated his stride, leaping over undergrowth and fallen logs, the ground trembling with the impacts of his enormous boots. When he burst into a clearing, he found Valla standing over the dead, bloodied corpse of an Ardeni man. Facing her was the huge Shadeni, the one Victor had seen flying toward the airship with the enormous black horns.

Valla circled him, her form blurred by gusting breezes and tiny electrical charges, sliding over the ground quick as thought, clearly confounding the big Shadeni, who wore a round, black metal shield and gripped a thick, fiery, cleaver-like sword. His pale blue armor rippled in the sunlight, though Victor could see a tear under his right ribcage where, presumably, Valla had given him a taste of Midnight. He glanced at the corpse, saw many bloody rips in the man's white leather armor, and almost pitied the fools for trying Valla this way.

Valla saw him standing at the edge of the clearing, but the Shadeni failed to notice him. Victor started forward, and Valla gave him a quick nod, so he focused on the blue-armored figure and tried out his new Energy Charge. Perhaps because he was already channeling so much of it, or perhaps because it came so naturally to him, Victor cast the spell with rage-attuned Energy and howled with mad battle lust as his vision blurred, and he flew, trailing a cloud of red, smoldering Energy motes that hung in the air behind him.

With a bone-crunching impact into the Shadeni's shielded side, Victor found himself standing where his target had been and saw the horned figure flipping, head over heels, to crash into the bole of a mighty tree. The impact resounded through the clearing, and leaves and dead branches cascaded down, knocked loose by the concussion. Victor marveled at the spell's effect—sure, he was much larger than the Shadeni, and hitting him at speed should be devastating, but Victor had barely felt the collision.

The Shadeni groaned and writhed on the ground where he'd fallen, some of his limbs badly twisted and bent; Victor had given him some new joints. "Ancestors," he moaned, "receive me. Take me to your host."

Valla, in a blur of motion, moved to stand over the large man, her sword at his throat, but she didn't kill him. She looked at Victor, an eyebrow raised.

"Not yet," he grunted, stomping to stand over his broken foe.

The Shadeni looked up at him, pain writ plainly on his face, his eyes, earlier blazing with golden Energy, were dim now, but his lips pulled back in a sneer as he gasped, "Kill me then, beast. Finish what you've started." His left arm was twisted and broken beyond movement, but the Shadeni's right hand began to twitch, the fingers wagging in the air, and Victor wondered what he was trying to do. Cast a spell? Summon a healing potion? Insult him? Rather than wait to find out, he brought Lifedrinker down and severed the appendage.

"Ah!" the broken man wailed as dark, thick blood pumped from his wrist into the loam.

"Where's the fifth?" Victor growled.

"Eat my balls, scum!" The insult was so out of left field, nothing like anything anyone had said to him since coming to this world, that Victor barked a short laugh.

"Eat your balls? Holy shit. Valla, is that something people say in this world?"

The horned-man looked at Valla and, spitting loose a fragment of broken tooth, said, "So, you are Valla. Ancestors, damn you both!"

"Who sent you?" Valla asked, pressing Midnight's edge against the man's flesh. He was clearly a sturdy fellow, powerful for this world, or he'd have died from the accumulated injuries to his person. Victor noted how his wrist had already ceased bleeding and that, if he watched carefully, it seemed his limbs were slowly straightening; he had some regenerative powers.

"My question first," Victor growled, resting one enormous foot atop the man's twisted knee. He didn't press on it, but the threat was clear.

"Wait, wait," the man gasped, lifting his stump toward Victor's foot as though he could somehow halt the impending pain. "The fifth? So, you've met the four of us here in these woods, not just poor Ulvish and me? Well, forget the fifth. She'll have fled after sensing our demise."

"Where was she?" Victor asked, allowing the smallest fraction of his bulk to rest upon the swollen, broken joint.

“Old father’s twisted cock! Please stop! She was with the strigaii, downslope, just beyond the trees.”

Valla looked at Victor, met his eyes, and he said, “Now, her question.”

“Why? You’ll kill me anyway. Why destroy my honor before I go?”

“Your honor, worm?” Valla sneered. “Was it honorable to send a dozen merchant sailors to their doom?”

“I had my orders.”

“Ah,” Valla nodded. “The Legion, then.”

“You traitorous whore . . .” his words were cut off, replaced by a wail of agony, as Victor, growling, pressed down on his knee.

“Watch your tongue. Answer her questions.” As he spoke, though, Victor felt an alert from his remaining coyotes; they’d found something. “My companions found her, I think.” He turned in the direction he felt them, straining his ears.

“Wait!” the man gasped. “Let her live, and I’ll answer your questions. She had no part in the attack.”

“Well,” Victor nodded, lifting his foot. “That’s a start. So, tell Valla your name and the name of your friend, and I’ll try to keep my companions from killing her.”

“She’s not my friend, she’s my wife. I’m Chokodo-dak, and my wife is Reesha-dak. I’m a Princep of the Empire, and you’ve made great enemies today.”

“Oh, that’s a little stupid, don’t you think? I mean, we must already have had those enemies because you started this shit.” Victor looked at Valla and asked, “Do you recognize the name?”

Her face had lost all expression, and she was staring at the man, peering into his flickering, golden-lit eyes, and she said, “Aye, Victor. I have. This doesn’t bode well for the expedition.”

“Hah!” Chokodo spat, blood sluicing down his chin. “Your expedition, or do you mean your rebellion? Do you think the Empire so blind, so deaf?”

“You have any way to bind this asshole?”

“We could hood and tie him. Even a powerful Energy user would struggle to cause trouble for you or me with such restraints. If we bring him to Rellia, she’ll have the means to hobble his Energy use.”

Chokodo slumped at her words, defeat plain on his face. “Could you not spare me an elixir to speed my recovery? I’ll not struggle further. I am beaten.”

“Take his rings, stow his weapons, tie him up, and I’ll go fetch his wife.” Victor looked at the bloodied man for a long moment, thinking about the sailors, probably dead, and spat to the side. “No healing for him. He’s mending fast enough.”

“Understood,” Valla said, picking up the man’s severed hand and peeling the rings from the fingers. She glanced at Victor, still standing there, reluctant to leave, and added, “Go. He’s in hand.”

Victor grunted and turned, bounding through the forest toward his coyotes, instinctually aware that they had someone cornered. He only had to cover about a mile before he broke free of the trees onto a long grassy slope that led down toward a river that cut through the center of the valley. He saw, staked not far away, the five strigaii, their wings folded back and their beaks low to the ground. Victor narrowed his eyes to see what they were doing and saw bones and hunks of meat; they were eating. Just past them, back to a tall tree as though she’d tried to flee upslope, was a Shadeni woman grasping a golden rod, using it to fend off the tentative lunges of his companions.

Victor strode toward her and, with a thought, called his coyotes away, urging them to back off and expand their circle around her. As they obeyed his command and the woman looked up to see the furious, armor-clad giant stomping toward her, a great, smoldering axe in his hands, she blanched and looked around, perhaps seeking an avenue of escape. Her eyes settled on the strigaii, and Victor knew she was thinking about trying to run through two of his companions, past him, and onto the back of one of the beasts. He cleared his throat, reached into his Core, and severed the flow of rage that was feeding his Iron Berserk spell.

As his size diminished, Victor lifted Lifedrinker to his shoulder, holding her haft with one hand, and then he called, “You don’t look like a fighter. I don’t know what your role in all of this is, but you’ll fare better if you don’t try to run.”

The woman, Reesha-dak, lifted her rod, and a shimmering, blue, egg-shaped barrier flickered into being around her. She said, “I can defend myself, sirrah!” Her voice trembled, and she held the scepter sideways in front of her lacy, black blouse.

Seeing the scepter and her fancy shirt, Victor studied her for a moment, taking in the many rings, bracelets, and necklaces. He was no expert, but he’d seen plenty of gems since leaving Earth, and he recognized some valuable, perfectly cut stones among her jewelry. Her hair was pulled tight to her scalp, back in a perfectly coiffed bun, and atop her head was a delicate golden tiara, bedecked with sparkling rubies. A gauzy black veil hung from the edge of her crown, covering her face and held firm by softly glowing purple gems at its bottom fringe.

She had to be wearing more wealth than Victor had ever seen on display, even considering Rellia or the noble Vesh in Coloss. “What’s your story, Princess?” he asked, sighing. “Why’d that dipshit, er, what was his name, Choco? Why’d he bring you along to attack my airship?”

“How dare you? You aren’t fit to speak Chokodo-dak’s name, let alone question his actions!”

Victor chuckled, moving closer, now just a few feet away. He could feel the Energy she’d expended to create her shield and knew he could smash that little barrier with barely a thought. Still, he paused in front of her and said, “Your companions are dead. Your husband is in chains. You’ll both answer for your crimes today. Don’t make me embarrass you further.”

“Crimes? Chokodo serves the Empire! He acts on the emperor’s explicit orders!”

Victor growled, feeling his rage surging, wanting release from his Core. In a compromise, he let go of his hold on his aura, letting it fall out around him, and Reesha fell backward, sliding down the trunk of the tree, tears springing into her eyes as the scepter rolled out of her hand. Victor leaned forward and said, his voice thick with righteous indignation, for, in his mind, he was innocent of blame—he hadn't started this shit, "I'll let Rellia sort out what you're guilty of, as for the emperor, maybe that asshole needs to answer for his crimes, too."