

“You mean my refinement?” Victor whispered, leaning close and resting his cheek against Valla’s head as she leaned into him. “I haven’t looked yet. I’m nervous about it, and, well, we’ve been busy.”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah, the whole reason I took this Battlemaster Class instead of a legendary option was because it’s supposed to open up better Classes or something. What if it didn’t?”

“I wouldn’t worry. Even if you were stuck with keeping Battlemaster, it’s not as if it’s weak. My new Class isn’t legendary. Should I be ashamed?”

Victor could tell from her tone that she wasn’t upset; she was teasing. Nevertheless, he felt bad for his choice of words. “I didn’t mean that. I just . . .”

“Hush; I know what you meant.” She pulled away from him and gestured to Chandri. “She’ll probably sleep through the night. Why don’t we go someplace we can talk.” Victor let her pull him up from the couch and followed her into the hallway, then down to their bedroom. They had a table and chairs in the corner to the left of the door, but he walked past and sat on the thick red rug beside the bed. Valla sat down in front of him and waited expectantly.

“All right. Let me pull up the options.” He activated his status page, gave his attributes a quick once-over, and then mentally selected the blinking “Class Refinement” tab. The first option filled his view:

*****Class refinement option 1: Quinametzin Foe Slayer - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Sufficiently advanced Quinametzin bloodline. 2. Epic-level Berserk or Berserk-like ability. 3. Epic-level strength or vitality. You have unlocked the secrets of one of your primogenitors’ Classes. Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality.*****

“Do you remember the Quinametzin Foe Slayer I was offered last time?”

“The name is familiar . . .”

“It’s my first choice this time. Um, it’s legendary, and basically, all it says is, ‘Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood.’ The Class attributes are strength and vitality.”

“It doesn’t sound bad. I imagine if it’s only granting you increases to two attributes, they’ll be significant.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Victor shrugged. “Let’s see what option two is.” He mentally selected “Next,” and his eyes widened as he read the description.

*****Class refinement option 2: Warlord - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Prior Class levels in Battlemaster, Martial Sage, or Combat Savant. 2. Sufficiently advanced bloodline. 3. Sufficiently advanced weapon skills. 4. Sufficiently advanced attributes. 5. A sufficiently advanced Core with appropriate affinities. 5. A history of leading followers into large-scale conflicts and achieving victory. Class attributes: Vitality, Intelligence.*****

“Well, shit. I guess Khul Bach knew what he was talking about.”

“Warlord?” Valla’s voice was hushed as she leaned toward him, clenching her fists excitedly.

“Yep! It lists Battlemaster as a prerequisite, but also some other Classes I haven’t heard of, Martial Sage and Combat Savant.”

“Really? It makes you wonder if other worlds have more knowledge of Classes and their refinements.”

“Wonder? Nah, I’m certain they do. I bet, for example, whatever world Tes was operating out of, the one with the guild she was a member of, has entire libraries dedicated to the subject.”

“You think so? Do you think the ‘hub worlds’ Lesh mentioned will have something like that?”

“I mean, they must. Don’t you think? Imagine how much money people could make offering access to their secret Class tomes. On the other hand, I guess there are probably sects that don’t let anyone know their secrets.” Victor shrugged. “Something we can try to find out, huh?”

“Yes! Do you have other options?”

“Let’s see.” Victor could see that another option awaited because of the still-blinking “Next” floating on his System interface, but he didn’t know if it was simply the old “keep your current class” option. He selected it:

*****Class refinement option 3: Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Titan, giantkin, leviathan, behemoth, or colossus bloodline. 2. Rage or rage-derived affinity. 3. Magma, or magma-derived affinity. 4. Berserk or berserk-like ability. 5. Marked by the mountain’s fury. You have discovered the depthless anger of a mountain’s heart, and the furious spirit of that mountain has marked you as kindred. Accepting this new Class will further mark you as a herald of the angry, sleeping gods of the earth, reminding the waking world of the smoldering anger that rests in their hearts. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will.*****

“Holy . . .” Victor struggled for words, so many questions springing into his mind that he couldn’t get his tongue to form them one at a time. As Valla stared at him, he finally blurted out, “Have you ever heard the System describe anything as a god or gods?”

“The System? Never.”

“I can’t tell if it’s being, like, figurative or literal, but it seems to be calling volcanos sleeping gods.”

Valla’s eyes widened. “Back up, Victor. What’s the Class?”

“Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath. It’s also legendary, and it has some pretty wild prerequisites. I think the fifth one is the hardest—a person has to have been ‘marked as kindred’ by the ‘furious spirit’ of a mountain. Also, it requires specific bloodlines, rage, and magma affinities. Like, I can’t imagine those combinations are common.”

“Does it interest you more than the Warlord class?”

Victor thought about her question. He'd taken the Battlemaster Class specifically to try to get the Warlord Class offered to him. Now, he had it before him and found himself less than enthused. Something in him was vibrating with excitement about the herald Class, though, and he didn't have to try very hard to see the root of his enthusiasm. He knew it was his Quinametzin nature. He knew it was his memory of the volcano's power, the heat of its fury in the air. The volcano had saved him. More than that, it had saved the people he most cared about.

Victor had truly felt the hand of something unimaginably powerful. He'd bathed in its Energy, incorporated it into himself, and turned it against his enemies. He'd met a Warlord, one who'd come to dominate his world with that class, but what was he next to a volcano? Sure, Warlord Thoargh was strong; he'd intimidated Victor and chased him out of his world, but would he be able to stand in a volcano's fury unscathed? Victor didn't think so. This Class, this Herald of the Mountain's Wrath, seemed to be offering him the chance to take what he'd experienced inside the volcano and carry it out into the world. "Worlds," he corrected himself.

"Hmm?"

"Will you be angry if I don't take the Warlord Class?"

"What? Why would I be angry? It's Khul Bach you might have a problem with."

"Tough. I'm Quinametzin, not Degh, and everything in my blood is screaming for me to take this Class." It was true. He felt it in his bones, in his blood, and in his spirit, a deep reverberating sureness. He'd speak to Khul Bach about it eventually, but he didn't need the old giant's advice right then. If Khul Bach had never heard of the Class, he might argue, might try to change his mind, and Victor didn't want to deal with that. Khul Bach didn't know what he'd felt when he'd stood in that Caldera, steeped in the Energy of the Volcano. There was something there, a connection that couldn't be described with words.

"The, um, mountain herald one?" Valla was smiling, looking at him in a way that he'd come to recognize as loving acquiescence; she knew he'd made up his mind. "Shouldn't you at least see if there are more choices?"

"Yeah, good call." Victor advanced the selection screen and was strangely relieved when he read:

*****Class refinement option 4: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.*****

"No other options."

"So, you're sure?"

"Yeah, more sure than I've felt about anything for a long time."

"Well, the Warlord Class will probably be available at seventy if you change your mind." Valla laughed and shook her head. "Imagine! I never thought I'd be talking so blithely about reaching level seventy!"

Victor struggled to find any trace of his earlier gloom as he leaned forward to kiss her. She gently returned the affection, reaching up to lightly scratch the short, stiff hair on the sides of his head with her nails. Victor felt like melting into her embrace, but he chuckled, pulling himself away. "All right, I'm doing it." Before any doubt could find its way into his heart, Victor scrolled back to the third refinement option and selected it. Warmth rushed through his body as System messages scrolled before his eyes.

*****Congratulations! You have refined your Class: Herald of the Mountain's Wrath.*****

*****Congratulations! World-first Herald of the Mountain's Wrath! Feat Awarded: Mountain's Resilience.*****

*****Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Wake the Earth – Basic.*****

*****Mountain's Resilience: The strength of the mountain infuses your very bones. Like the mighty rocky slopes of a slumbering god, you are resilient against the elemental Energies. You will take 80% less damage from earth, 80% less damage from fire, 50% less damage from air, and 25% less damage from water. These resistances will combine and stack with other sources of protection.*****

*****Wake the Earth – Basic: Remind the earth under your feet of the fury that lies dormant in its depths. When you cast this spell, you will cause a violent upheaval by transferring some of your Energy into the ground beneath your feet. The size and magnitude of the upheaval will depend on the Energy you unleash. Energy Cost: Minimum 2500, scalable. Cooldown: Medium.*****

"Uh, this is awesome." Victor swiped the last message away and, as he refocused on his surroundings, saw that Valla had moved away from him, standing by the door. It was only then that he realized the air was full of smoke.

"You're going to burn up the furniture!" Valla cried. Victor looked down and saw the carpet turning to ash in a circle around him and his body outlined in smoldering flames.

"Oh shit!" Victor turned his gaze inward, saw that his pathways were absolutely flooded with magma-attuned Energy, and laboriously forced it back into his lungs and then into his breath Core. As he did so, the flames flickered and winked out, and the heat radiating from his flesh faded to a much more tolerable level. He looked at Valla sheepishly, "Sorry about that."

She arched an eyebrow and stepped closer to him. "Are you pleased with your choice?"

"Yes! I got a title and feat for being the 'world-first' in my new Class. That's never happened before!"

"Hmm," she nodded, stroking her chin, "I've heard of that. Obviously, it happens less frequently nowadays, but when Fanwath was new, many such titles were handed out."

She walked in a circle around him, stomping on the still-smoldering carpet. "Well? Tell me about what you gained."

Victor joined her, stomping on the ruined carpet with his much larger feet. "All right, I'll give you the details, but then I want to hear more about your new Class."

“I’ll make that bargain, but let’s go sit upstairs while this room airs out.”

“Will it?” The bottom level of Victor’s home was devoid of windows; his one big complaint about it.

“I’ll get a wind gust circulating, just a moment.” While Valla concentrated, a soft, gentle breeze flowing from her outstretched hand, Victor pulled up his status sheet and perused the details. He wanted to get the numbers right when he and Valla compared their gains:

Status			
Name:	Victor Sandoval		
Race:	Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 1		
Class:	Herald of the Mountain's Wrath - Legendary		
Level:	60		
Breath Core:	Elder Class - Improved 3		
Core:	Spirit Class - Advanced 8		
Breath Core Affinity:	Magma - 9	Breath Core Energy:	2200/2200
Energy Affinity:	Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1	Energy:	23243/23243
Strength:	370	Vitality:	475 (523)
Dexterity:	190	Agility:	213
Intelligence:	172	Will:	553
Points Available:	0		
Titles & Feats:	Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Greater Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness, Battlefield Presence, Aura of Command, Epic Quinametzin, Mountain's Resilience		
Skills:			
System Language Integration		Not Upgradeable	
Spirit Core Cultivation Drill		Advanced	
Breath Core Cultivation Drill		Advanced	
Cooking		Basic	
Animal Taming		Basic	

Unarmed Combat	Basic
Knife Mastery	Basic
Spear Mastery	Basic
Bludgeon Mastery	Improved
Axe Mastery	Epic
Grappling	Advanced
Sovereign Will	Advanced
Titanic Leap	Improved
Spells:	
Iron Berserk	Epic
Inspiration of the Quinametzin	Epic
Channel Spirit	Improved
Enraging Orb	Basic
Globe of Insight	Improved
Project Spirit	Improved
Dauntless Radiance	Basic
Heroic Heart	Basic
Spirit Walk	Basic
Tether Spirit	Basic
Harsh Light of Justice	Improved
The Inevitable Huntsman	Improved
Aspect of Terror	Advanced
Imbue Spirit	Basic
Honor the Spirits	Improved
Titanic Aspect	Basic
Alter Self	Basic
Energy Charge	Basic
Banner of the Champion	Basic
Wild Totem	Advanced
Impart Nightmare	Basic
Guard Ally	Basic
Volcanic Fury	Basic
Wake the Earth	Basic

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The next day, Victor found himself arguing with Rellia; she'd ridden ahead of her portion of the legion, pushing her vidanii to its limits to get to the Sea Keep in time to personally help Victor and Lam decide what to do with the colony stone. They sat at his dining table with Valla, Kethelket, and Edeya, though the latter simply stared blankly, sipping from a cup of lukewarm tea Lam had given her. Victor had watched Lam touch a thin, matching silver rod to Edeya's crown and tell her to drink. It was creepy, and he hated seeing Edeya that way, which was the root of his argument with Rellia. "I don't want to waste another week gathering everyone to plant the stone. We need to get Edeya help, like, starting today."

Rellia looked at Edeya, and though her eyes betrayed her sympathy, she frowned. "I understand, but consider the fact that she's already been stable like this for more than ten days. Consider also that we'll need time to build up the System stone once it's planted. It won't have the options for world travel right away. We'll need the legion members to claim their citizenship. We'll need to set up portal stones to Gelica and Persi Gables to bring our families over, and then they'll need to claim citizenship. The options for growth are dependent on citizens. Once we've done that, we'll need to sink millions of Energy beads into the stone to open up construction and development avenues in the System menu and . . ."

"I get it! Shit!" Victor growled, staring at Edeya, scratching his stubble angrily. "How much time are we talking?"

"Weeks, perhaps. I hope not months. We can't jump straight to world travel; we have to go through certain growth phases. The System does things in a methodical way, and, no, I'm not sure why. I'm going off books written by some of the people who were around when Fanwath was formed. They weren't easy to come by, you know; the Ridonne have done much to destroy the history of those times. Nevertheless, I think it's your best option of quickly finding reliable passage off-world unless you want to go to Persi Gables or Gelica and travel to one of the backwater worlds the Ridonne have opened up in those cities."

"What about Tharcray?"

Rellia chuckled. "By all means. Go and ask the Ridonne to allow you to use their colony stone. Never mind the months-long journey to get there."

Lam interrupted the speculation with some of her own, "Didn't you say Catalina probably won't do anything with Edeya's spirit right away, that she might have plans that spanned decades or centuries?"

"Lam, I don't know, though! I was just guessing, thinking aloud, trying to make people feel better. Regardless, we should hurry. I thought you'd be the first to agree with me on that point."

Lam's eyes narrowed, and Victor could see she was getting angry. She held Edeya's free hand, and her thumb outlined little circles on the back of the young woman's palm. "I agree with you. I do. It's just that she has a good point; thousands have sacrificed for this endeavor. Should we really plant the colony stone here, ahead of their arrival? Is this the best place for it?"

Kethelket cleared his throat. "The central location, the one Hector held, is not an option."

“Yeah, I will recommend that you all do not build anything on that volcano.” Victor couldn’t keep the amusement out of his voice.

“This isn’t a time for jokes,” Lam growled.

“I’m not joking. Do you think I’m the only one who might be able to wake that volcano?” He didn’t wait for an answer. Gesturing to Kethelket, he added, “He has a point. The central location is a no-go. We don’t want the capital at the pass; what if Ridonne invades? We don’t know what’s south of these lands, so why build it south? We’re on the western edge of the Marches, and there’s a sea here. On the eastern edge, you’ve got more mountains. I think this *is* the best spot! Wouldn’t it be smart for the capital to have a port?”

“I agree,” Kethelket said. He and Victor had spoken at length that morning, and Victor had spent a good part of that conversation trying to apologize for the losses the Naghelli had suffered. Kethelket wouldn’t hear it; he insisted that Victor was responsible for a swift victory with relatively minor losses, all told. No matter how Victor described his foolish mistake of venturing into the caldera alone and becoming trapped, Kethelket continued to point out their crushing victories over much greater numbers. All in all, there were still more than two hundred Naghelli, and they were eager to live among the Ghelli again, no longer outcasts.

Rellia surprised him by nodding, clearing her throat, and pushing her chair back. Victor hadn’t seen her in weeks, and though she looked much the same, she also looked different. It took him a while when she first arrived to realize what it was, but after he’d figured it out, it was obvious—she’d advanced her race at some point. She was taller than before, leaner with brighter eyes and more pronounced canines. He couldn’t help noting how her ears curved upward through her thick, lustrous red hair. He wondered if she’d unlocked the same bloodline as that cat-like Ardeni he’d killed near Fainhallow after they’d attacked his airship. She stood up and rested a hand on Lam’s shoulder. “I agree. We’ll find a suitable site here, near the sea. Better to get the stone in the ground and start working on it.”

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Victor climbed to the top of the grassy hill. He could hear Lesh’s steps close on his heels, but his long, powerful legs devoured the slope, leaving most of the others behind. When he reached the broad, flat hilltop and stood at the center, he turned in a slow circle, taking in the view. To the south, small in the distance, he saw Sea Keep butting up to a range of rocky cliffs and hills. To the west, maybe a mile distant, the Silver Sea stretched to the horizon, glittering in the sun’s light. To the north, more rolling hills fell away, and distantly on the horizon, he saw the green-blue smear of grasslands. He knew that beyond those grasslands was the burnt-out forest of Black Keep. Turning to the east, he saw the ash-dark sky hanging over more hills and valleys and, just a purple smear in the gray sky, the slope of the mighty volcano.

“A good site,” Lesh rumbled. Victor turned to him and saw that many others had mounted the hill—Rellia, Valla, Kethelket, Lam, dozens of soldiers, and most of the Naghelli. He watched them continue to climb up the slope, coming into view, and that’s when he picked out Chandri. She was much recovered from her injuries. Her hair was short, cut that way to keep it out of her wounds before she’d gotten the regeneration potion, but otherwise, she looked like her old self. She was even laughing at something the soldier beside her had said.

“I think so too. From here, the city will have space to grow out toward the sea and in every other direction. And this hilltop is the highest around—a good place to defend.” Victor watched as

Valla approached, and she smiled brightly, waving. She could have flown up ahead of everyone, but she kept Lam company, holding one of Edeya's hands while Lam held the other. As he stared at her, his eyes wandered to Lam, Rellia, and even Edeya; they all looked stunningly beautiful in the bright sunlight, their clothing clean and colorful, their eyes glittering like jewels as they flashed smiles, talking excitedly. Victor hoped their good mood wasn't misplaced; he hoped he was right and they'd still be able to help Edeya. It made him nervous that Lam was acting as though it was a sure thing. He figured that might be how she coped with the stress, however.

He waited a few more minutes until almost everyone had assembled, forming a big, loose semi-circle around him at the center of the hilltop. Lesh stepped back and sat in the grass near Kethelket, and Victor raised his voice, "Everyone! Give your attention to Legate ap'Yensha!" He locked eyes with Rellia, and she smiled and nodded.

"Soldiers! Fellow citizens of these new lands! Our time has come to make our claim! I rushed to get here, but many other worthy comrades are also hurrying to join us, so let's keep them in our hearts on this momentous day! Today, we found our colony. Today, we claim our freedom! Today, we begin building toward something great, leaving our mark on this world so that our children's children will remember us and be grateful for the freedom we fought for, for their lives free of the yoke of Ridonne oppression!" She smiled and nodded as her words were drowned in cheers and applause. The soldiers were happy for her words, but everyone knew the situation. Everyone knew Edeya, standing there with a blank expression, desperately needed help and that the colony stone was the fastest way to get it for her.

When it didn't seem like Rellia would say more, Victor hollered, "Glorious Ninth! We're here because of your bravery!" Again, the soldiers went wild with cheers, and Victor saw Agnes and some of the other former thralls shaking their fists in the air, howling with excitement. They'd fit in well with the cohort, and it looked like they'd made many friends, judging by how close the others crowded around, exchanging slaps on the shoulders. "I don't have much more to say other than I'm proud of you all. We're going to build something amazing here."

Victor smiled and turned away as the crowd continued to applaud. He looked questioningly at Rellia, then Lam and Valla. When they all nodded, he hefted the heavy System-created colony stone and knelt in the grass, twisting it with the slightly broader end until it was stuck in the grass, standing upright. Nothing happened, and Victor chuckled; what had he expected? He had to activate it. "Channel some Energy . . ." Lam called, but Victor lifted a hand and waved her off. He knew how to kick-start a magical item. He pulled a thread of inspiration-attuned Energy out of his Core and sent it out through his palm into the stone.

*****Colony Stone, activate at the present location?*****

Victor smiled and turned to nod at the largest part of the crowd behind him. "Yes."

*****Who is the leader of this settlement?*****

Rellia had prepared Victor for this. As soon as she'd realized they were going to go through with the colony founding that day, she'd walked Victor through a ten-page dissertation about the colony stones and what he should do to set it up properly. As he sat there, contemplating the question from the System, Victor knew he could be selfish and claim the colony for himself. He could even make himself a dictator like the Warlord in Coloss. "I'm not that kind of *pendejo*, though." He spoke aloud, low so only he could hear himself, but he almost had a heart attack when the prompt flashed in his vision:

*****Who is the leader of this settlement?*****

Seeing it was the same question, his racing heart slowed, and Victor carefully said what Rellia had written, “Rellia ap’Yensha, Victor Sandoval, Lam, daughter of Fellis from Twilight Home. A temporary triumvirate with equal voting authority and weight.” Lam and Rellia had some sort of landholder republic in mind, and Victor didn’t know enough about the subject to want to argue. He just wanted his share of the lands they’d conquered. The temporary triumvirate would serve until they’d opened more options up in the stone, and she could change things around.

*****What is the name of your settlement?*****

Victor smiled and loudly proclaimed, “The Free Marches.” Of course, cheers broke out around him as the prompt disappeared, and he heard the sound of thousands of tiny cracks splitting the stone. Heat and steam burst forth from the seams, and Victor grinned, inhaling the hot gasses, utterly unfazed.

“What’s happening?” someone cried, and he realized he was leaning over the stone, watching, and blocking almost everyone’s view with his bulk. He stood up and backed away, watching as, in seemingly random order, segments of the stone split apart, stretched, and then re-fused with the whole. This occurred over and over, hundreds or thousands of times; all the while, steam lit with golden highlights burst forth from the splits in the stone. With each cracking and fusing, the obelisk grew, and Victor continued to back up until he was standing beside Valla.

The crowd became quiet, watching, mouths agape, as the stone grew to immense proportions; after a minute or two, there was so much steam flowing down the sides of the hilltop that it rose to even Victor’s hips, and some people had to cough and wave it away from their faces. The stone continued to grow, cracking, fusing, and emitting gouts of dense steam the whole time. After what must have been fifteen or twenty minutes, it finally started to slow and gradually settled into its final, solid shape. The little obelisk-shaped stone was now a true monolith, towering forty feet into the air, each of its six facets measuring four feet wide at the base.

The big monolithic stone had planted itself in the ground, and its dark gray surface ticked as it settled. Victor watched as the golden runes seemed to float up from the depths, hovering and shimmering just beneath the stony surface. As the steam blew away on the wind, a System message appeared in front of his eyes:

*****Colony: The Free Marches, established. Initial area of influence: The lands granted in the System-generated conquest challenge—66 million square acres south of the mountains known as the Granite Gates, east of the body of water known as the Silver Sea, and bordered on the south and east by as-yet-unnamed mountain ranges. Current population: 3. Colony Stone level: 1.*****