

Eyes on the glowing tent, Victor dismounted from Guapo and dismissed the sturdy mount. The center of the Imperial camp was deserted, no one challenged him, and he could be atop that rise, smashing through the tent in one leap—the Mustang wasn't needed. He shifted his Sovereign Will boost from agility and dexterity to strength and vitality. As his muscles swelled with power and he felt the vibrant Energy bolster his already sturdy form, he lifted Lifedrinker and began to stalk forward.

The sounds of battle behind him grew louder as his troops clashed with the Ridonne's guardian forces. He knew if he looked back, he'd see his cavalry breaking through, riding in a loop, and then charging again. They planned to do so over and over until they lost too many mounts, were surrounded by too many enemies, or one of a myriad of potential circumstances prevented their repeated charges. Victor felt good about their chances; he'd given them a hell of a first charge, and the defenders seemed far fewer than they'd planned for. Maybe with Polo, Valla, and Lam leading them, they'd actually win.

Victor brushed the thoughts of his troops out of his mind and focused on the task at hand. He began to regulate his breathing, visualizing how he'd crush first one Ridonne and then the other. He figured he'd kill the shorter, spiky Ridonne first; he hadn't seemed as strong as the big golden-skinned one. He was halfway up the rise, passing by empty, smaller tents, perhaps fifty yards from the big glowing tent when it exploded.

Exploded was probably the wrong word, he revised, ducking down, shielding his eyes from the bright flare. The orange-red burst of light was so bright, so intense, that he'd thought something had blown up in the tent, his mind drawing ridiculous pictures of cartoon-style TNT barrels. No explosion accompanied the flash, though, and as the bloom faded, he saw a great rip in the fabric of reality. It wasn't smooth or neatly oval like some of the portals he'd seen; it looked like a jagged tear through which weird, red mist flowed, traveling on a current of wind Victor couldn't feel. As the mist passed through and the rip began to shrink, a terrible shrieking cry echoed through the night, loud and multi-voiced, like a trio including a bass, a treble, and a warbling, pain-filled soprano.

Something stirred in Victor's chest at the sound, and he began to regress in his Berserk state to the way he used to feel before he'd learned his Iron Berserk spell. He felt himself straightening, his shoulders squaring, and a thought, almost foreign in his mind, echoed through his psyche—who was this weakling to scream so in his presence? Victor stoked the rage in his pathways and pushed it into his arms, using Channel Spirit to fill Lifedrinker with it. She shimmered with a red heat, and then the silvery sheen of her axe head burst into molten orange fury, black smoke drifting into the night as she smoldered and cooked the air. He stalked forward toward the diminishing reddish rip in the air.

Distantly he felt his bear fade away as it succumbed to thousands of wounds. He wasn't upset; he'd gotten a sense of conquest from the great beast and knew it had crushed many, many Imperials before it fell. He contemplated summoning his coyotes but decided to wait; he wanted to see what lurked in the bright glow of that rip. What creature had dared to utter such a shriek? It had been a challenge, there was no doubt, and Victor felt his blood boiling at the idea. By the time he crested the hill and stood there, looking at the ruins of the great tent under the fading light of the diminishing tear in reality, he was limned with red rage, his chest heaving with fury, his knuckles white on his axe.

The wind blew heavily over the hilltop, and he saw two individuals there at the center of the flapping, torn, smoldering tent. One, a frail-looking Shadeni, scabbled at the ground, worming

his way under the ripped fabric of the tent. The other was large, squatting on its haunches, a shadowy hulk that peered out from hooded brows with lantern-sized glowering red eyes. Here was his challenger, Victor decided. Here was the one who needed to feel his might.

With a raw, scraping, grating voice, the thing hissed, "A snack to welcome me home? How pleasing!" Then it flew through the air, quick as a thought, toward Victor. Enraged as he was, full of the proud blood of his ancestors, Victor bristled at the thing's words and lifted Lifedrinker, swinging her hatchet-like at the incoming ball of smokey shadows. He might not have been boosting his agility, but Victor wasn't slow, especially when Berserk. Lifedrinker, smoldering like a razor-edged coal, smashed into the challenger, pulling forth a wail of agony.

Victor didn't have time to celebrate or gloat; though wounded and stopped short by his cleave, the creature stood tall before him and hacked down with a jagged, blood-red sword at Victor's chest. Victor felt his wyrm-scale vest eat the blow, though the impact was immense, and he had to take a step back to steady himself. He didn't look down at his chest to see the damage done to his armor; he didn't have the time or mental bandwidth for that. He was too engrossed by the appearance of his foe now that it had emerged from its hunched, shadow-clad posture.

The man before him, for it was evident this was a man, not a beast, was nearly as tall as Victor in his Quinametzin form, slighter, perhaps, but impressive in almost every way. More than his height and red-gold flesh that shimmered with Energy and power, the man was handsome in a weird, inhuman sense. His eyes were like golden orbs with red irises, and his hair was a flowing mane of feathery, red locks. He'd unfurled two massive wings that spread wide behind him, giving him the impression of a vastly greater bulk. The wings were bedecked with thousands of red feathers that matched his hair, and he wore golden armor similar to what Victor had seen on the Ridonne he'd previously fought.

When his red, shimmering blade didn't split Victor in twain, the weird, handsome man stepped back, twisted his full, red lips into a sneer, and said, in that raw, scraping voice, "Succumb. Make this easy. I have slaying to do."

Victor had gathered his wits enough to realize this was some kind of Ridonne—a third one. Perhaps he was one of their champions, come to rescue the two others he'd already thrashed. He grinned, thinking of it, likening the pompous, winged buffoon before him to an angry uncle or parent. Rather than speak to the fool, rather than break his rule about shit-talking during a fight, Victor closed the gap between them, only five yards or so, with an Energy Charge fueled by inspiration. He streaked over the ground in a blur of white light and glittering motes and smashed his enormously dense Kethian Juggernaut helm into the Ridonne's chin.

In the terrible concussion that followed, Victor was shielded by the Energy of his spell. The Ridonne tried to stand firm and put some Energy into his pathways, blazing with red-orange light, but it wasn't enough; as Victor replaced him on the contested soil, the Ridonne tumbled back, completing a half back-flip before his head struck the ground and he slid through two nearby tents, digging a foot-deep furrow in the grassy loam. Victor knew better than to stand around and watch what his enemy would do. He leaped after him, bringing Lifedrinker down in a terrible chop at the downed giant.

He soared downward, Lifedrinker's edge mere feet from the Ridonne's collarbone, when a globe of red Energy expanded from the weird warrior's chest in a brilliant flash. Like an explosion centered on the tall, golden man's body, the red Energy consumed everything it touched,

vaporizing the tent remains, the grass, and the very soil upon which he lay. Worse, as it expanded in a point-blank explosion, the outer edge hit Victor as he fell from the sky.

The Energy was hot, angry, and filled with destructive power. Lifedrinker was the first to feel it, and he heard her scream in tortured agony, a sound that ripped through his mind. Panicked at the idea that she might be destroyed, Victor jerked his arm upward, flinging her away. She spun through the air, smoldering and blackened, to land in the grass fifty yards distant. Before Victor could feel relief that she wasn't vaporized, he fell into the globe of destructive Energy and knew nothing but pain.

Victor felt his flesh begin to come apart on his left hand, forearm, and his knees, as they were the first parts of him to touch that laser-hot sphere. As he continued downward, and his arm and legs, then his chest and torso, passed through it, he felt something akin to what he'd experienced when he'd inhaled the smoke of the fire drake. If whatever Energy was tearing him apart was fire, he'd feel better, knowing he'd resist much of it, but it didn't burn like fire. It was something else, some horrible Energy that clawed at him with the strength of acid and the heat of an inferno.

Many people might have thrashed and tried to roll away or change their trajectory. Many people might have panicked and folded from the pain. Many people would have lost the battle in that instant in their desperation to save themselves, to escape that agony no matter the cost. Victor wasn't an average man, however. The problem for the Ridonne was that Victor had one thing in his mind, and it was to rip the heart from his enemy, damage to himself be damned. Still falling in a red haze of fury and agony, Victor brought both of his bloody, dissolving hands toward his prone enemy's throat.

As he finished passing through the expanding bubble of terrible Energy, he smashed down on the golden man's chest. Blood showered off him at the impact, leaking from the many breaches in his flesh, but he'd felt worse, seen worse. He was already healing, his powerful flesh absorbing the terrible abuse as his Berserk healing and massive vitality worked to undo the damage he'd suffered. Meanwhile, his knees brought forth loud cracks and pops from the Ridonne's big chest, and his hands had found their purchase around his golden throat. Victor squeezed as he leaned forward, eyes red with blood and madness as he leered with bloody teeth at the Ridonne's shock.

As his enemy thrashed and vast torrents of Energy coursed through his golden body, Victor bore down with his enormous fingers, the cable-like muscles in his forearms standing out like the roots of a mighty tree. He squeezed with such fury, such single-minded madness, intent on seeing the eyes pop from the Ridonne's skull, that he almost didn't realize his foe was lifting that long, jagged, red blade, aiming its curved edge at the gap between his wyrm-scale armor and the rim of his helm. He meant to decapitate Victor.

Growling, Victor released one hand from the golden man's throat and grasped at his wrist, stopping the sword stroke inches from his flesh. Somehow the reprieve was enough for the Ridonne to recover slightly, to get some blood up to his brain or manage some kind of spell, for, in another burst of hot, red Energy, he exploded into a crimson mist that sped over the ground, stopping to gather dozens of yards from the furious titan.

Victor stood up, his death grip foiled, and took stock of himself. He was bloody, but the soreness of his flesh was fading quickly. His pants were shredded to tatters, but his stronger magical gear was intact. His vest was shinier than ever as it glimmered in the weird lights filling the sky from

the battles taking place all over the grassy plains. He knew his helmet was fine without looking at it; the damn thing was nigh indestructible. As he stood there, stewing in his rage, watching the weird red cloud, wondering if the Ridonne would rematerialize or flee like they all seemed to love doing, he patted at his waist, felt his steaming, ticking belt, and knew it had absorbed much of the spell's potency. What would have happened to him without it?

Watching the mist, wondering what the Ridonne was doing in there, Victor stalked over the ground to his smoking axe. When he picked her up, Lifedrinker hummed, scorched but alive. She radiated fury warring with gratitude, glad he'd been so quick to pull her from her torment but ready to kill the one who'd stung her. Brushing some of the char from her haft, he started toward the cloud, wondering what spell to use to force his foe to show himself. He needn't have wondered; as soon as he closed to within ten yards of the cloud, it shimmered, swirled, and condensed into the form of the golden man.

He grinned, whipping his red blade back and forth as he watched Victor. "Well," he hissed, "what a surprise. What have my foolish descendants allowed to walk into their world? Hmm? I can't have this. Come, let us dance; let me see how you use that axe, giant."

"Titan," Victor corrected, and then he cast Energy charge again, this time fueling it with rage, though his Core was running low on the precious commodity.

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Borrius watched as his world began to come apart. It started with some irrationally brave Imperials who charged on their roladii, got close enough to the ramparts to use wind-attuned spells to mount the wall, and as they were cut to ribbons, managed to kill a handful of the defensive casters for that side of the fort. What madness would spur men and women, clearly all at or near tier four, to throw their lives away so valiantly? They weren't here to defend their families but to stop an army that wanted nothing to do with them! Why would they sacrifice themselves so?

The irrationality of their heroism was the only thing he hadn't accounted for, the only thing that he couldn't have expected; Imperial troops were not known for their selfless valor! He'd screamed at Edeya to send for more defensive casters, but they were all busy on their ramparts, and their extrication from duty took too long. Imperial Earth Casters, clearly heavily stacked on this side of the fort, had summoned the soil and teased it forth with rocks and boulders to build an earthen ramp that stretched down from the top of the ramparts some two hundred yards, burying many of the defenses the army's engineers had so painstakingly erected.

Such a working wasn't normally seen on a battle of this scale, Borrius told himself, trying to wrap his mind around how easily he'd been outwitted. Had he been, though? He shook his head. If anyone had outwitted him, it was himself; he'd relied far too heavily on his knowledge of Imperial tactics. These soldiers weren't behaving like Imperials; the Ridonne must have done something to their minds. It was moot now, he said, listening to the hysterical clash of magic and steel below him, watching as their rampart was overwhelmed. Rellia was screaming something, orders for Edeya to write down, no doubt. He couldn't focus on her; his eyes were glued to the carnage below.

The Imperials were being slaughtered two or more for every man or woman on the wall, but they still came. They fought like they were possessed even when Borrius had called out orders to

use their ramp against them, allowing them to fill it with bodies and then using firebombs and archers to mow them down. Lightning strikes, sleeting gales, pits of magma, all summoned by the remaining defensive casters to great effect, slaying hundreds, even thousands of the charging Imperials, but they kept coming. They kept coming, and the greater number of casters out on the field had begun to turn the tide.

As the charging soldiers gained a foothold on the walls and discipline began to fray, the Imperial casters had started to bring forth their own little mini hells, unleashing them on the defenders and attackers alike, indiscriminate in their destruction. More lightning strikes rained down, gales of burning, acidic rain washed the ramparts, and tremors shook the earth, crumbling the defensive structure and allowing more and more Imperials to pour in. Once again, Rellia's shouts interrupted his thoughts, his observation of the chaos and the end of his world.

“. . . a weapon, now's the time to use it!" she shouted, her rapier in her hand.

"What's that?"

"They're coming up the ladders! Our defenders below are nearly overwhelmed. They'll be on us soon!"

Borrius looked at the opening in the center of the platform, wondering what sort of Imperial would show his or her face first. Edeya stood on the other side of the hole, her book stowed away and a large spear in her two hands. Had it come to this, then? Perhaps the army wouldn't lose. Though their platform was nearly overwhelmed, perhaps the other ramparts were moving to bolster this wall. Perhaps their defense was going more easily. It had to be, didn't it? Clearly, the Imperials had put their efforts into breaching this wall. Maybe Victor would prevail and return to the encampment in time to rally the troops.

"Well," he said, digging around in his storage ring. "I haven't used it in a number of years, but I used to be fairly good with a mace. I've a shield in here somewhere, too."

"That's the spirit. Let's take some with us," Rellia said, and as though summoned by her words, a soldier wearing an Imperial helmet popped his head through the hole, and she drove her wickedly fast rapier through his eye. He screamed and dropped away.

"Tribune!" Edeya said, and Borrius didn't know if she spoke to Rellia or him, but it didn't matter; she continued before either answered, "What's that? In the sky? Are they fireballs? No, some other kind of attack?"

"What?" Borrius asked, turning, still in the midst of strapping on his shield. Sure enough, out in the black night, high above the ground, hundreds of flickering orange lights twinkled in the dark. "Ancestors, damn them!" he growled. "They held some mages in reserve to the north?"

"Perhaps, but what a strange-looking attack. What are they?" Rellia asked, grunting as she stabbed at another attacker. She squinted into the black night, watching the weird, flickering ochre lights as they slowly drew nearer. "I'll wager it's an alchemical attack. One thing is certain, though, the attackers below will torch this tower soon or knock it down."

"Perhaps. Perhaps they want us alive for . . . questioning." Borrius continued to frown, staring into the darkness, trying to put a name to the mysterious lights. They didn't move like projectiles. Were they some sort of balloon or kite—something meant to explode overtop the encampment?

“Nothing we can do but hold as long as we can,” Edeya said, oddly more resolute and focused in the face of near-certain death than Borrius. He looked at her and nodded.

“Yes. Let us extract from them a dear price for our lives.” He stepped forward, gripping the familiar handle of his old friend, the cudgel of Blackstar, his father’s mace, the only weapon he’d ever killed someone with, long before he’d learned that leading men was more rewarding than fighting them.