

Kethelket followed the trail of bodies further into the camp. He could hear the rallying cries at the walls, the horns bleating their frantic alarms. He knew the camp was under attack from the outside as well as within, but he couldn't turn from his quarry. He'd shouted for his people to take flight, to aid from the safety of the black, fog-filled sky. Already, he'd lost too many—poor Divinia, snatched and drained by the creature he now pursued, Velnar, Brosk, and Evedelia, the guardians slain by Victoria, and who knew how many others Kethelket had yet to find. As he pushed his way through the wreckage and chaos, he saw evidence of plenty of slaughter, though none of the victims bore the dark wings of his kind.

The creature, demon, evil woman—he didn't know what to call it—seemed to prefer disembowelment as a means of quick murder. Kethelket ran down a bloody path strewn with entrails and pale bodies. He could see clusters of defenders here and there, torn, broken, ripped apart like caricatures at a child's party. Whatever the thing was, it was strong. His pursuit brought him toward the north wall, and he could guess the thing was heading for the gate. Did it hope to open them? He supposed it made sense. The camp had sturdy fortifications. They were well dug in. A flash of shadow in the corner of his eye sent a jolt of adrenaline through him, and Kethelket exploded into shadow, streaking away from flashing claws as they ripped the air where he'd been.

“A quick plaything?” The creature's voice grated on his mind like nails over bone. A dozen voices vied from control of those vocal cords, and the chorus was mind-wracking. Kethelket didn't wait for an invitation. He streaked through the air, his vision gray and white from the expansion of shadow-attuned Energy through his pathways. Gevel and Uthac were angry, hungry for the blood of this slayer of Kethelket's kin. They lashed out, quicker than thought, and carved twin gashes along the demon's naked ribs. An answering rake of claws caught Kethelket's shoulder, and he burned some more Energy, streaking through the shadowscape to lessen their bite.

He moved, in a semi-incorporeal blur, around the tall, gangly creature, aiming to assault her from behind. Up close, he was disturbed by the incongruous nature of the monster—her face was beautiful and bore a pleasant smile, while her body was all sharp angles and claws, too-long limbs, corpse-like flesh, and hair that hung in long, damp strands, heavy with the blood of those she'd already slain. Kethelket drove Gevel into the woman's lower back and hacked Uthac into her knee. Gevel bit deeply, and a spurt of dark blood followed as Kethelket pulled him out, but Uthac rebounded from bone, the impact painfully jarring.

Kethelket expected a quick response; he'd see how the creature could move. He'd already shifted to shadow and was streaking away when the nightmare whirled and clawed. Her movement was fast enough to catch the tail end of his passage, and Kethelket cried out as his concentration was shattered by pain. Somehow, she'd torn those long, black claws through his shadow form and broken his spell. He tumbled into the side of a tent, collapsing the canvas and rolling through it. Though fiery aches told him he'd been badly cut from his lower back down to his left knee, he leaped into motion again, ripping Gevel in a slashing upward parry, knocking aside the creature's follow-up attack.

With everything he had, he launched a masterful combination of hacks, stabs, feints, and parries, driving forward into the frenzied flurry of claws and insane, multi-voiced laughter. They battled that way for mere seconds, but those seconds stretched into hours, days, and weeks in Kethelket's mind. Every slash, every parry, every riposte became the focus of his lifetime, the pinnacle of everything he'd studied for. A hundred years of swordsmanship, three times that many studying combat and other weapons, building his Core, learning to use the shadow

Energy instinctually—everything came down to that moment, that furious exchange that was over before most people would have realized it had happened.

When Kethelket stepped back, the demonic woman fell at his feet, her heart punctured, her throat cut to the bone, and her entrails drooping from a gaping wound. Kethelket stood over her, victorious, and then he fell to a knee, planting his two swords in the cold, damp soil to prop himself up. He'd felt her claws part the soft flesh of his neck, felt them puncture his side, driving six inches into his vulnerable organs. He knew he'd choke if he breathed, so he didn't. He held his breath and watched the darkness closing in on his vision. He willed it away, furious that his body would give in before he'd seen the foul light go out of his enemy's eyes.

As the darkness receded, he refocused on the woman's face, watching those lips spew blood as she tried to breathe, watching as she heaved and shuddered, fitfully scrabbling at the cold earth with her long fingers, trying to pull her failing body closer to him. Kethelket couldn't breathe, but he refused to stay on his knees before her. Holding onto the hilts of his swords, he slowly, shakily, regained his feet, staring down at the creature, watching its struggles fade. Only then, when it shuddered its last breath, did Kethelket pull a healing draught from his storage ring and tip it into his mouth.

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*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Improved 1.*****

As the smoke and waves of hot air washed over him, as the release of Energy flowing hotly through his lungs and igniting in the air just past his mouth began to fade, Victor read the System notification and then looked at his Energy status:

Breath Core:	Elder Class - Improved 1		
Core:	Spirit Class - Advanced 8		
Breath Core Affinity:	Magma - 9	Breath Core Energy:	2000/2000
Energy Affinity:	Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1	Energy:	15/21864

When his breath Core had been "Base 9," he'd had 900 Energy. Did that mean he'd simply gained 1100 from the level up, or had he gained the usual 100, and then it doubled? He shook his head—no way to tell until he did it again. "I don't have time for this." Victor twisted his hands around Lifedrinker's ghostly Spirit Plane projection, but the axe was silent, just as she had been since the trap had been sprung. Was it draining her, too? Was it cutting her off, somehow?

Victor looked up at the veil star, pleased to see it obscured by waves of hot, stinging smoke. The lava tubes looked like giant incense burners, the black smoke pouring out of them laced with tiny, flickering motes of fiery ash. He was doing something. That much was certain. Something under his feet was waking up—the magma-attuned Energy was so heavy and thick in the air that he barely had to breathe to pull it into his Core. The more prevalent it became, the more Victor felt its secondary effects; he found it easier and easier to find the anger in his heart, the fury he knew he should be feeling toward Hector. Before, the thought of Valla and the others

in danger brought him only despair. Now, anger surged within him. He felt his teeth grind, his vision tint red, and a deep-seated desire to find Hector and put an end to him.

If the anger in the air could do that for him, could allow him to feel the emotion the veil star trap was blocking from his Core, could he use that? He'd built up his breath Core significantly; could he use that Energy to kickstart his rage? To summon enough into his pathways to cast Berserk again? If he did that, would it be enough to break the hold on him? Could he break free of his prison? The idea felt good, but as soon as he looked more closely at it, he knew it would fail. He'd *been* berserk when the trap was sprung, and he'd had a hell of a lot more than two thousand Energy. As soon as he managed to cast the spell, his spirit Core would be drained, and the spell would fade.

No, if he wanted any spell to last, it had to be fueled by his magma-attuned Energy. "But my *pinché* spells are meant for spirit Energies!" Victor growled, thumping his clenched fist against his forehead. As he stood there, anger grinding his teeth, frustration making him pound his head over and over again, something of a lightbulb went off in his brain. There had to be more to this magma-attuned Energy than the elemental aspect. He could feel it, the fury of the mountain beneath him, the smoldering anger in the air. More than that, he could *use* it. His brain was working because of it. His back was straight, and he wasn't wallowing in the dirt, thanks to that Energy. Rather than self-pitying defeat, he felt angry.

"Okay, *hermano*, if you're angry and your anger is thick in the air and in my breath Core, then why the hell can't I use that?" Victor closed his eyes again, turning his gaze inward to the smoldering, throbbing heart of his breath Core. It was apparent that the volcano's Energy was spewing forth much faster than the veil star and its smaller twins could siphon it off. Hector's trap had meant to deprive Victor, a single person, of his magma-attuned Energy. It wasn't a match for the mighty, angry spirit under his feet. That idea got Victor thinking. Was it a spirit? Was the mountain alive, or was it just a natural generator for the kind of Energy he could feel? Victor felt like it was more than that. Something was angry under him.

Looking closely at his breath Core, he focused his will and pulled a tendril of that Energy out, studying its smoldering, pulsing flow as he pushed it around in the pathways of his lungs. Just as he'd instinctively known, he could see the Energy was multi-faceted. Entwined with the amber glow of the fiery Energy was a tendril of deep crimson. It echoed the appearance of his rage-attuned Energy so closely that Victor couldn't help but recognize it. He supposed some might think it was just another brand of fiery Energy, a complexity to the magma that separated it from other, purer forms of elemental fire Energy. Victor knew better.

Victor slowly began to inhale, pulling a steady stream of the volcano's magma-attuned Energy into his lungs, sending it into his breath Core. At the same time, as the Core swirled and pulsed, he pulled that tiny thread of red, furious Energy out of it, separating it from his magma-attuned Core and slipping it into his pathway, out of his lungs, and down, into his spirit Core. Once that thin thread of Energy felt the tug of his rage-attuned Core, it began to siphon, and he didn't have to try any longer.

Grinning madly, he continued to pull the mountain's Energy into his lungs, feeding it to his breath Core, and watched as the ribbon of red, furious Energy rippled down through his pathways into his spirit Core. His dim, cold, rage Core began to smolder like an ember given a breath of wind. He saw the Energy sucked away, like crimson smoke, into the trap Hector had created, but as he continued to pull Energy into his lungs, that ribbon kept flowing, and it was slowly gaining ground—the Core was getting brighter.

If he weren't busy inhaling, following the cultivation drill he'd figured out for his breath Core, Victor would have howled with excited, bloodthirsty excitement. He could feel the heat of his rage truly begin to take shape. He'd only been at it for a few moments when suddenly, System messages flashed in his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Breath Core Cultivation Drill – Advanced.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: Spirit Core Cultivation Drill – Advanced.*****

Victor's insane grin spread wider, and his immense, rhythmic, chest-expanding inhalations took on a maniacal, frenzied pace as the messages encouraged him. He'd been on the brink of improving his Spirit Core Cultivation Drill for months but never broken through. Now he'd skipped "improved" and gone straight to "advanced." Was this what he'd been meant to do? To see the reflections of his spirit Energies in the elements around him? He'd always cultivated from his own emotions, but apparently, that was only part of the equation.

Victor continued to watch his Cores with his inner eye. His breath Core was full, growing slowly brighter, his input of magma-attuned Energy faster than the outlet pull of red, angry Energy he was sending into his spirit Core. His rage Core continued to grow, continued to get brighter and brighter. What was his goal? What would he do? If he stopped cultivating the magma Energy in the air, his rage Core would just be drained again. Could he berserk and still cultivate? Could he . . . Victor frowned as an idea came to him, something that he should have seen the moment he realized he could harvest rage from the magma Energy.

If he could pull rage out of his breath Core into his pathways and down into his spirit Core, why couldn't he pull that rage into a spell? He could do it. He could cast Berserk with his breath Core. He wasn't sure it would work the same, but it was better than doing nothing. Nodding to himself, still sucking Energy out of the air, he took that thread of red, furious Energy and, rather than stopping it from flowing into his Spirit Core, he pulled it back out into his pathway and wound it into the pattern for Berserk, just as he'd done hundreds of other times.

As the spell took shape, snapping into place, he felt the pull on his breath Core intensify. The spell was compensating for his depleted spirit Core, pulling on that long thread that he had running through his pathways. Iron Berserk was a hungry spell, brutal in its demands for instant Energy, and that thin thread of angry red Energy wasn't enough. As it pulled, a thick rope of magma-attuned Energy flowed out of his breath Core, into his pathways, into the spell, and then Victor erupted with mad, fiery Energy.

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Lam burst into Victor's home, charging down the short hallway to the dining area with Edeya in her arms. "Victor!" she screamed. "Valla!" She gently laid Edeya on the table and put her ear to her lips, confirming she was still breathing, though her wispy puffs were hardly breaths. "Victor!" she screamed again, desperate fear and frail hope adding a note of panic to her voice. She charged down the steps, down the hallway to Victor's bedroom door, standing wide open. "They must be out fighting." Nevertheless, she went through the door, wanting to be sure, and then she saw him.

Victor sat on the rug, huge and pale as ash, the air cold around him. His eyes were closed but jumping around behind the lids. He breathed fitfully, strangely, and Lam thought she could hear some weird, muttered, unformed words in his throat. "Victor! Wake up! Victor!" She ran to him, grasped his massive shoulders, and shook him. He was stiff and so bound with muscle, it felt like she was trying to shake a tree. She moved around to face him and, winding back her arm, slapped him full across the face. He hardly moved. "Rotten roots!" she cried and ran from the room, returning to check on Edeya.

The frail, pale Ghelli was the same. The only hints she was alive were the occasional tiny motes of color in her wings and the faint, wispy, shallow breaths puffing between her colorless lips. "Why won't the healing draught work?" Lam knew the answer; her body wasn't hurt. It was her spirit, and the one person she hoped might be able to help her was similarly lifeless. Something was happening elsewhere. Something was happening in that place of spirits Victor often spoke about. If he was under assault there, if Edeya had been taken there, then Lam could only do her best to give them time to finish their fights. She had to help protect the encampment.

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Valla crashed and tumbled over the ground, tucking her wings, charging them with air-attuned Energy to protect them and herself. Gusts of wind sheathed her, made her light, and added a great distance to her tumbling, sliding progress. The skeletal dragon, for that was what Valla had decided the terrible, monstrous mount had to be, had smashed her with its tremendous, spiny tail, knocking her aside as she might do to a rodent. Hector had brought the beast down onto the wall. The thing had gripped the ramparts with its roladii-sized talons and ripped them apart. Men and women had been smashed, sent flying, or torn to pieces by the horrific show of power.

Valla had tried to attack, had leaped into the air, streaking toward Hector, aiming Midnight like a lightning-charged headsman's blade at his neck, only to be smashed by the dragon's tail as Hector spun the creature. He'd laughed and roared, firing bolts or red lightning at defenders while the great, dead dragon snapped up soldiers and crunched them into a paste in its fleshless jaws. Valla finally came to rest against a gnarled tree trunk, and she unfolded her battered wings and wearily climbed to her feet. She was a hundred yards from the wall now and could see the battle clearly.

Hector and his pet were too much. They'd leveled most of the northern wall, allowing the ghouls easy ingress. The dragon shrugged off the feeble-looking ranged attacks of the defenders—arrows did nothing, and fireballs failed to ignite. Lightning might hurt it, but not the tiny bolts thrown by the beleaguered defenders. She saw ice shards, hurled earthen balls, and even freezing rains—none harmed the gigantic, green-glowing, skeletal mount. Its wings tore through entire units, sending broken men and women flying. Its jaws and claws were instant death, and though some Naghelli tried to attack Hector directly, he blasted them from the air with those horrible red lightning bolts.

"We have to flee," Valla muttered, with little hope of making it happen. How could you run away from a creature like that? What about the thousands of savage ghouls? They were too fast. "Some might live." Valla didn't voice her unspoken, cowardly thought—she could escape. Scowling, angry that the notion had even entered her mind, she gripped Midnight's hilt and stalked toward the horrible melee. She breathed deeply, steeling her mind, finding her focus, staring at Hector, carefully timing the lurching momentum of the giant mount. When she was

sure of herself, she channeled most of her remaining air-attuned Energy into a mighty Lightning Strike, seeking to reduce the damned Death Caster to ash.

Just as Hector threw a red bolt of lightning into the air, sending yet another Naghelli hurtling to the ground trailing black smoke, Valla's bolt of blue lightning exploded out of the dark sky, poleaxing him. His arms flew wide, and he vibrated for a long second with the surge of powerful Energy. A ragged cheer broke out from the entrenched soldiers as the Death Caster slumped and the bone dragon's animating green Energy faded. Just as Valla felt herself begin to breathe, just as she felt there might yet be some hope for them, Hector jerked his head up, his red, lightning-bound crown flared to life, and the dragon whirled, suddenly full of life again.

Valla spread her wings, lifted Midnight, and, in her shredded, bloody nightgown, she screamed, "Come on then!" The bone dragon bunched its legs and leaped, snapping its tremendous wings hard enough to send soldiers and ghouls flying. Hector and his mount soared through the air, ready to flatten Valla with those enormous talons. She didn't plan to stand still, however. Valla cracked her own wings, launching into the air.

If she couldn't kill Hector, she could perhaps give the Ninth some room. She could lead him on a chase. Maybe, just maybe, she could keep him busy until Victor finally woke, finally came to help. With those thoughts in her mind, she pumped her wings like she never had before, streaking upward, urging the Energy in her pathways to aid her flight. That's when she realized her miscalculation; her air-attuned Energy was nearly depleted. More, the dragon was faster than she'd thought. She felt it closing on her almost immediately. Valla cried out with effort as she furiously worked her wings. Her weary body tried to obey her, but all too quickly, she heard Hector's high, screeching laughter and then felt the bony talons of his mount closing around her.