

Victor paced in a circle, Lifedrinker held over his head, shouting into the crowd's roaring enthusiasm. Ronkerz must have enjoyed the spectacle because he let it go on for quite some time before his basso voice boomed like a gong, reverberating through the canyon. He didn't try to silence Victor or the crowd; he simply allowed the power of his projected voice to overwhelm their noise as he hollered, "The last of our visitors is eager to fight, Rumble Town! Look at him! See the might of an elder bloodline, here to entertain you! Which of our Big Ones can stand against such fury?"

Ronkerz's echoing, booming voice broke through Victor's self-induced haze of anger, and he slowly lowered his axe as he listened. "Make no mistake! The man below might not be through his iron ranks, but he's a monster in his own right—a warrior with the blood of a titan in his veins, a berserker with a Core brimming with rage! You saw how he stood against my aura! Who among our champions could face such a challenger?"

The crowd, hushed by Ronkerz's thunderous voice, began to murmur in low tones—words that, disparate at first, started to coalesce into a single name that they repeated, louder and louder, until the canyon echoed with the sound: "*Stormclaw! Stormclaw! Stormclaw!*"

"My number one? My apprentice? My right hand? Lira Stormclaw? The Reaper of Bloodtide Cove? You think this challenger is worthy of *her* attention?" As he egged them on, the crowd grew more and more vociferous, howling her name and pounding their cudgels, shields, tankards, and brooms. They stomped their feet in rhythm to their frenzy, howling the Big One's name, "*Stormclaw! Stormclaw! Stormclaw!*"

Ronkerz seemed to like what he heard and saw, so he opened his massive arms and, he, too, shouted, "Stormclaw! Take the field!" With a flash of shining armor reflecting the moon's light, Lira Stormclaw leaped from the ledge, spreading her great, gray-feathered wings and slowly spiraling down to the arena floor. Just as Victor had seen her before, she wore shiny, silver chainmail, but now she also had her head encased in a gleaming, polished helmet. She clutched her giant, curved saber in one hand, and, on her other arm, she wore a bright, metallic buckler that glinted in the bright light of the moon.

Her talons crunched into the canyon floor, and Victor saw they'd cut grooves in the stone. When her hawklike gaze locked with his, she spread her wings wide and held up her sword, and the crowd went wild again. She was the biggest avian person he'd ever seen, easily nine feet tall, and her wingspan had to be more than twenty feet wide. She cut an imposing figure, especially considering her gleaming armor and the heavy, bold aura she let loose. Victor might have been intimidated if he hadn't already fought dozens of men, women, and creatures more intimidating—if he hadn't already stood up against Ronkerz's aura, which was a hundred times denser.

"Well?" Lira asked, her voice once again surprising Victor with its melodic nature. "Shall we dance?" She slashed her saber through the air between them, leaving trails of glittering light and somehow producing a crystalline ring with each cut.

Victor held Lifedrinker ready, hands loose on her haft, and began to circle the avian woman. "Ready when you are."

Lira shrieked, cracked her wings, and launched into him, her curved sword whistling as she laid about with a frenzy of lightning-fast attacks. Victor tried to answer the ferocity of her blows but found himself unable to match her speed. Still, he was a skilled axe wielder and an experienced

duelist, and she didn't land any strikes clean enough to draw blood. She got past his guard a few times, but only because he saw her weapon would strike his armor and wanted to test its edge.

Once, he caught the saber on his heavy gauntlet, and, though it sparked and drew a narrow, shiny scratch in the metal, he hardly felt it. His wyrm-scale vest didn't quite hold up as well, shedding a scale as she drew the blade along his ribs, but still, he was unharmed, and the armor immediately began to mend itself—the fallen scale crumbled to dust and rapidly reformed to fill the gap. It was plain that Lira was testing him, as well, and Victor could see her shrewd, predatory gaze grow sharper as she was repeatedly rebuffed.

When she surged with Energy and began to move faster than he could track, Victor cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. As the white-gold Energy flooded his pathways and his consciousness expanded, he began to see the greater pattern of Lira's movements, and, though he still had trouble tracking her scimitar's flashing blade, he saw how she moved her feet, how her wings flexed, and where her center of gravity shifted as she went through the patterns of her attacks. He contemplated those patterns and formed responses in his mind as his armor amassed scrapes.

His grin turned savage as he predicted one of her slashes and, for the first time, stepped inside it and brought Lifedrinker down in a brutal hack against the armor on the outside of Lira's thigh. Lifedrinker, still carrying a shard of Victor's spirit, dented the shiny armor and split it just enough for her razor edge to draw a thin gash that wept blood down the side of Lira's leg. Lira screeched her pain and frustration and pumped her wings, hurling herself into the air, flying a dozen yards back.

Still brimming with inspiration, Victor tracked her trajectory and cast Energy Charge, flooding the spell's pattern with fear-attuned Energy. In a cloud of black and purple shadows, he ripped through the fire-blasted arena and, with Lifedrinker's edge leading the way, smashed into Lira just as she landed. She was fast, though, and put her shiny buckler in the path of Lifedrinker's edge. Victor's spell moved him like a missile, and Lifedrinker pulled and vibrated with the urgency of her hack, but, even so, that shiny, platter-sized shield stopped her cold. The impact rang out like a cannonball hitting a gong, and Victor's momentum drove him past the impact point, nearly jerking the axe from his hands as Lira sidestepped his driving shoulder.

Victor's grip was mighty, and Lifedrinker loathed the idea of being taken from him; it would take the weight of a mountain to pull her from his grip, so she slid along that shiny barrier, ringing out a crystalline screech as she tore a thin groove in the metal and followed Victor as he flew past Lira. The avian warrior snapped her wings and launched herself at Victor's back, scoring two powerful blows, left and right, smashing his wyrm-scale vest in an X pattern, shattering scales, cutting the thick wyrm-hide material, and, for the first time, drawing blood. Victor stumbled forward but whirled, cleaving Lifedrinker in a wide, one-handed backswing.

Lira danced back, avoiding the savage blow, and then, with a surge of potent, sharp Energy that tasted like coppery blood and rust, a dozen black-iron blades, each the size and shape of Lira's saber, exploded out of the ground and began to dance in the air, moving like a storm of razored metal toward Victor. Victor's monstrous vitality, bolstered by Sovereign Will, had already closed the wounds on his back, and he felt fresh like he'd barely begun to exert himself. His savage grin widened as he waded into the magically hacking swords and began to dance, treating each like a new opponent.

The blades wove side to side, up and down, and hacked the air with palpable *whooshes*. Even so, they were far slower and duller than Lira's gleaming saber. Victor smashed them aside with Lifedrinker and his gauntlet. Sometimes, he even ducked his head and used his helmet to catch the blades. All the while, he kept track of Lira, watching as she moved around her sword storm, timing the many swinging sabers so she could slip in and drive her much deadlier primary weapon at Victor's exposed flank or try to interfere with one of his parries.

Victor took many hits from those magical swords, but most slid harmlessly off his armor. Still, his thick lava king-hide pants were beginning to show their wear and tear, and he began to bleed as the minor cuts started to mount. His right arm was the worst—no gauntlet protected his forearm, and it was repeatedly exposed as he swung Lifedrinker out to smash aside one sword or another. Even so, his natural regeneration could cope, and Victor fought the urge to scream his frustration and cast Iron Berserk. He knew Lira had more that she was holding back, and he didn't want to play his cards until he had to.

After several minutes of battle against Lira's sword storm, Victor fell into an inspiration-fueled trance, and fewer and fewer swords hit him. He'd begun to see a pattern to the whirling, weaving blades; they had to make room for each other and, thus, weren't truly random. If he had to explain the pattern, he couldn't have. He caught glimpses of it on an instinctual level and began to modify his footwork and the weaving motions of his axe to capitalize, and soon, he was smashing four blades aside with each swooping swing of Lifedrinker. As he found the rhythm and fell into the new dance, he could turn most of his attention to Lira and, once again, frustrate her efforts to cut him.

"Gods be damned! You're good with that axe!" she grunted after a while. The words hardly registered on Victor as he wove between the slashing sabers and tried to work his way closer to the woman controlling them. As he closed the distance and began to put pressure on her despite her hacking storm of swords, Lira grunted, but it wasn't so much a frustrated sound as an excited one. The same sharp Energy filled the air, again filling Victor's mouth with the taste of rust and blood. Then, in an explosion of rock fragments, black iron plates burst from the ground and began to spin violently around Lira.

The swords crumbled to black dust, but the plates, varying in size, spun so rapidly that Victor was forced back. He ducked his head and held Lifedrinker up in defense, but Lira didn't press the attack; she was focused on her magic. The plates of magical iron wove in a whirling pattern around her body, and then, one by one, they began to slam into her. At first, Victor thought she'd made an error or cast a spell she couldn't control. He soon realized what was happening, though, and grinned as he watched Lira encase herself. The tall, lean warrior became a massive juggernaut of black metal.

Even her wings were covered, and though he doubted they could still be used to fly, they looked like formidable weapons in their own right. Rather than feathers, they were lined with razored blades, and, as she flexed them up and down, he could see they weren't immobile. As the last of the plates slammed into place, completing her suit of dense armor, Victor roared and cast Energy Charge again, this time fueling it with rage. He didn't want to risk Lifedrinker's edge or handle being damaged before he tested that thick armor, so he led the charge with his dense gauntlet, aiming to cave in the center of Lira's plated chest.

Lira spread her arms, her saber looking small in her metal-plated fist, and seemed to welcome Victor's impact. He soon learned why. As his gauntlet impacted that thick black plate, he realized it wasn't mundane armor that coated Lira's body. The metal was rife with Energy,

infused with the magic of Lira's affinity, which, apparently, wasn't simple iron but something far more profound, something more like the very essence of "metal."

Victor's gauntlet rebounded, the knuckles bent in by the tremendous impact. Even as his fist flew back, his body continued forward, and Victor slammed into Lira with a *boom* that cracked the stone around them. Victor's Core flared, driving rage-attuned Energy into the magical shell meant to protect him. Even without looking, he could feel the hot sun at the center of his being cool as he depleted a tremendous portion of his reserves to keep from crushing himself against the immovable density of Lira's metal-clad form.

As the waves of force washed outward, throwing stones, boulders, and clouds of dirt and debris toward the arena's edges, Lira punched her empty, gauntleted fist into Victor's side. She turned with the action, putting her considerable weight behind the blow, and Victor was lifted from his feet and sent flying. As he tumbled through the air, sure he'd smash into a crowd of onlookers who stood between two buildings, he came up against the invisible force of Ronkerz's Energy. It felt like colliding with a stone wall.

"Fuck!" Victor groaned as he slid down the invisible barrier to the hard rubble-strewn ground. He struggled to take a full breath, sharp pain lancing through his torso. Coughing and wheezing, he planted his hands on the ground and clambered to his feet. He was sure some of his ribs were shattered; he could feel the bones grinding painfully as his passive regeneration struggled to undo the damage. Just as he'd found his footing, he felt the ground trembling rhythmically, and that's when he realized Lira was already upon him. Victor whirled just in time to get his gauntleted left arm up and catch the descending edge of her brilliant saber.

The blow struck his gauntlet so solidly that the edge bit clean through the extremely dense, heavy metal, and he felt the saber bite a full inch into his arm, grinding into his wrist bones. Not only was Lira a great deal heavier with her armor plating, but she must have gotten some sort of strength boost; it felt like a pneumatic hammering machine had been unleashed on him as she began to pummel, kick, and chop at him. Victor fought to deflect her blows, scrambling back, pain from a dozen new injuries spurring him away as her tremendously heavy feet stomped at him.

"*Enough!*" he roared and unleashed his Core, casting Iron Berserk. Lira swung a heavy, metal-plated boot at his knee, but Victor unleashed a roar of fury as his vision darkened with shades of crimson, and his body exploded with muscle. He caught her boot in one massive hand and, with a tremendous jerk of his entire body, with the muscles and tendons standing up around his neck like cords of woven steel, he threw her across the arena. Lira's wail of surprise echoed strangely from her metal-clad head as she tumbled for two dozen yards before crashing onto the arena floor with a clamor akin to a head-on truck collision.

Victor bounded after her, already bunching his legs for a leap before she even hit the ground. He soared through the air, his gigantic form outstretched, his back arched, Liferdrinker held high in one hand. She smoldered and burst into baleful flames as her own rage and battle lust rose to match Victor's. When he came down like a falling mountainside, he planted Liferdrinker firmly in Lira's metallic shoulder as she struggled to rise. With a screech of rending metal, Liferdrinker burned through the armor, flaring white-hot at her edge as she melted her way in.

Lira screamed as Liferdrinker's merciless edge bit her flesh, severing muscles and tendons and boiling away her flesh and blood as she *dug* her way deeper. Victor let his rage mount, let his

will to remain lucid fall away, and, with his renewed strength and much greater stature, he began to repay Lira's pummeling and then some.

He let Lifedrinker work, tugging Energy out of his opponent, and, with his right hand, he grasped Lira so his left, gauntleted fist could pound her metal casing. Each blow sounded like a cannon firing, the great *bong* sound echoing through the arena, overwhelming the roars of the crowd. His gauntlet had grown with him and hadn't lost any of its density. No longer did the knuckles bend when he pounded against Lira's armor—now *she* bent. Victor jerked and punched, pounding dents into her back, her sides, her helmet, and her chest. All the while, Lifedrinker streamed black smoke from the rip in Lira's shoulder armor as she dug and burned her way into her flesh.

Lira screamed over and over. Her cries might have stopped Victor if he'd been lucid—if he'd allowed his will to keep his rage at bay—but he didn't and continued to punish her. He saw visions of Arona's torn corpse, and, somewhere in his mind, they got convoluted with memories of a different face, a different woman who'd died as he watched, helpless and slow, stupidly looking on when he should have done *something*. That frustration that remembered helplessness drove him nearly mad with rage, and Victor didn't let up his pounding, even when Lira's screams changed.

At first, he didn't notice the difference, but slowly, even in his rage-addled mind, Victor began to register a change in Lira's screams. They shifted from pain-filled to angry. Still, Victor drove her to the ground, pressed his powerful knee into her lower back, and grabbed both sides of her metal-clad head, intent on either pulling off her armor or her head—he didn't care which. "Aaaaaaaagh!" Lira screamed, and then, like a charge in the air before a lightning strike, Victor felt her gathering that sharp, metallic Energy.

"Die!" he screamed, and, with all his might, he pulled, determined to stop whatever she was doing. He might have done it. He might have killed her, but, just as he felt the metal start to give, it expanded, and suddenly, he was struggling to keep his grip as Lira's body grew, lifting him off the ground as his titanic form was dwarfed by *hers*. Lira's metallic body outgrew his by a third, and the rent Lifedrinker had made filled in with new metal—brighter, shinier, harder. It pushed the axe out, and Victor grabbed her haft just as Lira reached around to snag his arm and slam him to the ground.

Victor's back hit the cracked stone with a ground-shaking impact that shattered his ribs, drove the air from his lungs, and dented the back of his helm, rattling his brain and stunning him. He lay there, stars flashing in his vision, and watched the titanic form of the metal-clad avian warrior as she held up her saber. Another surge of that weird metallic Energy flooded the air, and shards of metal flew from the ground to wrap her saber, expanding it, lengthening it, until Lira stood with a monstrous sword that gleamed with iridescent, rainbow-hued metal, shining like the light of a star.

Victor grunted, trying to breathe, contemplating that amazing sword and its ten-foot blade. Lira held it above him, a metallic juggernaut poised to execute him. Victor's mind reeled, searching for a strategy, wondering if he could roll aside and avoid that deadly gleaming edge. He knew he couldn't block it with Lifedrinker. He doubted his arm would survive the attempt to block it with his gauntlet. He'd just taken his first full breath, allowing the stars to fade from his vision, when he realized why Lira hadn't struck him yet—she was waiting for him to yield. As if to confirm things, Ronkerz's voice boomed through the arena. "Yield, titan. Live to grow stronger and repay Lira for the lesson."

On his back, with a titanic blade poised to carve him in half, he felt his rage fading. Victor began to growl. It was a low, guttural sound that had little to do with his bloodline and a lot to do with his stubborn refusal to lose. If his iron berserk was running out and he couldn't pummel that powerful metallic shell until its occupant died, he'd try something else. Ronkerz's voice echoed through the arena again, "Do you yield?" Victor continued to growl as he poured Energy into his spell. Dark tendrils of tangible shadow began to coalesce around him, flowing out of the ground, out of the air, out of *him*.

Lira screamed and brought her blade down like a gleaming guillotine, but it was too late—a wave of palpable terror exploded out of those shadows, and Lira balked, botching the aim of her killing blow. Victor, recovered from his dazed state, felt his consciousness receding as the *other* took over. A scream that scratched his throat erupted from his lungs, and the lights around the arena flickered, their weak Energy sources overwhelmed by the darkness of his terror-fueled will.

With a crack of midnight wings, he burst from the pool of shadows into the air, circling the darkened arena. As he banked, swooping through the canyon, Terror observed the darkness and the many bright spirits surrounding him. A few were too dim to bother with, but hundreds were bright and tempting. Still, something lay between him and most of those morsels, something that, even as he watched, began to obscure them. Soon, all he could see was the single, brilliant spirit that glowed like an inferno beneath him. Gigantic, true, with a shell hard to pierce and a bright, gleaming edge that could surely cause him harm, but tempting, nonetheless.

As the spirit turned its eyes upward, spreading its broad metallic limbs and holding aloft that brilliant razor edge, Terror screamed and dove, weaving his shadows to obscure himself and confound the spirit's attempt to cut him. He had to infect his prey, had to poison that brilliant, sharp Energy with a seed of fear. As he swooped near, he screamed again, putting everything he knew of nightmares into the sound—millennia of tortured, pleading prey, conjured terrors, and lost, broken spirits.

The bright edge arced out and nearly cut him, but the shadows did their work, obscuring his true position, and Terror pulled away into the air, circling, coming around, gathering his strength for another projection of fear. This time, when he passed close, screeching his worst, most terrifying sound, the bright spirit deceived him. It fainted with its gleaming edge, but the actual attack came from those spiny, metal wings. They arced upward, and the spirit spun. Terror was caught on the sharp spines and ripped from the sky to tumble onto the stony ground.

As the ground shook with the spirit's great, metallic steps, Terror tried to right himself, tried to launch back into the air, but his wings didn't work right; they were broken, and he wasn't healing quickly enough. In the back of his mind, the *other* growled, and he heard his command: *Enough. You're not right for this fight.* Terror relented; he was broken—let the *other* deal with this spirit.

As Victor came back to himself, his body still wrapped in shadow, painfully reverting to his normal form, he bunched his legs and activated Titanic Leap, narrowly escaping a devastating blow from Lira's saber. Soaring through the air, aiming for a clump of broken, scorched stones, he glanced back to see the giant metallic figure stomping toward his destination. He turned his gaze inward, saw his Core was nearly depleted, and groaned. He had to buy some time, had to give his Core a chance to regenerate some Energy. Even if he managed that, though, he wasn't

sure what he'd do. Lira's armor was too dense; she was too large and strong. How was he going to beat her?