

Through the smoky, red fire of his fury, Victor could see figures on the long, arching span that crossed the raging waters. He didn't care what they were doing. The idea that they might be planning something nefarious to break the bridge or send him tumbling into the waters didn't enter his mind. He had a singular goal—find the *pendejo* who flew away from him, who fled their fight, and smash him to a pulp. He ran, loping on long, powerful legs, leaving a trail of smoking, burning footsteps. Fire flickered in his wake whether he traversed grass, dirt, or stone. Lifedrinker buzzed with anticipation, hunger, and glee; she was ablaze, a partner in his fiery rage.

When Victor mounted the bridge and began to sprint toward the distant figures, an Energy Charge might have been an apt choice, the right thing to close that gap in a hurry and put an end to whatever they were doing. Unfortunately, Victor's singular mindset, the rage boiling through his pathways, didn't leave room for other spells. When the stone beneath his feet lurched, and gunshot-loud cracks erupted in the stone, he didn't panic, didn't react other than to pump his legs harder. When the arch shattered ahead of him, the stone crumbling down into the abyss, falling to the white-capped river, he watched the group of robed figures plummet to their doom, a sacrifice for their undead master.

Maybe if he weren't so enraged, Victor would have reacted differently. Maybe he would have turned and tried to outrun the crumbling stone. Engorged by rage and fire, Victor didn't slow; he pushed harder, and when the falling stone was right before him, he bunched his legs and leaped for the far side of the gap. Whatever mad strength powered his burning, titanic form pushed his Titanic Leap to new levels, and he soared through the air, a smoking comet hell-bent on destruction. He crashed onto the intact stones near the far edge of the bridge, showers of sparks, droplets of magma, and black smoke bursting into the air with his impact. In two heartbeats, Victor was pounding up the ramp away from the bridge toward the second gateway citadel.

Just as he had when he charged the first tall keep, Victor focused on the gates and ignored all else. Arrows burst into flame as they touched his form. Firebolts and lightning glanced off him, insignificant as the thrall-like subordinates who threw them. By the time he smashed into the high stone gates, he must have been running more than sixty miles per hour, and, with a lowered shoulder, he impacted them with the ferocity of a hurtling granite boulder. As he shattered the Energy-enhanced crossbeam, the crack was so loud that it echoed up and down the mountain like a bomb blast.

Victor hardly slowed as the gates slammed open, and dense fragments of timber and stone exploded away from him, ripping through the puny defenders crowding the gatehouse tunnel. He steamrolled through them, moving too fast, his form too large, his Energy too hot and caustic for them to withstand. They burst into flames as he approached, screaming their silent screams. Victor barely acknowledged their existence—some kind of skeletal warriors in ragged armor lined up with zombies, shamblers, and ghouls. They hardly slowed him, simply making it a bit harder to find a clear piece of ground to place his feet on as he rushed through.

In moments, Victor had cleared the second citadel and was racing up the road, climbing toward the top of the mountain, his giant brother. He knew his prey was up there. He knew the Death Caster was doing something Victor wanted to stop, but he didn't care. The only thing he really wanted was to see him ripped apart, reduced to several hunks of smoldering ash. He rounded a corner in the road, and a wall of ice sheeted up from the ground before him. Dense, frozen Energy radiated out from it, and Victor didn't have time to slow, didn't have time to jump. He lowered his shoulder and pushed on.

He felt the cold sapping his heat, felt it pulling the hot magma-rich Energy out of his pathways. He felt the fire limning his form dim, felt the white-hot flames in his eyes fading, but then he hit the ice. It resisted him for a fraction of a second, but Victor bunched his legs and drove forward, a rage-fueled locomotive hell-bent on ripping up the track. The ice began to crack, and then it was all over—Victor burst through it in a shower of spraying shards, and his heat flared back to life. His vision brightened, his form burst into flame anew, and he powered on. He briefly noted a blue-robed figure kneeling on the side of the road, his skeletal hands gripping his head in agony. With a mad laugh, Victor swiped his blazing axe through the undead Elementalist, cleaving his skull in twain.

He saw a curve ahead, realized the road switched back and forth, and, impatient to get to his quarry, he faced the mountainside and jumped, clearing twenty yards of slope to land higher up the road. Victor was too mad with battle lust, too engorged by fire and fury to think about his Energy reserves, but if he hadn't been, he would have noted that his rage-attuned Energy was slowly burning down, and his magma-fueled breath Core was more than half empty. He didn't, though; it wasn't even a flicker of concern in his mind.

Victor continued apace, leaping to avoid long switchbacks several more times, and soon, he was nearing the mountain's top, the volcanic caldera. Luck was with him that night, for when he rounded that last bend, he came close to the lava flow that had erupted from the mountain's side. When he grew near, he felt the fury in the air. He felt the kindred heat and anger of the mountain beneath him, but sharper, richer, thick enough to breathe, thick enough to channel almost passively into his breath Core. As he felt that decadent power flowing into him, as he felt the rumble under his feet and heard the mountain's anger, Victor paused to lift his head to the sky and howl madly into the night.

His voice, deep at first, then rising into a wild ululation, echoed off the stones, reverberating back and forth through the many canyons surrounding the tall, high-sloped mountain. Smoke and cinders escaped his mouth as he screamed his madness, and the mountain heard him. It bucked wildly, but Victor moved with the motion instinctually, not bothered in the least. The lava flows that had already burst from the mountain's ancient shoulders geysered forth again, and Victor heard the distant sounds of more destruction above him. The mountain was waking, and those in the caldera were feeling its wrath.

He pulled back his lips, revealing a hungry, savage grin limned in black smoke as he leaped into motion, pounding up the slope, aiming for that rough, stony rampart behind which he knew the caldera valley opened up. He saw fortifications around the road, battlements, gates, and even siege equipment, but it was all scattered and abandoned. He didn't bother smashing the gates. Instead, he kept running and leaped over the wall, only twenty feet high. At the apex of his flight, he saw a glorious view of the caldera valley, and what he saw brought more mad laughter out of him.

Unlike the version on the Spirit Plane, this material version of the caldera was packed with structures—towers, walls, and buildings of all shapes and sizes. He didn't laugh because he saw them; he laughed because they were crumbling, and fires were everywhere. He saw crowds fleeing through broken, cobbled roads, scrabbling around collapsed stone buildings. He saw hordes of undead furiously working to dig rubble out from around partially collapsed buildings. What spurred his madness the most, though, was the scene at the center of the caldera.

Hundreds of robed figures knelt in a circle around the high, flickering, dim veil star. Beneath it, on a stone platform, sat a dark rip in the fabric of reality. Victor wasn't in a state of mind to contemplate the meaning of the weird rend in space, but something told him that his quarry might try to escape through it. Even in his madness, he knew the kneeling magic-users were working to keep the green light ablaze and that it was somehow connected to that shimmering doorway to another world. As he crashed to the ground, sliding down the gravel and dirt of the roadway, he bunched his legs and sprinted toward the distant scene.

Thousands of undead and living thralls were between him and his target, but he paid them no heed. If they got in his way, they'd die like those in the citadels. If they fled before his approach, they might live long enough to feel the volcano's wrath. Either way, Victor didn't care. He was tall, more than eighteen feet in his titanic form, and he saw over the buildings to the caldera's center.

He saw a long line of figures forming up, many of them carrying heavy-looking bags and even some with children. His eyes were good, superhuman in their fiery glory. He could see through the darkness as though it were noon with a bright sun in the sky. He could pick out faces among those distant figures and see that they weren't undead, not all of them, but Victor didn't care in his state. Enemies were trying to flee him, servants of the bastard who'd tried to kill people he cared about. Dim visions of Valla's face floated through his mind, snatches of memory when they'd been in bed together, fought together, laughed together.

The images were almost abstract in their vagueness, but they were enough to stoke his rage, to remind him that these people and creatures ahead of him had tried to kill someone he cared about. Moreover, the air in the caldera was so thick with magma-fueled Energy, so heavy with the volcano's fury, that he felt like he was swimming through it. He could feel it flowing over him, brushing his skin, fanning the flames that flickered and lashed out behind him. He could taste it in every breath. He could feel it pour into his breath Core, stream into his pathways, and ignite, joining his rage-attended Energy to power his Volcanic Fury.

He grew hotter and hotter, more and more furious as he charged into the caldera. He began to lose focus even on chasing Hector, began to look for things near at hand to destroy. When he jumped over a fallen tower, and the volcano shuddered again, sending an arcing spray of magma into the air on the far side of the caldera, he paused and screamed again, his mouth forming mangled, nearly inarticulate words, "Come on, *hermano!*" He glimpsed a crowd of undead digging away at some rubble and couldn't help himself from charging into them, laying about with Lifedrinker.

He was so large, his furious heat so potent that they withered before him, falling back, scrabbling to get away, but he pursued, hacking, kicking, grabbing, and throwing them until all were dead or scattered out of his sight. The green veil star pulsed, catching his attention, and when he looked at it and saw it was brighter than before, his eyes burned so intensely that anyone watching him would have looked away in pain. Victor began to rant as he charged toward the veil star, words that made no sense, noises that probably wouldn't have been considered words to anyone listening.

He didn't know what he was saying; he didn't care. He was trying to vent some of the fury that boiled in his veins and pathways. He was trying to release some of the pressure. He indiscriminately swung Lifedrinker left and right, sometimes chopping her into wood, sometimes into stone, and sometimes into a foe. She screamed and screamed, just as furious as he. She was white hot with fiery fury, and when Victor burst into the clearing around the veil star, he

lifted her high and threw her at it. It wasn't a planned attack. It wasn't something he'd ever have done if he was himself, but he wanted that thing dead, and so did Lifedrinker.

The idea of "killing" the veil star wasn't a rational one. It wasn't something Victor would think to try if he had a shred of reason in his mind. Still, Lifedrinker didn't object, and his throw was true—she flew like a smoking, white-hot comet, ripping the air in concussive shockwaves that thundered over the flat, stone clearing, sending the more frail of Hector's wizards sprawling. When she hit the veil star, Victor saw, in his red-tinted madness, the green glow shrink to a tiny point, eclipsed by the blazing heat of Lifedrinker's flames, and then it expanded, rolling out like an inflating ball of dense green energy.

The ball of green and fiery Energy expanded to something that looked to be a good fifty feet in diameter, seeming to suck the noise and light out of the caldera. As the green Energy shifted more and more to yellow-white, as it became more and more a roiling ball of fire, everything was still. Everyone was quiet for a pregnant heartbeat, and then the massive ball of roiling Energy exploded, washing the center of the caldera in fiery, white-hot flames. Victor arched his back and roared, watching the fire roll toward him, stomping toward it, hungry for its touch.

As the flames engulfed him, he felt Lifedrinker in them and knew she'd won her battle with the veil star. Whatever it was, whatever had hung in the air up there, she'd pierced it, and she'd overcome it. Of course, the explosion and the fire did nothing to quench the furnace in his heart nor in that of the volcano. Victor rushed forward through the flames, hands clenching and unclenching, eyes mad with the lust for violence. The volcano bucked and shook, more lava flows erupting out of the stony ground, and some part of Victor knew it was done—the volcano was waking, and nothing would stop it.

He charged among the hundreds of robed Death Casters, snatching up those who still moved, those who'd shielded themselves from the veil star's destruction. He threw them, used them as weapons, smashing them about, ripping them limb from limb. He shrugged off magical attacks, nothing fazing him. None of Hector's apprentices, at least those still gathered there at the center of the volcano, had anything near enough power to penetrate Victor's furious constitution or to leave a wound that his magma-filled blood wouldn't instantly heal. All they did was further infuriate him, further drive him into a berserker frenzy as he sought the true target of his wrath.

As he ripped the arms from a screaming, ashen-faced mage, he looked through the mist of blood toward the central platform where the rip in space still hung. He saw Hector's people wildly charging through, saw tall, powerful figures trying to hold some of them back, and, though he couldn't contemplate their intentions, Victor saw them as a better outlet for his frustrated rage. He leaped toward them, coming down among a crowd of fleeing people. Victor snatched a woman up and, as she burst into flame, threw her at the front of the line, smashing her smoldering corpse into one of the tall guardians of the gateway.

The man, dressed in black plate that might have been familiar to a rational Victor, might have reminded him of the reavers he'd slain weeks earlier, tumbled backward, bouncing over the stone dais. At the same time, his companion slammed the visor down on his helmet, lifted a massive black-bladed, two-handed sword, and charged straight at Victor. The people fleeing screamed and cried, running two and fro in a panic, trying to get away from Victor, but having nowhere to go—madness had overcome the caldera, geysers of flame were exploding everywhere, the ground was rumbling and shaking, and the air was thick with ash and smoke.

When the sword-wielding giant, a good four feet shy of Victor's height, reached him, hacking down with that mighty blade, Victor caught it in his left hand and squeezed. The blade bit his flesh and opened an outlet for his fiery blood. It ran down the blade, turning the black metal orange with heat, and the warrior cried out inside his helmet, letting go as the leather-wrapped hilt burst into flame. Victor pounded his right fist down on that helmet, smashing his head with a sickening series of wet crunches. When the warrior collapsed, Victor stepped forward, resting his foot on his chest.

He eyed the rip in space as the corpse began to smoke, and the metal armor began to glow with heat. Had his quarry gone through already? The only thing stopping Victor from madly charging through was a feeling in his gut that his foe was still here, a deep-seated desire not to be fooled into going somewhere where he'd lose track of him. Absent Hector to fight, he had to find an outlet for his rage, so he furiously scanned the platform for a target, and that's when he saw, just beyond the portal to another world, a floating, spinning stone, dimly glowing with gold and silver runes.

Victor stalked forward, crunching the corpse, now ash inside hot metal, and angled himself around the rift, getting a better look at the floating stone. Something deep in the back of his mind said, "System." Was this the source of the portal? Was it something else? Victor pulled back his lips, exposing his insane grin as he took a deep breath, inhaling until he felt his lungs would burst. If Hector wanted to hide, he'd take out his frustration on this thing. Maybe if he could break it, the portal would close. Just as he was about to exhale, to bathe the floating stone in the magma fury of his breath, a tremendous crack of thunder shook the air, and a massive bolt of red lightning hit him in the shoulder, sending him stumbling toward the rift.

The ground lurched as the volcano continued to wake, and Victor might have fallen, might have rolled right into that gap through time and space, but he was awash with Volcanic Fury. He was brother to the mountain, and he walked along the bucking ground as though it were placid and flat. He avoided the rift and turned to see where his enemy was. His shoulder was sore, but he could feel it rapidly healing; Hector's lightning was powerful, but a single bolt wasn't enough to stop him or, really, to even give him pause.

Hector rode the air on a cloud of charged air. It crackled with red lightning, and as he swooped by, firing another bolt of lightning at him, Victor saw Hector's pale, rictus face beneath his blazing red crown. The sight renewed his fury and reminded him of why he was there. Something deep in him woke up at the proximity of his enemy—something with a stiff back and pride that wouldn't be quenched by fury alone. Who was this worm floating around, daring to taunt him with tickles of lightning? Who was this man who'd threatened the friends and loved ones of a mighty Quinametzin?

Victor took two steps away from the rift and stooped to pick up Lifedrinker from where she'd fallen, her blade buried in the stone. As soon as he pulled her free, she burst into flames again, and he heard her seething whisper in his mind.

*Come, love! Let us lay waste to this fool and bask in the glory of the volcano's fury!*

The words were sharp and spoke straight to his soul, or he might never have heard them, for Victor's ears buzzed with fury. His mind could focus only on his hatred of the man floating about above him. He stood before the rift, facing Hector, clenching and unclenching his fist on Lifedrinker's haft. He could feel his rage building, could feel his bones and flesh igniting with it.

How much could he take? How much of the mountain's horrible temper could he absorb before he burst?

Hector swooped toward him, streaking like a Roman candle, and Victor swiped at him, forcing him to veer away. Had he been trying to get past him? Trying to enter the rift? The idea of his foe running away, disappearing through that hole, was so upsetting that Victor felt his rage cool slightly as his mind raced for a way to keep him here. Could he close the rift by breaking the stone? *Could* he break the stone? Lifedrinker was a powerful weapon, but Victor knew she was nothing to the System. Would he risk her by smashing her against that System stone? He felt his rage cool further as his thoughts raced, and then Hector hit him with another red thunderbolt.

The burning shock shook him enough to knock the thoughts out of his head. Hector raced forward again, clearly trying to swoop past him to the rift, but Victor wasn't stunned, just refocused. He squared off with the Death Caster and lifted his axe. Hector jerked away, streaking off into the caldera at the last instant, clearly afraid of Lifedrinker's bite.

*Throw me again, love!*

Lifedrinker's hungry plea rang through Victor's mind, and he almost did it, almost listened to her, but he had another action in mind and was too stubborn with rage to turn away from it. He stared at Hector, watching him, inhaling, breathing deep into his belly, pulling Energy into his breath Core just as he'd done on the Spirit Plane. He pumped his lungs in and out, gathering the Volcano's furious magma-fueled Energy, packing his pathways with it, and letting it seep into his blood, flesh, and bones. As Hector swooped around, ready for another pass, gathering red, crackling lightning on the tip of a dark scepter that Victor hadn't noticed before, Victor's grin grew, and the madness overtook him again. He laughed, and yellow flames licked his lips, sending black smoke into the air with the sounds of his insanity.