

Rather than attack or try to charge past him, Hector stymied Victor's desire to fight by hovering a good twenty yards away and shouting, "Fool! You've conjured ruin upon us all! Let me leave, and you can rule over this wasted land!" Victor didn't reply but shifted, putting himself squarely before the portal. His grin widened, and, as he exhaled, black smoke tendrils drifted out of his nostrils. The message was clear—if Hector wanted to flee this world, he'd need to remove Victor. In wild frustration, Hector jerked back his head and screamed, his crown of red lightning sparking and dancing with Energy, creating an arcing feedback loop with the black scepter that Hector raised aloft. With a grimace of desperate determination, he raced forward, blasting Victor with a torrent of arcing, writhing crimson electricity.

Victor was full to bursting with magma-attuned Energy. His Core was overflowing, on the verge of another expansion. He'd stretched it to its limit with his lungs, inhaling the heavy, thick Energy of the volcano, cultivating as he stood there, waiting for Hector's next attack. As that blast of arcane, thunderous Energy arced out of Hector's dark scepter, he took it full in the center of his chest. It burned and pulsed and would probably have stunned or killed a lesser foe, someone not so maddened with his own fury and the echoing, long-slumbering rage of a mountain. As it was, the powerful blast only served to contract Victor's lungs further as he exhaled a plume of hot air so thick with Energy that it misted the air more like a liquid than a gas before igniting with *woosh*.

The jet of superheated magma-infused fire sucked the oxygen out of the air as it engulfed Hector, cooking through his cloud of charged red Energy. The Death Caster screamed and gathered up all his reserves to save himself, cloaking himself in a red, crackling shield and girding his flesh and bones with cold, blue, death-attuned Energy, clearly something he'd been holding back. Victor tracked him as he descended to the ground, still spraying forth a plume of magma. The Energy coming from his mouth was dense and thick and hot, but it wasn't aflame; it didn't burn until it was several inches from his lips. From there, it streamed like a demon's firehose, bright with destructive power, unrelenting as it coated his foe, slowly burning through his defenses.

Victor had made incredible gains with his breath Core in a brief span of time, all thanks to the Volcano's radiated Energy. It was that heat, that magma-fueled rage in the air, that allowed Victor to send forth a plume of destructive force that would otherwise be beyond his young magma Core. More than that, his Volcanic Fury doubled his potential, extending his breath and increasing its potency. All that said, he only had so much; he couldn't maintain his Volcanic Fury with an empty breath Core, and some instinctive self-preservation wouldn't allow him to breathe his Core dry. After blasting Hector for several seconds with fiery destruction, Victor stopped and, heaving with the effort, began to suck air into his lungs again, restarting the cycle that would send Energy into his Core and then into his pathways, extending his Volcanic Fury's duration.

Hector was crouched low, his arms above his head. Victor had watched his magma-based fire destroy Hector's crimson shield of electricity, and he'd watched as Hector fought to sustain himself by expending a massive amount of cold, grave-scented, death-attuned power. Though he was hell-bent on destruction, his enraged mind incapable of clever quips or convoluted planning, he understood that Hector was spent, that he'd nearly exhausted himself. He wouldn't be flying out of reach anytime soon. Victor lifted Lifedrinker and, on long, powerful, titan-sized legs, he stalked toward his prey. He grinned, a burning, fiery smile that spread from ear to ear, exposing flame-licked teeth as a low, rumbling growl built in his gut.

Hector stood, backing rapidly away from the much larger titan, his arms high, sputtering blue wisps of smoky Energy tendrils gathering on his fingertips. He couldn't go far. Behind him, the

mountain had shaken open a rift in the ground, and hot billows of black, smoky air drifted up from it. Victor's growl intensified as his mouth began to salivate, dripping from his toothy grin in orange, fiery droplets to sizzle on the rough, blackened stone. He was savoring the moment, his fury hot and smoldering, ready to feel the satisfaction as Lifedrinker split the Death Caster from neck to crotch.

As though she could see the images playing through Victor's mind, Lifedrinker began to hum in anticipation, vibrating and bucking in his hand as he lifted her high. When he was just two titan-sized strides away, Hector lashed out with spectral, blue, misty claws. They flickered and faded in the hot air, hardly scratching Victor's neck and groin. Hector had aimed for his softest, least armored body parts and failed to make an impact; the Death Caster was truly spent, and his remaining Energy affinity was ineffectual in the magma-thick air. Victor lifted Lifedrinker, and, too mad to form any words, he grunted savagely, swiping her downward.

His blow would surely destroy his enemy; Lifedrinker's smoldering edge was wide enough, and with Victor's strength behind her, she would have cleaved him in half lengthwise. Something strange happened, however. Billowing steam rose from the ground and materialized out of the hot air, clouding Victor's view. A high-pitched screech resounded, echoing weirdly through the steam, but not before Victor ripped Lifedrinker downward, aiming to destroy Hector utterly. She rippled through the steam, sending it whirling away on superheated winds, and before he could stop the downward chop short, she bit into the stony ground with a tremendous crash and an explosion of basalt shards. Hector was gone.

Victor whirled in time to see a familiar ghostly form. Victoria hovered near the rift, and before her, condensing into flesh from the hot, moist air, was Hector; somehow, she'd transported him in her foggy tendrils away from Victor's destructive blow. Victor's fury soared to new heights. His vision darkened to murderous crimson so dense that he felt he was swimming in blood. He roared his frustration, fire erupting from his mouth, the flames limning his shoulders and arms torching upward in white-hot tendrils. He focused on Hector and ran, lifting Lifedrinker high again.

Victoria didn't stick around to watch; she spun and, trailing a cackling laugh, soared through the portal. Hector wasn't a fool; he could see his destruction written on Victor's face. Only two steps from the rift, he leaped for it, and despite Victor's explosive speed, his mad surge of muscular, rage-driven power, he was just shy of catching the Death Caster before he hit the weird tear in the universe. Victor screamed in wild, frustrated fury, continuing with his diving charge, hacking Lifedrinker at Hector's leaping form despite knowing he would come up short.

Hector wore a desperate grin, almost like he couldn't believe he was still alive, that he would escape. As his outstretched arms hit the rift, though, they were rebuffed. He came up against the tear in space and time and stopped short as though he'd hit a solid wall. Victor, unable to comprehend what had just happened, didn't care—he finished his diving chop, and Lifedrinker buried herself in the center of Hector's spine, splitting through his torso and pinning him to the stone platform as she bit into it. Victor slammed into the stone platform beside Hector's much smaller form, still gripping Lifedrinker. He twisted her left and right, growling in savage pleasure as Hector screamed and wailed, thrashing his arms and legs.

Hector's lips twisted into a grimace, and he wheezed a defeated curse, "God damned System." Then Lifedrinker's ministrations rendered him incapable of speech, and Victor was too furious for words. The only sounds beyond the bubbling of lava, the rumble of the mountain, and the weird hissing crackle of the rift above them were Victor's growls and Hector's desperate

mewling gasps. Lifedrinker bucked and throbbed, pulling the dregs out of Hector's Core. Victor watched through a deep, crimson haze as the Death Caster's pale, drawn flesh began to blacken and crumble from his bones in a fine, powdery ash.

The anger in Victor's heart throbbed with each beat, and as he watched his nemesis crumble into dust, he felt a deep, profound satisfaction. He'd destroyed his enemy, answered the challenge to his bloodline, avenged himself against the man who'd trapped him, and redeemed his failure, his mistake that had enabled this man's foul attack on his friends and soldiers. When nothing was left of Hector other than a pile of black ash, a hissing, sizzling *pop* resounded through the air, and Victor looked up in time to see the rip in the air disappear in a brilliant flash of white light.

As the mountain bucked and throbbed, he stood to his feet, and, still engorged by furious magma, he was barely able to comprehend the System message that flashed before his eyes:

*****Congratulations! Challenge of Conquest Completed! You have put an end to the invasion from the world of Dark Ember. Prince Hector of Heart Rot is no more. The enemy stronghold will suffer imminent destruction. Should you survive, claim your reward at any other outpost System stone. Rewards due: Colony Stone and a Chest of Conquest.*****

Victor glanced at the text, dismissing it in his rage-addled state. He turned to look around the caldera. Nothing in sight lived. He saw flowing magma, jets of superheated black smoke and steam, and trembling, lurching stone in every direction. The air was dark with smoke, though he thought he could glimpse some brighter light in one direction. He wasn't sure why, but he began to laugh as he loped in that direction, fearlessly stepping into magma, riding the roiling, heaving ground as though he was born to it. He could hear the angry rumble of the mountain beneath him, could feel it ready to burst.

"Yes!" he roared, his voice thick with wild, mad laughter. "Yes! Shout your fury to the world, *hermano!*"

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"Gather the dead as we run! Put them in your storage containers," Valla screamed, looking up to the billowing clouds of black smoke and thick orange lava flows begging to pour from the distant volcano. The eastern sky had grown light with the dawn, illuminating the destruction all around the remnants of the ninth cohort. She'd never seen a volcano before, didn't know what it would be like if it erupted, but something in her knew they had to get further away. She led by example, dashing from body to body, throwing them into her storage rings. The soldiers did the same, and she could see Kethelket's people flitting on their dark wings up and down around the scattered battlefield and broken encampment.

When she'd picked up at least a dozen corpses and didn't see any others nearby, she gathered Edeya's still-unconscious form into her arms and channeled Energy into her wings, flapping them to bring her aloft. "To the east! Rally to the east!" she screamed, and though she wanted to streak away, riding the wind to a distant hilltop far from the volcano, she held herself back, watching the poor, beleaguered soldiers still afoot, trying to hurry away from the enraged mountain. She couldn't get an accurate count in the messy, sporadic line, but she didn't think there were more than two hundred.

Less than half of the cohort had survived the night, but judging from the System message she'd just seen, at least the battle was won. She hoped Rellia and Borrius would be smart enough to heed their instinct, that deep-seated primal desire to live, and get away from the rumbling, angry mountain. Surely, they'd already put many miles between themselves and its smoldering slopes. Spiraling slowly, using the wind to keep herself aloft without straining her muscles, she looked down at Edeya, still wan, still hardly alive, and she wondered what it would take to wake her. The conquest was over—Hector was dead. Why hadn't she recovered?

Occasionally, she'd swoop low and shout encouragement to the fleeing soldiers. They were exhausted, but they were Energy users, and the Glorious Ninth had plenty of troops in the fourth and fifth tiers. With a grimace, Valla acknowledged the cold truth that most of the deaths had probably come from the lower-tier ranks. These survivors, bloody, filthy, and exhausted though they were, flew over the ground on powerful legs, gaining strength and momentum despite their hard labor—their Cores were recovering.

As their flight lengthened into dozens of minutes, they received another boost as streams of thick, potent yellow Energy began to flow toward them from the distant battlefield. The System had finally agreed that the battle was over and was delivering their reward. Valla knew what was coming and didn't want to be airborne when the surge hit her. She watched as the Naghelli and a handful of Ghelli flyers came to the same conclusion, hurrying to the ground ahead of the rushing, yellow ribbons.

She'd just landed when Lam fluttered down beside her. "I was looking for her! Thank you for bringing her out!"

Valla held Edeya close, offering Lam a fierce smile. "Victor told me to get her."

"Thank the roots he awoke. Whatever he did up in that volcano, it won the day. Do you think . . ." Lam let her words trail away, but Valla knew what she was going to ask—did she think Victor had lived?

"I don't feel like he's dead, but I suppose I can't really know. I hope he can get away before . . ."

Her words were cut off as a river of Energy smashed into her, and a similar one hit Lam. They both cried out in ecstasy, and though she tried not to, Valla dropped Edeya to the hilltop as her arms flew wide, and she lost herself in the euphoria.

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 60 Sword Dancer, gained 20 agility, 20 dexterity, and have 16 attribute points to allocate.*****

*****Level 60 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Ordeni Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 70. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.*****

The message awaited her when she fell to her feet and regained her mental faculties. "Two levels," she said to Lam as the other woman staggered to her feet.

"Three!" Lam replied, stooping to pick up Edeya. Valla grasped her shoulder, stopping her short.

“Let me carry her. My wings can ride the wind.” She’d seen how the Ghelli flew; they had to flap their little sets of wings rapidly, and she knew it was tiring. Lam, herself, had told her she couldn’t fly very far, even when rested.

“Ah. Thank you, then.” Valla stooped to pick up Edeya, and that’s when the mountain exploded. Even where she stood, some six leagues from the mountain, Valla was thrown to the ground. The air exploded with a thunderclap sound that temporarily deafened her. As she struggled to her hands and knees, eyes on the distant peak, the ground bucking and shaking underneath her, she felt the flow of hot, furious Energy rippling through the air, dwarfing the Energies in her Core like grains of sand whipped aloft by a hurricane.

The mountain was ejecting a plume of ash and smoke high into the sky, towering toward the firmament, flashing and rippling with menacing colors—grays, blacks, and, lower down, reds and oranges. The sky darkened as the ash cloud spread, and Valla finally regained her feet. Orange rivers ran down from the mountain’s peak, and she wondered how far they’d reach before the volcano’s fury was spent.

“It feels like Victor!” Lam screamed, and Valla knew what she meant—the fury and hatred in the air reminded her of Victor’s aura when she’d first felt its full weight, though it was a thousand times heavier.

“We need to keep moving!” She bent to pick up Edeya, and as she and Lam retook the air, she could see the surviving members of the ninth cohort had similar ideas; they raced pell-mell away from the mountain toward the distant clear sky in the east.

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When Victor came back to himself, he was utterly disoriented. He sat up, blinking rapidly, staring at his environment for several long minutes before blurry memories began to fill the gaps in his mind. He sat on warm, ash-covered stone, and, looking around, he realized it was a boulder the size of a small house. All around him was a dim, smoky wasteland. Leafless, blackened trees dotted a nearby hillside, but most vegetation was gone entirely, with nothing on the ground but ash, as far as he could see. A ticking, steaming river of half-hardened lava filled a gully to his left, and the sky was dark gray, barely lit by the faint white orb of the sun overhead.

“Volcano,” he muttered, his throat dry and his voice hoarse. In a series of images and feelings, he remembered what had happened, though it was like looking at a slideshow in his memory, not a movie. Images of the roiling caldera, the rift to Dark Ember, Victoria escaping, Hector dying to Lifedrinker’s bite . . . “Lifedrinker!” Victor furiously scrabbled at her harness, only to find it gone; all of his belongings were gone save his helmet, his wyrm-scale vest, his dragonsteel belt, his bracer with Khul Bach’s shard, and his various storage rings. Panic sending his heart racing, he leaped to his feet. Like a cold shower, relief washed over him when he saw Lifedrinker lying on the boulder behind where he’d been sitting.

“Thank God, *chica*.” He breathed a deep sigh of relief, running his hands through his hair. He looked down at himself, half-naked as he was, and chuckled, pulling some new pants and boots out of his ring. “Shit!” he patted at his waist, realizing that his older, dimensional pouches hadn’t survived. It had been so long since he’d organized his things that he didn’t even know what items he’d lost. Regardless, he knew his most precious belongings were in his rings; he hardly touched the pouches anymore.

Once he'd put on a new pair of self-sizing and repairing leather pants and a pair of sturdy boots, he scooped up Lifedrinker and turned his attention to the System messages that, at some point during his madness, he'd shoved to the side of his vision.

He vaguely remembered the first one:

*****Congratulations! Challenge of Conquest Completed! You have put an end to the invasion from the world of Dark Ember. Prince Hector of Heart Rot is no more. The enemy stronghold will suffer imminent destruction. Should you survive, claim your reward at any other outpost System stone. Rewards due: Colony Stone and a Chest of Conquest.*****

"Right." He turned in a slow circle, looking through the dim, smoky air. He could see the volcano's slope a dozen miles or more behind him. It no longer shook, and only a half-hearted plume of smoke continued to rise from its peak. The lava flows were still orange near the top but faded as they descended the slopes. "You were pissed, but you shouted out your rage all at once, eh, *hermano*?" He turned back to the System messages:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 59 Battlemaster, gained 20 strength, 18 vitality, 8 agility, 8 dexterity, 6 will, and 6 intelligence.*****

*****Congratulations! Your breath Core has advanced: Improved 3.*****

"Two levels and a breath Core rank, huh?" Victor nodded, looking up at the top of the smoking mountain. "Thanks, Hector." His amusement was short-lived when he thought back further than his victory over the Death Caster. What damage had been done? How many lives had been lost because of Hector's ambush, because Victor had let himself get trapped? He turned and looked over the ash-covered wasteland, wondering how many of his friends had escaped.

"Valla . . ." He reached into his Core and used some inspiration-attuned Energy to summon Guapo. As he swung onto his back, the Mustang knew where he wanted to go—the System said to collect his reward at an outpost, and the closest one was Sea Keep, east of the mountain. Valla had been on the same side of the mountain. It stood to reason that she and the surviving members of the Ninth would go that way. "Let's go, buddy." He slapped Guapo's shoulder and leaned forward, urging the horse to pick up the pace. Hope and dread battled in his heart as he raced toward the distant sliver of blue sky.