

“So that’s one of ‘em?” Victor watched the gold-clad man charging toward him, easily ten feet tall but still a child compared to Victor. “Doesn’t seem so tough.”

“Careful, Victor,” Lam said, still hovering above him near his enormous, blazing banner.

“Well, if the Empire is moving against us, this moment was coming sooner or later. Might as well get it over with.” Victor set Lifedrinker down and pulled his helmet and wyrm-scale armor from his ring. Rather than waste time taking off his uniform jacket, he simply sent it directly into storage then he donned his armor. By the time he’d sealed up his vest and lifted Lifedrinker, the enemy force was only half a mile or so distant.

“Something killed our driver. I’ll hunt the sky. Be careful,” Lam said, then her wings buzzed and sprayed Energy motes as she streaked upward, back toward the coach. Victor watched her briefly, then turned back toward the Ridonne and his soldiers. He began to run straight at the front of that wedge of charging enemies. “C’mon, *chica*, it’s time to dance.”

*I thirst!*

Victor laughed as he poured red, rage-attuned Energy into his pathways and began channeling it into his arms and Lifedrinker. She blazed with furious crimson light, and then, as if in answer to his Energy, her silvery metal ignited, heatwaves rippling off her into the air, black smoke trailing as Victor charged. As he tore over the plains, resisting the urge to leap so that he’d have more control over his trajectory, he began to make out details about the rapidly approaching enemies.

He couldn’t count them easily, not clumped and lined up behind each other the way they were, but if he had to guess, Victor would say there were more than a hundred darkly-clad warriors behind their Ridonne leader. They carried gleaming spears, two-handed swords, axes, and mauls, but not a shield was to be seen among them. This was a force of killers, men and women who aimed to overwhelm their targets with a brutal offensive assault. Victor’s grin spread further, pulling back from teeth that reflected the moons’ luster in anticipation. Blood was about to flow.

The Ridonne towered over his soldiers, but they all ran with grace and unnatural speed, sliding through the grass like wraiths, their passage creating a susurrus that almost sounded like a steady, sustained wind gust. When they were just a hundred paces apart, Victor focused on the golden warrior and his gigantic, gleaming sword, held high over his head, back as though ready to chop forward. With nothing but anticipation and excitement in his heart, Victor roared again and cast Energy Charge. Like an eight-hundred-pound human cannonball, his form ignited with red, furious Energy and streaked through the gap separating them.

The golden warrior cried out, his voice rising in a mad, ululating crescendo, and then he brought his sword down, far too early to hit Victor. Though he was moving almost as quickly as a person’s eye could track him, Victor saw the move and felt a surge of excited glee; was the fool so bad at judging when to strike? Then the earth erupted under him, ripping apart, exploding up in a shower of rock, dirt, and grass as the true effects of the Ridonne’s blow became apparent. Victor saw the wave of earth coming, saw the ground rupturing from the point of the Imperial warrior’s strike, but he couldn’t waver in his charge. The spell was set, and he was under its impetus; he tore right through that rippling curtain of rock and dirt and smashed into the Ridonne.

The concussion of his impact with the sundered earth and his secondary crash into the Ridonne shook the night, sounding much like a large vehicle slamming into a tree. The golden warrior was far sturdier than Victor expected. He braced himself, just barely lifting his sword in time to keep Victor from trampling it out of his hands. Then Victor, leaning forward, Lifedrinker held high, carrying a thousand pounds of dirt and rock, collided with him. The Ridonne tried to slip him, rolling to the right, but Victor was too large, the concussion too massive, and they both tumbled and tore through the host of smaller warriors, flattening dozens of them and utterly breaking their charge.

“Kill the old man!” the Ridonne screamed, his voice high, shrill, violent, more like a giant raptor than a man. Victor was stunned by his enemy’s quick recovery and ability to shout commands after that impact. Victor had tumbled several times and had ended up face down on a pile of injured Imperials. He rolled over, grasping a fallen soldier and flinging him away as he surged to his feet. The Ridonne stalked toward him, sword held high, golden Energy shimmering over his entire form like a liquid, crystalline barrier.

He might once have been a Shadeni, but it was clear his Ridonne bloodline had changed him a great deal. He had a hawkish nose, wild, red-blazing eyes, and, sprouting from his shoulders and helmet, his forearms and hips were long, black horns or spines. Victor didn’t know, didn’t really care, what the correct term for them was. Moreover, the man didn’t wear boots or even have armor below the knees. He had no need; his legs ended in enormous, shiny black hooves upon which he stomped toward Victor, heedless of the downed soldiers he trampled.

“Come on then!” Victor roared, sidestepping and whipping Lifedrinker in a cleaving hundred- and eighty-degree arc, savagely maiming several warriors that tried to approach him from the side.

“I said kill the old man!” the Ridonne screamed again, and Victor glanced toward the carriage, nearly a mile away, noting that dozens of the Imperial soldiers were almost upon it. He saw Lam’s glittering wings looping in a wide circle around the vehicle. He saw something like a miniature light show as Valla channeled a lightning-powered spell. He knew they were formidable, Rellia too, but he worried they’d be overwhelmed.

He grinned at the Ridonne, circling him, swiping Lifedrinker left and right if any of the soldiers drew near. While they faced each other and the Ridonne continued to scream at his soldiers, exhorting them to kill the others and “leave the giant” to him, Victor summoned a massive flood of fear-attuned Energy out of his Core, nearly draining himself of the potent, purple-black power, sending it into another spell. The ground around him erupted in dark shadows, swirling and writhing as they rose up, solidifying into the shapes of five gigantic, pony-sized, leering, snarling, yipping coyotes.

With a thought, Victor sent them racing over the plains toward the carriage, quickly overtaking most of the soldiers, trampling or snapping at them, spreading fear and panic in their wake. They howled and cried, their weird sounds magnified by their size and the dark Energy that flowed through them. That done, Victor turned his attention back on the Ridonne. Done waiting for him to make a move, he stepped forward, snapping Lifedrinker forward and down, aiming to split him at the crease of his neck and shoulder.

“I’ve killed larger than you,” the man snarled, whipping his huge bastard sword up and to the side, parrying Lifedrinker, and nimbly using the force of Victor’s blow to glide sideways over the ground.

Victor wasn't a shit-talker, not during a fight. He just glowered at the smaller man and got to work. He could tell by the way the Ridonne parried and tried to slip his blows that he feared Victor's strength, but the man's speed was a near match for his, and he certainly wasn't a slouch with that sword. They exchanged furious flurries of blows, dodging, parrying, or eating them, each trusting in their armor from time to time. Lifedrinker cleaved great scars in the man's gleaming plate armor, but she never cut through it. Victor didn't hold her responsible—the only blows the man was letting through were glancing. He needed to strike a solid hit.

They fought like that for several minutes that seemed to drag out like eternity as Victor was forced to concentrate on every aspect of the contest, pushed to his limits like he hadn't been in a very long time. Not Polo Vosh, nor Yabbo, nor even Karnice had pressed him that hard. The duel of axe and sword became his reality, his world, and he almost began to enjoy it as the rhythmic contest took on a life of its own.

Lifedrinker sang and screamed as she cut the air, her blazing magma heart growing brighter and brighter. The Ridonne's sword was something special, crafted of brilliant silvery metal; it let Lifedrinker's furious heat roll off, sparks flying like a blacksmith forging steel. All the while they battled, Victor analyzed the man's style and knew he was doing the same. They circled, clashed, circled, and clashed. Victor wondered who would break from the pure combat first. Who would try to end things with a well-timed Energy-based skill or spell?

"So, you're Victor?" the man asked through gritted teeth. Was he tiring? He certainly didn't move like he was. Victor could feel his own Energy levels. His fear was nearly gone but slowly regenerating. His inspiration was more than half full and rising. Even his glory was on the climb, almost recovered from casting his banner. The only pool that gave him concern was his rage, well under half-full after several minutes of battling with his Iron Berserk active and constantly channeling the furious Energy into his axe.

When Victor ignored his question, the man hissed strangely and blinked his eyes rapidly, and Victor almost stumbled when he saw the flames in those orbs dim slightly, revealing odd, hourglass-shaped pupils. He clicked his tongue, whipping his sword down in a low cleave that Victor easily avoided. "Do you know me, then?"

Victor grunted, still ignoring the man, and channeling a bit of inspiration-attuned Energy, cast Energy Charge again, hoping to catch his opponent off guard. He was only a couple of steps away from him, so as the spell ignited around him, limning his form with white-gold light, and he blasted forward, the Ridonne gasped and barely managed to create his shimmering golden shield. He encased himself just in time as Lifedrinker bore down on his shoulder, and Victor slammed into him, sending him flipping backward, head over heels.

"You talk too much," Victor roared, jumping after him, soaring up into the air, and coming down, Lifedrinker's blazing, smoking blade streaking toward the downed Imperial like a comet. His savage smile widened as he descended, noting the split in the man's golden armor where hot, purple-red blood bubbled forth, brightly illuminated by Victor's banner. The Ridonne was battered, his armor dirt-smearred, long stalks of grass caught between the plates and joints. He was barely up to one knee, using his bastard sword as a crutch when he saw Victor falling toward him like death incarnate.

"Fool!" he cried, then exploded in a burst of bright golden Energy, tearing over the ground, ripping apart the tall grass, and leaving a trail of fire and smoke as he fled Victor's impact. Victor

roared in furious frustration as he crashed into the ground where the man had been, but he didn't linger there. He leaped to his feet and began charging after the fleeing Imperial. The trail was easy enough to follow—a trench of blackened, smoldering grass leading further afield from the carriage.

Once upon a time, Victor might have been unable to consider whether or not he should chase the man. Now though, after all the work he did on Zaafor, after everything he endured to improve his Berserk ability, he paused and glanced back at the carriage. He could see Lam's explosive Energy attacks, taking the shape of a giant hammer, smashing down amid the Empire's soldiers. He couldn't make out Rellia or Valla and saw no sign of the others.

He did see and felt his coyotes. He licked his lips as he connected his mind to them, felt their hunger and the pleasure they experienced ripping their foes apart, flinging them left and right, harvesting the terror and fear they drew forth. He felt the call to join his pack, to smash the fools trying to kill his friends, trying to cut the head off his army.

Victor looked out over the grassy plains, trying to track the Ridonne's passage. The smoldering line of his flight ended about a mile away. Was he just running now? Had he teleported? Sprouted wings? Victor had no idea but knew his friends might die if he left them. He turned back to the carriage, and, with three running steps, he leaped through the air, crashing to the ground and repeating the process again and again until he was among the rearguard of the Imperial soldiers.

These men were probably dangerous, powerful soldiers among their peers, but Victor was stacked with abilities that boosted him beyond his natural, already dominating potency. His banner filled him with vigor, boldness, and a love for battle. His orb granted him a keen insight into the combat taking place around him, showing him where to step, where to swing, and where to move to evade a strike. His Iron Berserk, probably the most potent of his boons, filled him with strength, sped up his movements, and allowed him to shrug off wounds that would have left a lesser man dead or disfigured. More, he wore armor that proved impervious to the blows of the Imperial soldiers, and Lifedrinker cleaved them apart, heedless of their shadowy chainmail.

All that said, Victor was like Rottweiler let loose amid a rabbit colony. He cut the soldiers apart, and when they got past his axe and strayed too close to him, he'd grab them by the tops of their heads or their arms and smash them around like ragdolls. Blood misted the air in his wake, soaking him, splashing onto his banner, and joining the ethereal crimson rivulets that ran down from the edge of the blazing sun. His allies rallied at his approach; in the light of his banner, they grew stronger and bolder, screaming and hacking viciously at the enemies who had earlier harried them.

Victor saw Lam launching herself into the air and descending on her foes, wielding a one-handed, sledge-like warhammer that she somehow expanded into a massive orange Energy weapon that flattened and shocked whole groups of enemy shoulders. As he continued to bathe in his enemies' blood, driving ever closer to the carriage, he finally got eyes on Rellia and Valla, both fighting back-to-back at the carriage door, where, he presumed, the two lieutenants and Borrius had taken refuge. All around them, leaping, howling, growling, and furiously biting, were his massive, purple-black coyotes.

The bodies of Imperials were everywhere. Grievously wounded soldiers wailed and cried, clawing at the blood and gore-soaked grass, trying to escape the insane charnel house that had

overtaken the grassy plains around the carriage. Having fought his way to their center, attacking from the rear, Victor paused long enough to bellow a war cry that thundered out of his massive chest. Bloody saliva streamed from his enraged, frenzied face as he screamed, and then the Imperials broke. The dozens left who could still run tried to do so, breaking from the melee and charging in every direction away from the carriage.

Victor's coyotes weren't having it; they raced after the runners, snapping them up by the necks, hamstringing them, or simply trampling them in their frenzied need to keep their prey from fleeing. Victor almost joined the chase, but he stomped up to the carriage and bellowed, "Does Borrius live?"

"He does," Rellia said, bending at the waist, pressing a palm against a bubbling, flowing gash above her left hip.

"Are you okay, Mother?" Valla asked, producing a potion and handing it to Rellia.

"Fine, fine," she said, tipping the draught to her lips.

"What of the Ridonne, Victor?" Lam asked, landing atop the carriage.

"He ran. He was a tough bastard, but he bolted as soon as I hurt him."

"There was a Ridonne here?" Rellia asked, and when Victor looked at her again, he was struck by her savage beauty. Her eyes gleamed fiercely in the light of his banner, and her pale blue skin, painted with sprays of her dead enemies' blood, almost matched her copper-red hair. He shook his head, trying to get control of the Quinametzin berserker inside him, trying to focus on what people were saying.

". . . wasn't winged. He had horns all over his body, though, and ran like a charging roladii bull," Lam finished saying as he finally tuned in.

"Damn," Rellia spat. "Without his head, we'll have a hard time convincing the other nobles that the Ridonne tried to assassinate us. Old bones!" She said the last like a curse, and Victor grinned as she continued, "How'd they know to attack my coach?"

"It's not hard to spot, and, seeing the shadows still wrapped around these broken fools, I don't think it was hard for them to lay in wait. Perhaps they didn't know how big a bite they'd taken." Valla said, gesturing to the absolutely gore-drenched Victor.

Victor grinned, exposing teeth stained pink with the blood that had splashed into his face during his slaughter. He shook his head, though, and said, "Nah, they knew Borrius was in there." He gestured to the coach. "The Imperial was screaming at the men to 'kill the old man.'" He looked at Lam and asked, "Did you find who killed the driver?"

"No. They were either very fast or very stealthy. Perhaps that assassin is who informed the Ridonne about Borrius."

Victor hawked up a large wad of coppery-tasting, bloody saliva and spat it into the grass, then, looking around at the massacre, listening to the groans and wails coming from the tall grass, said, "We've got some prisoners you can question."

“Yes, and we need to get the army ready to march. I’m deploying the airships tonight; we need to find where that Ridonne fled, especially if he has more men or an actual army nearby. We might have our first real test sooner than I’d hoped.” As she spoke, Rellia turned to the coach and knocked on it, calling out, “You can open up now.”

“Should I chase that fucker down?” Victor squeezed Lifedrinker’s haft in his fists, twisting them slightly, enjoying the heat emanating from the weapon.

Lam shook her head. “No. We can’t afford to be reckless. You beat him, yes, but if he has brethren nearby, you could walk into an ambush. Do you think you could take two of them? Three? I can tell you he wasn’t one of the strongest.” Lam dropped down from the top of the carriage. “I’ve heard of Ridonne twenty feet tall, wielding flames that would be more at home spewing forth from a volcano.”

“Tall tales,” Valla scoffed.

“We’ll see,” Lam said, shrugging. “I’m afraid I mean that literally—we’ll see.”