

Victor's intention hadn't been to impose his aura on his friends and allies nearby, but he felt stronger, more powerful, and more capable when he wasn't working to hold it back. With it released, coursing out of him, he felt like he'd just set down a sack of cement he'd been hauling around on his shoulder. Sure, he could carry it, but things were much more comfortable when he didn't have to. Still, he flinched a little when he heard the gasps behind and around him, and he hoped he hadn't driven anyone to their knees. He glanced over his shoulder, saw Rellia helping another woman to steady herself, and quickly looked forward again. Now wasn't the time to start feeling guilty for being powerful.

With that in mind, hoping to bolster his friends so he didn't have to worry about them, he pulled a thick ribbon of inspiration-attuned Energy out of his Core and cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. White-gold Energy poured through his pathways, seeping out through his very flesh, limning him in a pleasant, soft light that seemed to pulse through the air around him in a great circle, encompassing not just the platform he stood upon but the ground around him for dozens of yards in every direction.

Victor instantly felt the relief of those standing nearby, felt them shift and sigh, and knew that his spell was more than mitigating the effects of his aura, at least for those he considered allies. More than that, Victor felt the inspiration—stronger, deeper, and more profound than ever before; this spell was like a floodlight next to the lightbulb of his old Inspiring Presence. His back straightened, he widened his stance, and he reached up to touch the chain around his neck, channeling a bit of Energy to activate it.

Standing tall as he was, nearly fifteen feet of corded muscles wrapped in gleaming wurm-scale armor, high above the ground on the airship platform, he was easy to see for the gathering troops. Their initial trickle had become a rush, and now they crowded closer. Victor could see sergeants, lieutenants, and even captains near the front, holding them back, keeping them from going wild as they witnessed Victor's gigantic, softly glowing form.

He didn't know exactly how well the necklace would work to project his voice, so he started by clearing his throat. The sound echoed over the encampment, sounding more a growl than anything else, and some of the clamor from below settled as the soldiers realized he was preparing to speak. Victor didn't even know how to address them all, was "soldiers" the right word? What was he going to say? His mind darted from idea to idea, and he began to feel a real sense of panic; did he look a fool?

Still, the inspiration coursing through him wouldn't let him falter for long. He grunted, cleared his throat again, squared his shoulders, and remembered that these people had come to fight for him; he wasn't trying to sell something. Why would they judge his words harshly? He stared at a section of soldiers who were more unruly than the others, pushing at the widespread arms of several sergeants and a captain. He faced them and said, "Settle down, soldiers. I have words for you." Again, the necklace did its work, pushing his voice out over the encampment, and stillness fell upon the assembled mass.

"Good," he heard Rellia breathe. Perhaps she'd been afraid he'd fail to find his voice.

"Soldiers!" Victor began, his mind racing toward the things he wanted to say. "I know you've come to fight under my," he glanced to his left and right, "our banner. You know what's ahead of you, a long, possibly harsh journey. An unknown foe in the Marches, unknown enemies between here and there. Just last night, a new enemy showed me his face when his agents tried to kill me and Tribune Valla." He jerked his thumb toward Valla, then paused. What was he doing? He

looked out over the sea of faces, the soldiers, some in armor, some in uniforms, some half dressed as though they'd just woken up. They were quiet. This didn't feel like it was what he should be saying.

Victor glanced down at Rellia, and she nodded, motioning for him to keep going, so he turned back to the soldiers and said, "It's not important; like any enemy that faces us, they were beaten." That got a little reaction out of them, some half-hearted cheering, clapping, and maybe a bit of laughter. Were they laughing at him? No, Victor shook his head; that didn't make sense. Still, things didn't feel right. He felt like he should be pumping them up, not lamely describing what he wanted to do.

"I'm not sure what you all have heard about me. Yeah, yeah, the big fight in the arena . . ." he trailed off as that got a bit more of a reaction, some soldiers cheering, others hooting, a lot more talking. "Things have changed since then—a lot. I've been to another world. I've fought giants and great wyrms. I've learned a great deal, and I'm going to use what I've learned to push you to victory!" Victor's voice gradually grew into a shout, and he lifted Lifedrinker as he finished speaking. Many of the soldiers clapped and stamped their feet. Quite a few cheered, but in Victor's mind, it was lame. These were soldiers. There were more than six thousand of them out there. Their response should be thunderous.

He decided to change tactics; it was time to talk them up. To get them fired up like he might do to his wrestling team before a match, just on a larger scale. What should he say, though? He stared out over that mass of colorful people, trying to gather his words. Would he be honest? Would he warn them of the troubles to come? He shook his head; he didn't need to. "I'm so goddamn proud when I look out over this encampment!" he bellowed. The soldiers stared at him, quieter than he'd expected, perhaps wondering at the sudden praise. Victor pressed on, "Look at you! Ready to take on the whole fucking world!"

Still, the soldiers were silent, some with open mouths, unsure. Had Victor gone too far? He laughed. Again, he lifted Lifedrinker high with one of his massive arms, "I know, I know. You want to conquer the Untamed Marches. You want to claim land for your loved ones, your people. Still, look at you!" he shouted. "Look!" He gestured left and right with his axe, and finally, the soldiers did as he asked; they looked around.

"Those are your brothers and sisters! Ready to seal their bond with you in *blood!*" He screamed the last word, and when it felt like the soldiers weren't catching his mood, weren't feeling his enthusiasm, were, in fact, starting to look a little disturbed, Victor decided he'd had enough. He built the pattern for Berserk in his pathways, and, just as he'd done to learn Inspiring Presence and Heroic Heart, his Aspect of Terror and Inevitable Huntsman, he cast the spell with a massive torrent of glory-attuned Energy.

Glory infused his being. It was an Energy unlike any he'd ever felt, hot like rage but good like inspiration. It crackled through his pathways, igniting him with enthusiasm, purpose, and zeal for facing any sort of adversity, but particularly for fighting—for conquering. He didn't feel like he was losing himself; in fact, he felt more in control than ever. Still, he felt so incredible, so full of potential and power and the verve for life that he lifted his head and roared. He was so busy savoring the sensation that he hadn't noticed what was happening around him.

A System message appeared in his vision, and when he lowered his head from his thunderous outburst, he quickly read it before dismissing it:

*****Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Banner of the Champion - Basic.*****

*****Banner of the Champion - Basic: Prerequisite: Affinity - Glory. Channeling the lust for Glory that lives in your heart, you manifest that aspect of your spirit in the form of a banner that hangs in the air behind you, bestowing a fraction of your potency and desire to those allies of yours who look upon it. Conversely, enemies who see your banner will suffer a malus that will reduce their will and build dread in their hearts. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

Victor looked behind and up, and there it was, hanging in the air behind him, blazing with brilliant, sparkling, golden Energy—an enormous banner. It was rectangular, two yards wide by three or four high, with a pale, creamy background on which a golden sun blazed, near as bright as the one in the sky. From the bottom of that blazing sun, rivulets of blood ran down the pale background to drip from the banner's bottom edge, each drop exploding like a little red starburst behind Victor's back.

Victor roared again when he saw it, driven nearly into a frenzy by the inspiration and glory in his pathways. He lifted Lifedrinker into the air, and this time her silvery head exploded into glorious molten fury, black smoke billowing into the air from her hot, razor-edged blade. The soldiers, staring at Victor, mouths open, eyes wide and transfixed by the immense blazing banner behind him, finally started to feel what he was experiencing; they cheered. They lifted their weapons and screamed. Victor, feeling what he'd been waiting for, the adulation of a crowd, bunched his knees and launched himself off the platform, heedless of the damage he caused with his explosive movement.

He landed squarely on the ground just before the center of the assembled soldiers, and, as those closest to him stumbled and fell from the concussion, he lifted Lifedrinker again and bellowed, "We are going to destroy any force that confronts us!"

Again, the soldiers cheered, their titanic leader ablaze with golden and white Energy, an enormous standard hanging in the air behind him, filling them with the lust for glory, striding among them, roaring and shouting his praise. "You're the best damn soldiers on the planet! We'll smash our way through the Untamed Marches! No one will stop us!" He went on and on, exhorting them to scream and roar and howl. "Let me hear you!" he thundered, pumping his blazing axe toward the sky.

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"Ancestors!" Rellia gasped as she helped Chev-dak to his feet. Everyone on the platform was staggered, struggling to stand without stepping on the shattered planks left in the wake of Victor's leap. Everyone seemed to be all right, uninjured. In fact, they seemed better than all right, and Rellia could relate. She felt good, incredible, even; the effect of that man's Energy and his huge blazing banner were undeniable. She wanted to draw her rapier, to leap from the stands and follow him. She wanted to crush her—their—enemies and see them driven before her. She wanted to hear the praise of her people and see the adulation in their eyes as they witnessed her victories.

"Where's he gone," Lam asked, then she launched into the air, her wings humming as they carried her aloft.

Lam's little assistant, Edeya, cried, "He's among the troops! Look how he towers over them like a giant! Roots! My heart felt like it was squeezing out of my chest when his aura fell on us. Thank the Great Tree he cast his inspiration on us! Can we follow him?" Her voice was thrilled, excited, desperate. Was the man's pull so strong?

"A Titan, not a giant," Valla said, stepping around Polo Vosh to stand near the cracked, bent railing. Rellia frowned at her daughter's back but moved between two of her attendants, urging them to step away from the broken center of the platform, and when she got to the edge, she looked out at a scene that seemed cut from myth.

The soldiers surged and moved in great waves around Victor's gigantic figure, buzzing with excitement, cheering, screaming, howling, and falling to their knees in ecstatic, frenzied pandemonium. Victor's deep voice rumbled above the din, shouting encouragement, roaring, and bellowing his praise. "What have we unleashed," Rellia asked, her eyes wide, her jaw falling slack. Despite her words, she too wanted to get out there, to follow Victor. If he wanted them to march into battle right that moment, she'd be ready to join him.

"A Titan," Valla said again.

"You've seen this?" Polo asked, his deep voice rumbling, trembling with, if Rellia were any judge, excitement.

"Um, similar. Not that banner, though; that's new." Was that pride in her daughter's voice? As if she could read her mind, Valla turned to Rellia and said, "Was this what you were hoping for?" Now she sounded smug, as though she'd seen Rellia make a mistake. Had she? Rellia frowned but didn't respond. She watched the titan-sized man out there among the troops, striding around, the soldiers moving like water in a tide pool, surging and ebbing around his progress. If she were honest with herself, this was a less-than-ideal development, at least not for her.

She'd hoped that, by springing the speech on Victor, he'd recognize his inexperience and see that he needed people like Rellia, and their partnership would be solidified. This, though, was beyond anything she could have imagined. These soldiers were going to be fanatical in their loyalty. Victor would feel more secure in his role, and she'd be further sidelined. She began to worry that she would lose control of this entire expedition.

Valla had turned back toward Victor, so Rellia stepped closer to her and said, softly, just for her ears, "Are you angry with me, daughter?"

Valla frowned and glanced at her. She'd become more beautiful, more powerful. It was apparent, from the way she carried herself to the feeling of her aura, more pronounced now that Victor's was further away. More, the girl had let her hair grow and was wearing that, arguably quite impressive, armor rather than her uniform. Rellia had tried for years to get her to stop dressing like a legionnaire! Now that she wanted her to dress the part, she'd decided to gird herself like a warrior instead? "Aren't you pleased that he announced you as a Tribune?"

"Certainly, I'm pleased. Are you?" Valla's frown curled into a smile, though Rellia wondered if she saw a touch of cruelty in those eyes. "As for whether I'm angry with you, the answer is no, Mother. We have much to discuss, however."

Rellia's frown deepened, easier for her now that Victor's banner grew more and more distant. For the first time, she worried that she'd made a mistake sending Valla to shadow Victor. What

had she experienced in such a short time to change her so much? Just a few months ago, she'd never have taken such an insolent tone. Where had the doting daughter gone? The one who'd clung to her like a barnacle on a sea ship when Rellia had lost her foot, so protective . . .

"Mother, he seems to be winding down. Is the command structure there, inside the central palisade?"

Rellia jerked her eyes up, looking out at the distant, glowing figure, still towering high, still waving around that smoking axe. *Great Mother, that axe!* Rellia shivered, remembering its bite. "Yes, Valla. Tell me, though, why do you think he'll stop anytime soon?"

"Look more closely. The soft white light, his inspiration Energy, is gone. If he's pulled it back or ended that spell, likely he'll end the others soon as well."

"Those are spells, then? Not his bloodline?" Polo asked, joining the conversation.

"A combination," Valla replied, shrugging. "He's a potent package. His bloodline alone is devastating, but combine that with his powerful Spirit Core and his affinities . . . I pity our foes."

"Aye," Polo grumbled, "He's grown much since we last sparred. I don't know how he thinks I'll be useful to him."

"He's not always titan-sized. He still has much to learn about the axe." Valla offered Polo a smile, and Rellia felt her heart stir with a bit of pride. She was a good girl at heart. Perhaps it was good that she was feeling her independence and becoming more of an individual.

"Very well. Come," Rellia said, moving to the wooden stairs, careful to step around the shattered boards at the center of the platform. "We'll walk to the palisade gate and wait for him." She was pleased that her foot, artificed by a cousin in Tharcray, provided enough feedback to help her navigate without a stumble.

"He's got them so damn riled up," ap'Jinna grouched. "It's inspiring, sure, but look!" He gestured left and right as he came down the steps. "Half the tents are trampled. I'm going to call a captain's meeting. Is that all right, Lady Rellia? We'll need to instill some discipline and get this camp organized."

"Don't ask me. Your Tribune is right there," Rellia pointed to Valla.

"Really, Mother? I thought you'd have assumed the role of Legate by now."

"No, not yet. Lam and I wait to speak with Victor about our placement in the ranks."

"And yet Captain ap'Jinna just asked you for permission . . ."

"Oh, Daughter! Must everything be difficult with you? Yes, Virt! Gather the captains. See to it." Rellia dismissed the man, waving her hand at his sputtered apologies. Then, she began to stride purposefully toward the palisade gate, irritated by this whole affair; nothing had gone to plan. Where was Lam? She scanned the skies and finally looked back toward Victor, distant now, toward the back of the encampment, and she saw her wings pouring motes of Energy as she streaked around over his head, circling him and his banner.

“I’m not trying to be difficult, Mother, but I must keep a critical eye on everything, including you and the other nobles, everyone who will vie for Victor’s loyalty. He depends on me.”

Rellia’s budding irritation at Lam slipped from her mind as she turned to her daughter, “What do you mean, depends on you?”

“He’s named me his Tribune Primus.”

“Oho? You who’ve never led more than a cohort? I had others in mind for that role. Lam, herself, mentioned an interest.”

“Regardless. Victor has chosen.”

Rellia looked around, saw that her retainers and the other officers who’d been on the platform were following a respectful distance behind, and allowed some affection into her voice as she said, “I’m proud of you, Valla.”

Finally, Valla’s expression softened a little, and she glanced quickly toward Rellia, meeting her eyes. Rellia felt something melt in her heart, a spot where she held memories of the little girl she’d taken all those years ago. Valla had such beautiful eyes, a color right in the middle of green and blue, big and angular, angry like a storm at sea when they wanted to be or gentle, like placid waters on a soft, sandy beach when the moment was right. As their gazes locked, the girl—the woman—on whom she’d pinned the future of her household said, “I missed you, Mother.”

Rellia felt moisture spring into her eyes, and she quickly looked away, walking stiff-backed toward the fort in the center of the encampment. Things hadn’t gone perfectly, but they hadn’t gone badly. Her daughter was home, and she was closer than ever to the titanic champion still railing away out there among the troops. Rellia may not have gained an edge over Victor with her little speech ploy, but she’d strengthened the morale of her army, and word would travel. Her enemies would feel something they might not have felt for a very long time, perhaps never in their lives—doubt.