

Victor felt the difference his Born of Terror feat made right away; though the fear pervaded his body, altering it, changing him from a man of muscle and sinew into a creature of shadow and talon, he still knew himself. This was a massive change from his previous experience with the Aspect of Terror—he knew, deep inside, that he was Victor, that he had a goal in mind, and that feeding upon the fear of all the bright spirits around him was secondary to that. Still, when he stretched his form, free of his temporary chrysalis of shadow, he sniffed at the air, savoring the rich scent of despair.

The world was no longer dark, the shadows fell away, and though he didn't see the bright colors of a simple flesh-bound beast, he could see clearly in the night. The blackness was gone, replaced by a grayscale landscape punctuated by bright lights—spirits ripe for the reaping. He looked down the slope into the wavy grasslands, admiring the rime of frost that was forming despite the late spring date. His breath plumed and huffed as he sniffed, looking out into those fields, seeing the spirits out there, gathering near the tall boughs of the great deep forest. There were a great many of them, milling about, congregating, waiting for something—him?

He knew more of the bright spirits waited behind him, lurking in the wooden fortress, hiding behind their flimsy walls. He also knew they weren't for him. He was meant to feast upon those in the fields and the forest. He was meant to drive them to madness, to panic. He grinned, spreading the leathery lips behind his beak, exposing rows of fangs. That black, razor-edged beak clicked in a weird, devilish chuckle. Behind him, someone hollered, some throaty human voice, bellowing a question. Who would dare?

Victor whirled and stalked toward the palisade, his head nearly high enough to see over it to the other side. Some spirits lingered atop that wall; most of them shrank back, wilting before him, but one stood tall, the one who'd barked at him. Victor stretched his long neck, extended his double-jointed knees, and pushed his beak-tipped snout toward the spirit, sniffing. Who was this insolent one? Suddenly the ripe scent of opened bowels touched his nose, and Victor growled, offended by the stench. He took another step toward the wall, the hunger in his Core, spurred by his anger at that quaking, insolent spirit, pushing him toward violence.

He knew this spirit, did he not? Should it be so disrespectful? Wasn't it one who'd sworn obeisance? Shouldn't he give it a taste of his fear? Shouldn't he share it? Before he could decide, another spirit came into view, one that had been behind the crenelation of rough timber. It was bright, beautiful, and very familiar to Victor. He sniffed at it, leaning close, the other foolish, much dimmer spirit forgotten. As his snout tasted the air, it spoke, "Go. Go, Victor. Punish those that threaten us. Break them!"

Valla! The word came to him, strange and foreign tasting in his mouth. He wanted to say it aloud but knew his tongue wasn't meant for such things—not anymore. Instead, he listened, and he remembered. This was a spirit he cared about, one he didn't want to share his fear. It wanted him to visit terror upon the fools in the fields and forest. If that were so, then he would oblige. He would relish it! Victor turned and responded to an urge born in his bones, in his blood; he screeched his madness, his fear-steeped heart, and willed those who heard him to share in it. He bounded down the slope, leaping pits and trenches, crashing through barriers too flimsy to slow him.

Soon, Victor was tearing through the tall grass, his long limbs devouring the distance between the bright, wonderful spirit and the ones she wanted him to visit destruction upon. She. "That's right!" he growled in a twisted, guttural voice. "Valla!" he roared, but it came out more like a screech than a name. He tore through the tall grass, aiming for a cluster of bright spirits

somewhat closer than the larger congregation, a small group of them squatting, lurking behind the grass, conspiring. Victor didn't give them a chance to react to him. He ran on taloned pads that caressed the grass like feathers on mist, and when he burst into their little clearing, it was like an avalanche of shadowy claws descending on Valla's enemies, *his* enemies.

Victor howled and smashed them about, knocking them down, ripping them with his talon-like claws, and, one by one, crouching over them, drawing the fear out of them as it compounded on itself. He used the Energy he cultivated to feed his form, to extend his spell, and to propel himself from one stunned target to the next. When he'd taken all the group of scouts could give, when they lay, bleeding and gasping their last breaths, he tore through the grass, a whispery shadow on the wind, and launched himself against more of the bright spirit's enemies.

Some of the spirits he feasted upon were stronger than others. Sometimes their sharp, shiny claws bit into his flesh or chipped at his bones and talons. It didn't matter; as he drained them of Energy and his Core churned out rage and fear, he healed. Most of the spirits' attacks were fruitless; they slid off his hard bones, his thick feathers, and the shadows that clung to him. He overwhelmed his victims with ferocious speed and power, gripping them with his talons, pressing them down, draining their Energy, and feeding his Core. Each enemy he overwhelmed restored and sustained him. No, he reconsidered, more than sustain—he thrived. As his rampage went on, as he charged from one quaking enemy or group of enemies to another, he grew more and more powerful, more and more hungry.

Soon, it wasn't only the victims underneath him, pinned by his talons, that fed him. No, he felt the fear coming to him from distant corners of the plains, drifting over the grass from the forest. His Core swelled with it, and his form grew denser, thicker with shadows, as the fuel for his frenzied feasting began to outpace his usage. Mad with the glut of pure fear, he lifted his head and screeched again and again as the night wore on.

#

"They wear on me, those cries! What's he doing out there?" Borrius asked, his eyes wide with stress, sweat beading on his pale blue forehead, despite the chill. He'd taken a moment to clean himself up after his brief encounter with Victor's terror aspect, and, not exactly refreshed but certainly less soiled, he'd tracked Valla down; she'd been patrolling the ramparts.

"He's killing them. He's running them down, driving them to mad fear, and reaping the harvest. It's how his fear aspect cultivates." She turned toward another screech, distant, perhaps all the way to the edge of the Blue Deep. Had he pursued them so far? Were they not in the fields?

"I wish we could get him to report back to us and tell us their numbers and locations."

"He probably won't remember much of what he sees out there when he comes back to himself."

Borrius frowned as he saw a cluster of guardsmen below, huddled close, whispering with wide, fearful eyes. "He's breaking not only the enemy's morale but our own."

Valla turned away from the grassland, following his gaze, and frowned. "Where's my mother?"

"Near the gate, last I saw."

“Come, we need to do our part.” Valla started around the rampart toward the palisade gate, and Borrius, feeling as though control were slipping through his fingers, followed after her.

Ten minutes later, he stood next to Rellia and Lam’s aide, Edeya, watching as Valla addressed the cohort captains. “Captains!” She said, her voice sharp and demanding, drawing their eyes away from the darkness outside the walls. “I’ve called you here for a reason. Your Legate Primus has left a task for you—we must bolster the troops’ morale. We must spread the tale of Victor’s rampage outside this palisade. Those screeches ripping the night come from his throat. He’s out there tearing apart the Imperial forces. He works to make them regret bringing in this night.”

“That’s him?” Polo asked, straightening up and shifting the great axe slung over his thick shoulder.

“That’s Victor,” Valla said as another screech distantly echoed over the plains.

“We must join him, in that case!” Sarl said, a rapier materializing in his hand.

“No, Sarl. Victor does his terrible work so that we might stand a chance against the Ridonne when they make their offensive. He works to break their morale, to thin their numbers, and to soften the tip of their spear. If we charge now, we’ll undermine his efforts.”

“What if he’s surrounded? What if the Ridonne surprise him?” Yarsha, captain of the fifth cavalry cohort, asked.

“Does it sound like he’s in danger? Do you hear any pain in that horrible screech?” Borrius asked, jumping onto Valla’s bandwagon. “If those two devils can catch him, which I highly doubt, having seen him move through the night with my own two eyes, then I fear they’ll regret doing so.”

“Come,” Valla said, clapping her hands. “Get out there and encourage the troops. Spread the tale of Victor’s work. Let them know the darkness might be against us, but the nightmare stalking through it is one of our own.”

#

“Desertion is starting to feel like a very real concern, Pazra,” the tall, golden-fleshed paragon of the Ridonne said, resting a hand on his shoulder, carefully avoiding the spikes. Pazra pulled away, moving to the other side of his map table. They stood inside his command tent, lushly appointed with thick rugs, opulent furnishings, and ample space for the two huge men and their attendants.

“Brother. Dear, Rosh-dak, if you fear your men are deserting, then you must punish them. I can assure you; my men will stand fast.”

“Your men are dying,” Rosh said, chuckling, looking down his long, straight nose as he was wont to do, always so eager to demonstrate how much taller he was, how much more handsome, how much more loved.

Pazra growled his response, "Small numbers. The beast can slay all night, and it will only be a fraction of us. What is the thing, anyway? Have you set eyes upon it yet? Old bones, but its shriek wears on me!"

"My scouts close in. It seems to hunt at random, never in a straight line. Still, they close the net, and when they do, they'll call to me."

"So sure? When was the last you heard from them? What of the airship your flyers captured?"

"Minutes ago, dear brother. Don't judge my men as harshly as your own. The cries you hear, the gaps in our line—all yours. As for the airship, it will be of no use. The other one brought it down with it; they proved more resilient than my plucky, flying tribune anticipated." Rosh chuckled, reaching up to finger the golden-capped, spiral horn that swept back from his temple over his ear. Pazra admired those glorious horns. What must life be like to be so handsome? "In any case, they did their job. We've removed the wench's air support. My men perform their duties with aplomb."

"Your men fair well only because they guard the far side of the encampment. If the beast wends its way toward them, we'll see how well they stand."

"It won't. I'll kill it before then. You should hope I do, at least. My last missive from our dear uncle wasn't very charitable in its language referencing this little military campaign of yours."

"Ours," Pazra corrected, "This is a joint venture, brother."

"So it is, so it is. He sees my involvement somewhat more charitably, however. I came here to help you, after all. He's wondering why two Ridonne and their legions are needed for a simple uprising orchestrated by a backwater noblewoman. If it weren't for the reports of this champion of hers, this so-called giant, and what the auguries have shown, I fear you'd be in a bit of trouble for allowing things to escalate to this level."

"Brother, is that how you've sold your involvement?" Pazra stood up straight, looking away from the map for the first time, his anger suddenly redirected toward his sibling. "I may not be as handsome as you, as loved, but don't mistake that for a weakness of the mind. I appreciate you being here, and I appreciate your help, but don't try to capitalize on this situation; do not attempt to curry favor among the family. Favor with me? Yes. You have it, but not if it means you will attempt to drag me down. What do you have to gain? I'm already far removed from the succession."

"What is there ever to gain by sibling rivalry? Is not the joy in the contest enough?" Rosh smiled slyly and reached out a long, powerful arm to jostle Pazra's shoulder. "Come, I know you're not being completely honest with me. Do you not attempt to please our mother with your activities? Do you not run to her, squealing the tale of every mistake I've made?"

"I don't, but you do, and she sees through it. You know Farscribe books can have more than one copy; she's seen all your missives goading me to violence, swearing your assistance. I give you this bit of advice freely: don't try to play our uncle for favor. She'll see through it. She's well aware of every misstep I've made but also of your involvement."

Rosh chuckled, stroking his chin and narrowing his eyes as he looked down on Pazra. "You did that? Gave her a copy? You little churl!" His chuckle seemed genuine; was he truly so

unbothered? “No matter. We’ll solve this debacle, and the family will see it was I who came to your aid.”

“Excuse me, Lord Pazra-dak,” Venet, one of Pazra’s tribunes, said, stepping into the light of his lamp and approaching the table.

“Speak,” he said, wincing as another horrifying shriek cut through the night.

“It seems the losses are somewhat greater than I first tabulated. There are . . . gaps in the secondary line.”

“Gaps?” Rosh asked, his amusement and further words forgotten; their rivalry was old news, and here was something new. His golden lips pulled back from sharp, white teeth, exposing bright canines that flashed in the gleam of the light. Pazra hated how his heart grew sick with envy whenever his brother smiled.

“Aye, sir. There are missing reinforcements.”

“Not dead?” Pazra asked, a deep frown marring his already scrunched countenance.

“That’s unclear. It’s possible that some of them rushed the beast to aid the first line, but I’m getting reports of men slipping away, deeper into the forest. I was . . . wondering if we should invoke the pact.”

“Of course! Desertion isn’t something ever to be tolerated,” Rosh answered for him, and Pazra growled, feeling the heat of his fiery Energy begin to seep out of his Core.

“Yes!” he barked. “Invoke the pact! Alert the captains—I want an accurate count on our numbers—how many we lose after the invocation. We’ll gain some use from those cowardly fools.”

“How entertaining,” Rosh said, continuing to gently stroke his golden chin, his long, black nails making a soft susurrant as they scraped over his fine stubble. “Yes. This has a lovely symmetry; let us send our own monsters into the night.”

#

Rula ran. Without thought, without a plan, she ran. One thing occupied her mind, and it was an image, a scene, replaying again and again. As she leaped underbrush and crashed through low-hanging branches, she saw, in her mind’s eye, Tezla-dak being pinned to the ground by an enormous, horrible creature that oozed primal Energies. Energies that brought fear and terror out of Rula. Urges buried in her deepest ancestral memories came to the surface, and she knew one thing: she must run.

She didn’t think of her duty, of her commander, of the Empire. Only the desire to escape that horrific creature propelled her forward. If she couldn’t think of her sergeant, the ever-snarling, ever-angry, ever-present Egrolo-dak, how could she possibly remember the pact? How could she think of a document she’d signed years ago in a time like this? Sadly, it didn’t matter if she remembered the pact, for it remembered her.

Rula paused by a thick tree, frozen, hunched against its rough bark as the creature screamed again. As the echoes of that weird, terrible cry began to fade, and she felt the muscles in her legs unclench, she looked ahead, choosing a direction in which to sprint. Then her heart exploded. It didn't *actually* explode, but it certainly felt like it. She wasn't dead—fire burned in her chest, and she couldn't breathe, but she wasn't dead. She writhed, her hands clawing at the damp, cold mulch of the forest floor. When had she fallen?

As the horrible pain, the hot burning Energy spread from her chest into her arms and down toward her legs, Rula looked at her hands to see them changing. Her fingers stretched into hard, dark claws, the skin peeling back from black bones. Her wrist cracked, and, as she screamed in agony, her bones elongated, and her joints shifted. Her vision changed then, and so did her mind; she no longer felt afraid. All she knew was pain and the unbearable hunger for the Empire's foes.

She lifted her head and, in her red-tinged vision, scanned the sky for the moon, for the stars, for some sign of what she should do. Nothing outside herself held the answer, but something else did; a deep voice, the Princep who'd taken her oath, spoke in her mind, "Seek them. Seek the foes of the Empire. Run to them. Tear them apart. Eat their leaders."

Rula howled, lifting her strange, animalistic snout, long tusks protruding from a lower jaw that her father, a man who'd once doted on her, who'd called her his beautiful princess, wouldn't recognize. Her cry rose into the black night, and others took up the call—dozens, hundreds, of voices rose in unison, singing a hungry, desperate, mournful song. Then she turned and began to charge toward the edge of the forest. The grasslands were nearby; she knew that much, remembered that little bit of her old life. The tall grasslands were nearby, and on them, the enemies of the Empire.