

Green's Inn and Suites was much more like a hotel on Earth than the inns Victor had seen in the cities of Fanwath and Zaafor. It had a lobby separate from a bar and restaurant and, in a show of Earthling ingenuity, an Energy-powered elevator. It was a five-story building, and Alec put them all in suites on the top floor—it was evident that he'd built the hotel with growth in mind because it felt relatively empty. He and Valla had a corner suite with lots of windows, and they both enjoyed looking through the crystal-clear glass as the town woke up around them.

"I'm surprised at how diverse the populace is," Valla said, looking down at the busy central hub of retail businesses. They were built around a lovely red-brick street that surrounded a hill at the center of the community. Steps led up the sides of the hill to a garden-like plaza that surrounded the colony stone. People were opening shops, sweeping sidewalks, and bustling to and fro, getting ready for what looked to be a busy day of commerce. Victor could see what Valla meant—fewer than half the people walking around down there were humans.

"I guess, with only five thousand original settlers, they had to open their doors to the natives of Fanwath if they wanted the community to grow quickly."

"Isn't that strange? I understand they all came on one ship and that it was likely crowded, but you'd think they'd send more people to settle a new world."

"Yeah, I don't know anything about that." Victor shrugged. "They weren't expecting to run into the System or arrive on a world full of other people. Maybe if they'd actually been allowed to land their ship and if they'd been alone . . ." Victor trailed off, acutely feeling his lack of knowledge on the subject. "Shit, I should ask Olivia more about this stuff. I should be more interested in her. She's always asking for details about me and my experiences, and I haven't been good about showing an equal interest in her." He gestured out the window. "In them."

"Well, something tells me you'll learn a lot about these people today."

"Yeah." Victor looked to the horizon at the pink, yellow, and orange-hued sunrise and said, "I thought that lady was coming to meet us at dawn."

"That's not an exact time, though, is it? Is dawn when you first see the sun? Is it now, when the sun is halfway visible? Is it the hour or so after it's just risen?"

Victor didn't take the bait. "Let's go down to the lobby. I want to be ready." He walked over the plush, intricately woven rug featuring multicolored flowers on an olive-green backing toward the door. The hotel suite was nicely appointed and much more familiar in style than some of the furnishings he'd seen on Fanwath. The difference was especially evident in the art—their suite was adorned with paintings of objects and landscapes, but not a single person, a stark contrast to what was common on Fanwath. Rellia's villa, for instance, had walls covered with portraits of family or historical figures. The bathroom was another big change—somehow, the humans were making porcelain. Victor hadn't realized how much he'd gotten used to seeing brass and copper tubs and toilets.

In the hallway, he paused to knock on doors, alerting the rest of their party that they were heading down to the lobby, and, a few minutes later, they rode down in the weirdly smooth, silent elevator. "I don't think this thing is on a cable," Victor said, stepping out and turning to regard the elevator as the polished brass doors slid shut.

"A cable?" Valla frowned.

“Never mind. Let’s sit over by the fire while we wait.” Victor led the party to the grouping of couches near the big stone fireplace across the lobby from the reception desk.

On the way, Borrius stepped over to the young Ardeni man who staffed the desk. “Ahem, young fellow. Please let Ambassador Green know that we’re sitting together there by the fire.”

“Of course, sir.”

Victor smiled at the exchange, glad he’d brought the old commander along; he was perfect for this sort of thing. The couches were comfortable, the room was cozy despite its vaulted ceilings, and they all sat, making small talk for several minutes. Victor enjoyed the lull in activity, though it felt like he was wasting time, and part of him wanted to stand up and seek out the people he was supposed to speak to and get it over with. Still, he sat back and tried to be present, listening to Valla as she attempted to bring Nia out of her shell a little.

“I know it’s not a pleasant memory, but can you tell us about your home a little? Your people originated from the same world as those who’ve settled here. Does anything seem familiar?”

“Aside from them being human, not much. I suppose . . .” She looked around, frowning, “I suppose the aesthetic is a little familiar. I grew up in a village without an inn, but I know the cities of the great lords have hotels and restaurants. I haven’t seen enough of the town to say more.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll say today? About the ‘great lords’ as you name them?”

“I didn’t name them that.” Nia scowled, but then she seemed to remember whom she was speaking to, and her eyes widened as she stammered an apology, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to snap; my bitterness found its way off my tongue. The great lords of Dark Ember are called that by decree, and if those such as myself were to name them otherwise, we could be killed or worse for the offense.”

“Don’t apologize.” Valla leaned forward so she could reach over to take Nia’s wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You’re rightfully bitter about what they’ve done to you. Still, my question stands.”

“Oh, um,” Nia paused and licked her lips. They were dry and cracked, and Victor realized that if he was nervous about speaking in front of a bunch of strangers, Nia was probably feeling a thousand times worse. “I suppose I’ll talk about how it felt when they passed through town. How . . .” Her description was cut short as a cheerful voice called out from the front of the lobby.

“Folks from the Free Marches! I see you’re eager to get started. This is Issa ap’Roald, a member of our parliament and the head of the committee responsible for your visit today.”

Victor turned toward the hotel doors and saw Alec striding toward them, accompanied by a stunningly beautiful Ardeni woman with gleaming yellow eyes and hair that hung like spun threads of gold. She was impressively tall for an Ardeni and moved with a grace that spoke of many racial advancements. Where Alec was dressed in a nicely tailored brown and cream suit, Issa wore a silky blue, kimono-style dress with a tight, high collar and sleeves that covered her arms down to the backs of her hands. It hugged her figure, and the single smooth garment from neck to ankles accentuated her height.

Victor stood up, as did the rest of his party, and he stepped forward, extending a hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Issa took his hand warmly between both of hers, and the smile she offered him was reflected in her bright eyes. "It's so nice to meet you finally, Victor. I've heard much about you from Olivia, and I've been hoping for your success in the Marches."

"Um, thank you." Victor felt lost for words, annoyed with himself again for not asking Olivia more about the people of First Landing. He felt like he should know more about this woman. Valla cleared her throat gently, saving him from standing there like an idiot. He let go of Issa's hand and gestured to Valla and the others. "This is Valla ap'Yensha. She represents the most influential family in the Free Marches."

"Lady ap'Yensha, it's my pleasure to make your acquaintance." Issa took Valla's hand, and it was obvious that she wanted to ask more as her eyes locked onto Valla's silvery-turquoise wings.

"My pleasure." Valla smiled, shaking her hand.

"This," Victor reached behind Valla to grasp Borrius's shoulder, "is Borrius ap'Gandro. His military leadership is renowned on Fanwath, and he's here to share his experience and knowledge with your people."

"Well met, madame." Borrius shocked Victor by taking Issa's hand and kissing it, bowing with a flourish.

"You honor me, sir!" Issa tittered as Borrius released her hand. Perhaps to save further embarrassment, she looked at Darro and Nia. "And these two? Are they also landholders from the Free Marches?"

Victor knew Alec must have already told her who was in their party, so her question, while polite, bothered him a little. Was she playing politics already? "That's Lieutenant Darro; he's Borrius's aide, and this is Nia, daughter of Efa, a woman from Dark Ember. She has much to share about the dangers of allowing a single faction to gain too much power in a world."

"Wonderful! Thank you both for coming!" Issa surprised Victor by taking Darro's hand and then earnestly shaking Nia's. "I know you've traveled far, though with the portals, it doesn't seem so. There's still time for you to eat or rest for an hour or two before the town hall; we've scheduled it for mid-morning. I just wanted to meet you before the big event so I could answer any questions you might have."

"Victor won't ask, so I will," Valla said, smiling as she glanced sideways at him. "What sort of demonstration do they expect from him? I mean against your automatons?"

"Well," Issa looked at Victor, and her smile seemed almost nervous, "I have to say, we can cancel that if you'd like. Olivia's description of you and your exploits left a different impression than I'm getting right now. With her descriptions and the, perhaps misguided, desire to prove that they're ready for anything, the Defense Department has arrayed quite a force on the parade grounds." She looked at Alec and frowned slightly as she continued, "It might be better for our cause to await Morgan's return to highlight their mistakes."

“And how would that affect our payment?” Borrius asked, demonstrating his priorities.

“Oh, well . . .” Issa started, but Victor held up a hand and cleared his throat, interrupting her.

“Don’t sweat it, Lady Issa. I’m reducing myself significantly right now.”

“Hmm?” She looked at him with a cocked eyebrow.

“Victor learned magic to make himself more comfortable in the quaint dwellings of we small folk.” Valla hid her smile behind her hand as she explained.

Victor couldn’t help hamming it up a little as he put an arm around Valla’s shoulders, wings and all, “Well, it’s not just so I can fit through doors more easily; I also can hug you better like this, yeah?”

“Yes,” she nodded, no longer hiding her smile, “there’s that, too.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll let you be the judge of your readiness.” Issa spoke with her hands, gesturing to illustrate her words as she continued, “They’ve arrayed something like twenty of the ‘tank’ automatons on the field and two of the ‘juggernauts.’ They’re like giant, person-shaped constructs built of wood and metal and highly charged with Energy. I’ve seen them demonstrated before, and . . . I’m not sure I’d like to do battle with one.” She paused and looked around. They were all still standing in the lobby, and though the hotel was quiet, it seemed she was feeling a little self-conscious about standing there. “Would you all join me for breakfast? I know it’s not breakfast time for you, but . . .”

“I’ll excuse myself, Lady.” Borrius bowed and turned to Darro. “We have some work to do for my estate back in the Marches, and we can make good use of this time.”

“I’ll go to my room until you need me, if you don’t mind,” Nia said to Victor, and he nodded.

“You’re welcome, you know . . .”

“No, thank you, Lord Victor. I’ll use this time to meditate.”

“Well, Victor and I will join you, Lady ap’Roald,” Valla said, taking the lead.

“Just Issa, please.” She smiled and gestured to the arched opening of the hotel’s restaurant.

“Are your kitchens open, Alec?”

“Always!” He led the way, and Issa and Valla followed.

“See you guys soon,” Victor said, nodding to Borrius and Nia. A few minutes later, he was sitting at a small table near a window with Valla and Issa; Alec had begged off, saying he had hotel business to manage before the big meeting. A waiter had brought over steaming cups of coffee with a tiny pitcher of thick cream, and Victor was savoring the drink, watching Issa eat pancakes and listening to the two women talk.

“I hope you don’t find it rude, but I’m very curious about your bloodline, Lady ap’Yensha,” Issa said between bites.

“Please, if I’m going to call you Issa, you must call me Valla. Hmm, my bloodline stems from an ancient ancestor, a Rihven. Have you heard of them?”

“Rihven . . .” Issa’s eyes unfocused, and Victor could see she was searching through her memory. “I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“You’re well versed in the Ridonne, though, I’ll wager.”

“Oh yes. Obviously.” Issa snickered as though the two women were sharing a joke.

“You know about the Vessi, yes?”

“All but gone, no thanks to the Ridonne.” Issa nodded and took another bite. “Are you sure you two aren’t hungry?”

“I’m always hungry,” Victor laughed, “But I don’t want to eat so soon before the meeting. I’d probably spill syrup on my shirt.”

“Victor!” Valla sighed. “Your shirt is enchanted to clean . . .”

“I know, I know.” Victor sipped his coffee. “I’ll eat when I’m done beating up all these *pinché* robots Issa’s people have set up for me.”

“That sounds like something Morgan would say,” Issa laughed.

Valla gave Victor a knowing look and continued speaking, “Well, back on the topic of the Rihven, you know that there were three species of people that came from our homeworld, yes?”

“From Alurath?”

“Yes. Before the joining—the Ardeni, the Shadeni, and the Ordeni.”

“Oh, yes! The Ordeni were almost gone before the joining; the Ridonne were at war with them. Didn’t the Yovashi finish them off?”

“Right, the Yovashi were from Kthella—the homeworld of the Ghelli. You could say that when the System merged the worlds, they didn’t exactly get along with the new species they were confronted with. The Ordeni especially threatened them, being at least equally gifted with Energy usage.” Valla stopped, sipped her coffee, then chuckled, shaking her head. “I’m sorry for the history lesson; I promise I have a point.”

“No, please go on!”

“Well, as you no doubt know, we people from Alurath are quite compatible physically; if a Shadeni loves an Ardeni, they have no trouble bearing children.”

“Of course.” Issa nodded.

“Before I found my bloodline, I was, as far as I knew, Ardeni. I discovered, though, a distant ancestor who was Ordeni. Through her, I brought forth this Rihven bloodline. It’s the equivalent of the Ridonne and the Vessi bloodlines.”

“Ah! I love this sort of discussion! Wouldn’t you say, then, that the Ordeni aren’t really gone? I’m sure millions of Shadeni and Ardeni have Ordeni ancestors!”

“That’s right!” Valla smiled and leaned back, sipping her coffee. “I’d like to go to Tharcray and liberate the texts in the Imperial Archives. I’d like to learn more about the Ordeni, to learn more about everything the Ridonne have tried to bury or erase from the public record.”

“We should . . .” Victor started, but Valla sighed and shook her head.

“Someday, maybe. We have other priorities.”

Issa nodded at Valla’s words, setting her fork down. “Do I understand correctly that you’re seeking to open world travel so you can get to places the Ridonne have blocked?”

“Yes! We’re hoping to open up a hub world where we can learn more and, perhaps, travel further.”

“A pity the timing is off, but that’s just the sort of thing my Morgan is working on.”

“He’s off-world?”

“Yes. He bargained with the Ridonne, and, for a favor, he’s been granted passage. This was before we learned of your troubles with the Ridonne, before we realized the extent of their corruption.” She frowned and shook her head, “I hate to make excuses for my ignorance, but I’m from Tarn’s Crossing, a frontier village, and my knowledge of world affairs was sorely lacking. Sadly, that’s the case for most of us who aren’t living in the bigger cities. The Ridonne have done well in spreading their version of history.”

Issa’s face betrayed some worry or tension, and Valla leaned closer, her voice soft and sympathetic, “Have you had contact with him? Morgan, I mean.”

“Oh, goodness! Does my worry show so much? Morgan is very resourceful, and when he contacted me, asked for my blessing to undertake the journey, he set the appropriate expectations. Don’t trouble yourself a second longer worrying about me. I’ll be fine. Now,” she turned to Victor, “Victor, I don’t normally speak bluntly about political motives, but I want you to know that my reasons for lobbying for your visit weren’t wholly altruistic.”

“I figured.” Victor shrugged.

“It’s true that these people need to understand what a powerful cultivator can accomplish, but just as importantly, for me, there’s a faction here in First Landing who must be taken down a notch. If they lost some political face, it would benefit Olivia, me, and others who think like us. I want that to be clear before you go into that town hall. I won’t have you thinking me duplicitous.”

“Well, if that’s the case, maybe you should tell me about this other faction. What sorts of beliefs do they have that you think are problematic?”

“For one, most of them think I should have been excluded from the election. I’m the only non-human in Parliament. For another, they believe in recapturing the technology they left behind on Earth as a priority that supersedes all others—gaining levels, cultivating, trade agreements, exploration, nothing matters to them more than their ‘lost tech.’ They advocate for human expansion and supremacy, and, though I think it isn’t such a terrible idea, they are actively working to build a vessel that can travel into orbit where they believe their ark ship still flies. There are a hundred thousand human embryos on that vessel.”

Victor snorted, “You think that’s not terrible?”

“Well, not the recovery of the embryos, no, not in and of itself. Everything will depend on which faction wins control. Things are very divided here. There’s a reason the low-affinity species Morgan and his friends rescued have left First Landing to found their own Village a day’s travel from here. Publicly, people say it’s because they wanted their own homes, their own farms, and their own traditional buildings, but there were many people here who made them uncomfortable. I think it had more to do with that.”

Victor looked from Issa’s earnest face to Valla’s frowning, contemplative expression and growled, “Wherever people gather, you’ll find assholes. There are assholes among the Ardeni and the Shadeni, and, yeah, of course, there are going to be some assholes among this many humans. I like you, Issa, but I don’t really know you, do I? I won’t promise that I’ll be on your side right away, but if anyone at that townhall says something as stupid as what you just described, if any of them try to tell me that humans are better for some reason or another, I’ll be glad set them straight. Olivia tells me humans have a high average affinity, but that’s nothing compared to dragons or,” Victor shuddered as he involuntarily remembered his encounter with Fox and Three on the Spirit Plane, “some of the scarier individuals I’ve run into.”

“That’s all I ask, Victor. I just hope it wasn’t a mistake to advertise your ‘demonstration.’ There’s a faction led by a man named Norton Holmes who’s very influential with the Defense Department here, and, well, I’m worried about what he’s going to throw at you. There are rumors about a special project.”

“Oh? Are they playing for keeps, then? Like, no holds barred?” As he spoke, Valla shifted and grimaced, reaching under the table to put a hand on his wrist, almost like she thought she had to restrain him.

“I . . .” Issa tilted her head, contemplating. “I believe they’re going to try to convince you to sign some sort of contract indicating that they’ll not be held responsible for your death.”

“Hah!” Victor shook his head as his burgeoning rage subsided, replaced by amusement. “I guess it’s only fair. I was going to make you, or them, I guess, sign something saying I won’t be responsible for the damage I do.”