

Victor once again stood on the prow of an airship, this one piloted by Rellia's people and equipped for war. He'd noticed the magical ballistae, two on each side of the ship, as soon as it set down to retrieve him, Valla, and their prisoners and captured mounts. The crew was friendly, though too deferential, hardly speaking a word to either of them. In fact, it felt like they were terrified of not only him but Valla.

He thought back to when he'd first met Valla, back when he'd gone to visit Rellia after their duel in the arena. He remembered how she'd hardly spoken, using clipped phrases. He smiled at the memory, thinking about how she'd been even more perfectly coiffed back then, standing straight as a wooden board. He supposed she had a reputation, not just as Rellia's adopted daughter, but as a Captain in the Legion. Victor leaned forward against the railing, gripping it in his large, strong hands, and smiled, thinking about how Rellia and Lam would react to the changes in him and Valla.

He was his natural size, something over eight feet tall, and he figured he'd keep it that way until he had to go inside a structure again. Why not tower over some people, larger than life? "Especially when we first arrive," he grunted, squeezing the railing until the wood creaked. He had half a mind to cast his Titanic Aspect spell; let them see whom they'd recruited to lead this expedition—a living, breathing Quinametzin. It was a thought, but he ultimately shook his head, deciding against it. He didn't need to impress Rellia or Lam more than he already had.

Victor turned to look over his shoulder and saw Valla standing not far away, speaking to an Ardeni in a crisp sailor's uniform, one with some special insignias on the shoulders. "Hey," he called, getting her attention.

She clasped the man's shoulder, said something, then walked over to Victor. "Hey."

"So, where's the ship taking us? Rellia's estate? Some airship dock in Persi Gables?"

"I'd prefer it if we went to the estate, but apparently, Rellia sent orders that the ship is to drop us off at the legion's encampment. Lam and Rellia are both there, overseeing some final logistical matters."

"Oh really?" Suddenly Victor wasn't feeling quite so cocksure; was he ready to be seen by the soldiers he was meant to lead?

"Yes. News of the attack on our airship has escalated things."

"Right, right." Victor nodded. "Makes sense. How long do we have?"

"Minutes. We'll be done passing over Lake Beliss shortly, though too far south to see Persi Gables, and then it's just a short journey over the bordering woods to the plains where the army is encamped."

"Damn. All right." Victor stood up straight, releasing the railing. He'd been watching the passage of the lake, the moons' reflections flickering oddly over its choppy waters. The ship was low, far lower than Victor imagined planes flew, and the view, coupled with the rushing winds, had kept him engaged for an hour or more. "Should I change?"

“No, your armor and helmet are impressive. As you can see, I’m wearing my armor.” Valla reached up to her neck, touching the choker Victor had given her, and he realized she’d kept the top part of her hauberk open so it didn’t cover the sparkling, pale blue crystals.

He smiled and said, “You look great. Are you nervous?”

“Only about seeing Rellia.”

“Right. Yeah, I know there’s a lot between you two, or I’d try to offer some advice. As it is, I have no idea what to say except that she’d be an idiot not to be proud of you.” His words pulled a smile out of her, and she looked down briefly.

“Thank you. I hope Rellia sees it that way. I hope she doesn’t send me off on meaningless tasks to keep me in my place.”

Victor frowned. He knew she wasn’t used to receiving much praise, so he added, “Seriously. You’ve accomplished so much! You’re on your way to being one of the most personally powerful people in the world. You captured one of the emperor’s princeps. You’re returning with wealth far beyond what anyone could have reasonably hoped for. Meaningless tasks? As far as I’m concerned, you will be right by my side for this entire expedition. I’ll insist on it.”

“You’d do that?” Valla smiled, resting a hand on Midnight’sommel.

“Are you kidding me? I need someone with me I can trust no matter what. You and, like, three other people are the only ones in this world who fit that bill, and you’re the only one strong enough. Do you understand? You’re invaluable to me.”

“I,” Valla stepped forward, dropped her hands to her sides, and straightened up. Victor wasn’t a military guy, but to him, it looked like she was standing at attention. She cleared her throat and spoke firmly and quickly, her words clipping each other off, “Thank you, Victor! I won’t let you down.”

Victor wanted to crack a joke, to try to lighten the tension in the air, but he knew she was being serious. He saw this meant something to her, so he met her gaze and nodded, then simply said, “Thank you, Valla. I know you won’t.” He turned back to the ship’s prow and said, “Come on, let’s see if we can see the army when we approach.

“It’s dark, so you’ll see their fires.”

“Well,” Victor pointed to the horizon, “it was dark, but the sun’s coming up.” Sure enough, the sky, dark and gloomy directly overhead, was ever-so-slightly paler where the sky met the ground in the distance. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that the sister moons were nearly obscured by the opposite horizon, and guessed the sun would be up in minutes.

“Now that’s going to set the Augurs talking—the commander of the army arriving as the new day dawns, unshaken from an imperial assassination attempt!”

“Hah!” Victor snorted, surprised at Valla’s creativity.

“You laugh, but I promise you; Rellia will spread the tale. She’s very image conscious.”

“Sometimes I can’t tell if you love her or loathe her.” It had been a long while since he’d seen Rellia in person; he remembered her being beautiful, far younger than he’d imagined, and far more pleasant. He wondered how much had been an act to get him to sign on to this expedition. “God, I was so naive. I can’t believe how much has changed since I fought her.”

“Perhaps a bit green,” Valla paused and nodded, “but your instincts were good. Rellia was sincere in her dealings with you. I know her well, and I’m sure of it. She wants a better start, a better, less corrupt place for our family and those who ally with us to prosper. I truly believe it, Victor.”

“I hope you’re right.” They stood on the prow, watching the water speed by for several minutes, then it gave way to a shadowy forest, the air warming noticeably as they left the lake behind. Victor glanced up and said, “Wow.” He pointed to the horizon again, “Look at those colors!”

As the sun began to brighten the distant horizon, the clouds hanging in the air had taken on brilliant shades of yellow and orange, deepening to pink and red. As Victor took it in, and Valla leaned forward, also taken with the sight, he watched as the slowly emerging sun began to illuminate the dark green-blue landscape—expansive grass plains for as far as his eye could see in any direction. He was watching the ground lighten when Valla grabbed his arm and pointed. He followed her finger to see hundreds of tiny motes of light in the grassy plain.

“Campfires. It’s the army.”

As the sailors began to yell to each other, tightening or loosening ropes, preparing the ship to land, Victor watched as the shadowy shapes of tents came into view, hundreds of them. No, he amended, thousands. A great corral had been staked out near the encampment, and Victor saw thousands of animals within, mostly roladii, but a few other creatures, including great, elephant-sized birds. He searched his memory for what they were called and uttered, “Bundii.”

“Aye. To pull the bigger wagons,” Valla said, pointing toward a row of dozens of massive wagons lined up inside the earthen bulwark surrounding the entire encampment. The whole place looked like a town under construction to Victor as they drew closer. He even noticed wooden watchtowers around the perimeter and a large, permanent-looking wooden fortification at the camp’s center. “The ship will tether there, at the perimeter. See? They’ve built a docking structure. No, two of them.”

Victor saw what she meant; two stage-like structures on stilts stood about fifty yards from each other and about twice as far from the earthen bulwark, and the ship was rapidly descending toward the one on the left. “Impressive for a camp.”

“This is sloppy, actually. I suppose some leniency can be expected, considering they’ve been using this as a recruitment camp for the last ten months. Still, we’ll have sharper camps on the road, or I’ll personally be handing out discipline.” Valla spoke plainly, like she was reciting well-known facts, and Victor had to give her a double-take.

“You putting on your Legion Captain persona?”

“Yes! I want this to be a successful endeavor, and that means discipline. I’ll be the mean old gran if I have to.” As she finished speaking, Victor chuckled. He wasn’t familiar with the idiom about a mean old gran, but he got the idea; he could imagine his *abuela* whipping some sloppy soldiers into shape just fine. A surge of sad nostalgia rose from the pit of his stomach as he

thought about his grandma, but rather than banish the thought, he embraced it. If she were truly gone, then he'd cherish every memory that came to him of her. He shook his head, reminding himself that he wasn't sure about anything yet.

"Ah, they've sighted us. See the parade coming toward the landing platform?"

Victor followed her gaze and saw what she meant. A column of tiny soldiers was marching down the central boulevard through the encampment. They'd probably arrive as the ship's sailors were finishing with their mooring lines. "Well? Shall we?" He reached down as if to take her hand, but she shook her head.

"Let's not give the soldiers and sailors more to talk about than they need. You're the commander of this army, Victor. Rellia might see you as a figurehead, but you're not. You'll soon show them as much. I don't want to be seen as a . . . a lady-friend of yours."

"Oh," Victor said, nodding and pulling his hand back. He was trying to be cool but felt like he'd just been rejected by a prom date. "Right. Sorry, Valla. I wasn't trying to imply anything . . ."

"I know you weren't! I'm sorry too, but we both need to be respected by the troops, especially if you expect me to act as tribune."

"Tribune?"

"Yes, Victor!" Valla's exasperation had slipped its leash, but she quickly recovered and added, more calmly, "And you are Legate Victor Sandoval."

"I thought I was a commander."

"A commander is a general term, and it is accurate, but with regard to a legion, such as the one encamped around this airship, the leader is called a legate. Mark my words, Rellia and Lam will attempt to label themselves as co-legates. You should insist they are tribunes."

"*Pinche mierda*," Victor growled. "Why doesn't the System translate all this shit consistently? Why don't I hear modern terms for everything?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's because we, on Fanwath, place a lot of weight on tradition when it comes to the Empire and the Legion. The System may be trying to help you recognize that we use different terms rather than generic possibilities like 'commander.' We can talk about this more when we're alone, but right now, the ship is nearly down, and we're about to be surrounded by important people. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. It's just messing with my head that we've got legates and tribunes but also captains and lieutenants. Forget it. I'm sure it'll all fall into place up here after a few conversations." Victor gave his forehead a good knock with his knuckles.

"Good. Let's stand by the gangway. I'd prefer to meet Rellia on solid ground than here on the ship." She waited for Victor to walk before her, keeping pace with him but always a stride behind. Victor didn't doubt that she was following some protocol she had learned in the Legion. The sailors moved out of his way, and, as the ship bucked and pulled, slowly winched into place by the attendants on the landing platform, he stood before the gangway, waiting for it to drop.

It took a bit longer than Valla had predicted, and by the time the big wooden gate lowered, becoming a bridge, Victor saw that Rellia already stood on the platform, a dozen others, some of whom Victor recognized, flanking her. Right away, their uniforms caught his eye. Everyone on the platform wore them, similar in design to the ones Valla was always sporting, though with starkly different colors. Where Valla's pants were usually white, everyone on the platform wore slim-fitting black pants. Above their pants and shiny boots, they wore red, high-collared shirts and, overtop, black military-style jackets with gold brocade. They looked very fancy, very sharp.

Rellia stood at the center, her jacket adorned with ribbons and medals. Next to her was Lam, tall, slender, shimmering wings creating spectacle enough, but she, too, wore the uniform, and her jacket was near as heavy with metal as Rellia's. Slightly behind Lam was Polo Vosh, looking huge as ever, his hairy head and shoulders above even Lam, but he'd done a hell of a job cleaning up, and someone had stitched a uniform that fit his thick body. Victor saw Edeya next to Polo, looking much as he'd left her, though, if Victor were pressed, he might admit she'd gained a few pounds in muscle.

The rest of the people were new to him, though some of their faces might have been vaguely familiar; staff or hangers-on of Lam and Rellia. He started down the gangway, Valla shadowing him. When he stopped before Rellia, she craned her neck, looking up to meet his eyes, and performed an interesting salute, standing straight, clicking her heels together, and pounding her fist into her chest over her heart. As soon as her fist thumped home, everyone else on the platform mimicked the action.

Victor didn't want to look like an idiot trying to copy the salute, so he smiled at the quiet crowd, pressed his fists into his hips, elbows akimbo, and said, his voice deep and booming, "Thank you. It's great to see you all."

"Welcome home, Victor. Valla." Rellia stepped forward and held out a hand. Victor reached down and enveloped her slender blue hand with his, and, like before, he felt the electricity of her touch. Something about her was charged, full of force. Once, he might have thought it a sexual thing, but he'd grown a bit, and he thought it was simply her powerful personality, an effect of her aura, or some combination of them both. She was a born leader.

Victor nodded, and Valla said, reverting to her old, clipped speech, "Thank you. Ma'am."

"Victor! You've grown again!" Lam said, chuckling and stepping up beside Rellia. Victor let go of Rellia's hand and reached toward Lam, only to have her step closer and try to pull him into a hug. Her face pressed into his chest, and he awkwardly gripped the backs of her shoulders, careful not to touch her wings; he had no idea how sensitive or fragile they were. "It's good to see you so well." Her words were quiet and muffled by her embrace, but they still brought a smile to Victor. Still, he wasn't used to affection from Lam, so he gently pushed her back, a tickle in the back of his mind warning him—was she trying to earn some favor by this public display, if not with him, then with the army?

"I have grown. Yeah," he shrugged. "It's my bloodline. Hey, Edeya! Hey, Polo!" Edeya beamed hugely as he said her name, snapping him another salute, and Polo nodded, a toothy grin spreading his furry cheeks.

"Victor," Rellia said as Lam stepped back beside her, "I know you must be tired, but might we have a word?"

“He is weary, Lady Rellia.” Valla stepped forward, and Victor felt something like pride in his chest, seeing her looming over Rellia in her wyrm-scale armor, her hand on Midnight’s pommel. “We just fought off an assassination squad and missed a night of sleep.”

“Even so,” Rellia said, glancing over her shoulder. Victor followed her gaze over the platform’s edge and saw that an enormous, hushed crowd was beginning to gather around the tethered airship. “This is the first time the soldiers have seen their Legate. Do you think you might have a word for them?”

“Oh, Ancestors!” Valla hissed. “What sort of ambush is this? He’s not prepared a speech! I thought we’d have days or weeks before you brought us before the army.”

“That’s hardly my fault,” Rellia said, her voice low but hissing. “You should have prepared him for this!”

Lam stepped forward and opened her mouth, but Victor held up a hand and said, “Hold on. You want me to address this army? Right now?” He tried to keep his face neutral, his voice low, but his first instinct was to balk, to refuse; Victor Sandoval might like to fight, but he didn’t do public speeches.

“You don’t have to,” Valla said, angling herself so she stood between Rellia and Victor, facing them both.

“It would be a huge morale boost if you did,” Lam managed to interject.

Victor frowned, recognizing the churning, dark thing in his chest—fear. His strongest affinity was, once again, reminding him that it was often the root of his decisions. “Where?” he growled, trying to cover his nervousness with a bit of anger.

“Here. You’re on the platform; the soldiers are gathering, curious.”

“And you conveniently made no orders to the contrary,” Valla sighed.

“My, but you’re crabby, daughter. We’ll need to have some words, hmm?”

“Indeed, we will, Ma’am.”

“Now?” Victor asked, still fighting a battle of his own, trying to decide if acting in spite of his fear was just as bad as acting because of it. If he refused, he’d be giving in, but now that he knew he was afraid, was the solution to react to his fear and do the opposite? What would Old Mother tell him? He felt she’d say something rather unhelpful, something about not letting his fear rule him.

“In a few minutes. Let the troops continue to gather.”

“I’m loud, but not sure I’m loud enough for six thousand people to hear me.”

“I have something for that,” Lam said, holding out her hand in which a golden chain appeared. Dangling from the chain was a circular black stone inlaid with gold-etched runes. It was large, with thick links, and Victor knew she hadn’t had the device made for herself. Victor took it from her, frowning.

“What’s this?”

“It will amplify your voice for a time, something between ten and fifteen minutes. After that, it will need a day or so to recharge.”

“Come, Victor,” Rellia said, her voice soft but entreating, “Just a few words. Rile them up. Tell them we’ll be victorious. Nothing special; they’re already excited to follow you. Rumors of your exploits have traveled from fire to fire, especially how you bested me in the arena.”

“That’s the least of his accomplishments,” Valla said, surprising Victor. Had she grown so loyal to him?

Rellia scowled at Valla, but Victor forestalled further bickering by lifting the chain over his helmeted head. Once around his neck, he ran a hand over his chest, opening his wyrm-scale vest and tucking the stone medallion within. Before he sealed his armor, he asked, “Do I have to bond with it?”

“Aye.” Lam nodded.

Victor did so, and he felt the chain shorten a bit so it hung in the middle of his chest; then, he closed up his armor. He looked at Polo and then Edeya, trying to see what they might think, figuring they might have a more neutral opinion about things. Polo looked ready to fight, as usual, his moist black eyes not giving away any emotion, and Edeya, well, she looked ready to charge into hell at his command. “*Jesu Cristo*,” Victor muttered and received nothing but puzzled expressions in response.

Victor stepped between Lam and Rellia, startling them with the abrupt move, forcing them to move aside hurriedly. He lumbered up to the railing of the landing platform to look out over the tents and the rapidly assembling mass of men and women. “Soldiers,” he reminded himself. These were people signing on to fight to the death, to follow him into unknown lands to face enemies there and along the way. Did they not deserve to know who they were following? Did they not deserve to decide if he was worthy of leading them?

“Just send a bit of Energy into the necklace to activate it,” Lam said from behind him.

Victor didn’t respond but reached up, unsnapped Lifedrinker’s harness, and lifted the great, silvery axe, holding her before him with both hands. “At least I have you, *chica*; I always have you. No matter the battle I face, even in this one, a battle with my mind, you bring me comfort.”

*Always*, the axe replied, and Victor grinned savagely.

“He still speaks to the axe, I see . . .” Lam said, perhaps trying to be funny with Edeya or Valla, but her words choked off as Victor reached into his Core, cast Titanic Aspect, and released his aura.