

“So, you have a full-on town going, huh? Thousands of humans?” Victor had spent a good hour giving Olivia a very rough overview of his adventures and foibles on Fanwath and a few short sentences summarizing his time on Zaafor. After he’d explained the Writ of Conquest and his plans with the Untamed Marches, Olivia had shared quite a lot with him about First Landing, the human colony, and some of the hurdles they’d overcome.

“Thousands of humans, thousands of other species who have taken on citizenship, and, if my theories and hopes bear fruit, we may have another hundred thousand fertilized embryos in orbit. I’m of the opinion that the System teleported us down here but left the *Pilgrim-9* alone. Theoretically, it would have achieved orbit with the autopilot program.”

“So, you all are building a ship to go up there?”

“Not exactly, but I have some theories about Morgan’s void attunement. He’s the one I told you about, my friend with an advanced bloodline that granted him wings. He can create portals, as I explained, and he has some feats that give him resistance to the void; in fact, he gains bonuses . . .” she paused and frowned, shaking her head as if irritated with herself. “I’m getting lost on a silly tangent; it’s all theories. What’s important to me is that you seem to believe the Ridonne Empire is corrupt.”

“Yeah, I’d say it’s pretty damn definite by now. Wouldn’t you say, Valla?”

“It seems we’re placing our trust in your discretion, Olivia Bennet,” Valla said, frowning at Victor.

“I’ll be discreet.” Olivia nodded, looking steadily into Valla’s eyes as though she wanted her to see into her, to recognize that she wasn’t being duplicitous.

“I won’t speak openly about my family’s stance on the Empire, but I will say that I don’t disagree with what Victor just said. He and I recently survived an assassination attempt, and it’s rather evident that the Empire has designs against us. Victor’s role with the army my mother has raised is crucial in our attempt to circumvent the corruption that grows unchecked in the nobility.” Valla paused, looked around the little room as if confirming they were alone, and added, “This conquest will allow us to secure a foothold outside the Empire’s control. A place from which to gather our strength and defend. A place where we can root out corruption before it buries its roots.”

“I’m suddenly very worried about Morgan. As I mentioned, he was traveling to Tharcray to attempt to treat with the Empire. It sounds like he was walking, well, in his case, flying, into a snake pit.” Olivia’s face was pensive, her hands clutched together on the lap of her elegant robes.

“They’re sneaky assholes,” Victor said, attempting to put her at ease, “but they aren’t usually the kind who’ll stab you in the face. They’ll probably give him a lot of agreements, talk a bunch of bullshit, and then, when they think the time’s right, they’ll move against the colony. I mean, that’s the way things have gone with the nobles I’ve dealt with.”

“He’s not wrong,” Valla sighed, shaking her head, caught between wanting to agree with Victor and not precisely approving of his words. “Why not join the conquest? Bring the humans to the Marches!”

“Shit! Not a bad idea, Olivia. You guys are kind of hanging out on a ledge by yourselves out there . . .”

“It’s not that easy.” Olivia started to count on her fingers, “We have children, for one. We have people with livelihoods—people who have worked day and night for years now to build up the town, their businesses, their contacts with neighboring settlements.” She gave up on counting on her fingers and set her hand on her lap. “If we sent a significant fighting force with you, it would leave those who aren’t so inclined rather open to attack. No, I don’t think it will work.” Before Victor could say anything, she added, “I’ll present it to the council, along with your warning about the Ridonne. Still, if we do join you, it will more likely be after you’ve finished your, um, conquest.”

“Right. After we’ve done all the work.” Victor made a dismissive sound, almost a *tsk*, that he hadn’t done in a long time. He looked away from Olivia and started to stand, ready to dismiss her, to move on with the things he found important.

“That’s not fair, Victor,” Valla interjected. “You only just told her about this. Do you really expect a whole settlement to drop everything they’ve been working for and march into war for the possibility of a better place to settle?”

“Nah, I guess not.” Victor halted his sudden urge to stand and looked at Olivia’s face. He saw how it had fallen in response to his comment and felt a little ashamed. Despite Valla’s words, she still looked upset, so he added, “Listen, I’m not holding anything against you. I didn’t come here looking for help, and I’m still not. You know what a Farscribe book is?”

“Yes . . .”

“Let’s buy a set, and we can keep in touch. If you run into trouble with the Empire, or if we run into a problem, maybe we can help each other out.”

“That’s a great idea, Victor!” Olivia said, her face lighting up, and then she opened her mouth and leaped to her feet. “Oh my gosh! I forgot something! Morgan’s tower! It has teleportation gateways. We could set up a link between it and your new settlement if, no, *when* your campaign is successful.”

“Oh, yeah,” Victor nodded, seeing Valla’s contemplative look. “Sure, that would be cool.”

“Can we go and buy the books now? You’ve kind of ignited something in me. I feel stressed about the colony and my responsibilities. No, that’s not fair.” She shook her head, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “I was feeling that way before I came to this meeting. Still, I’d like to get back to First Landing to check on things, and I’d like to look into Lord ap’Gravin. I promise I’ll write to you about what I find.”

“You think that’s smart?” Victor asked, raising an eyebrow, trying to size her up again.

“Victor, I’m very clever when it comes to spells.” She chuckled and shook her head, holding up a hand, “I’m not trying to boast! I just want you to know that I’ll dedicate some time to researching what happened with your summoning. It already aligns with my own interests, and, well, I can be very persuasive. If ap’Gravin is hiding anything—records, contacts, *anything*, I’ll get it out of him.”

“Well, shit, Olivia. That would be pretty awesome. I mean, I guess we’re kind of cousins, so it’s cool to know that, right? We’ve got some family in this crazy world.” Victor looked at Olivia, wishing he was a little better at reading people, that he could see into them the way Tes could. He decided to be blunt with the concern that was itching the back of his mind, “What level are you?”

“Nearly twenty-six, but, well, again, not to be boastful, but I’m stronger than most tier-two people. I have a high affinity and some good class synergies.” She suddenly looked embarrassed and glanced down, hurriedly adding, “I only said that because you seem like you’re feeling like you should be concerned about me. You don’t need to be.”

Valla snorted and started to say something, but Victor was already speaking, “Nah, I get it. But, as I said, use the book. Keep me posted. If you go after ap’Gravin and I don’t hear back from you, I’ll have to figure out a way to help. I’d help right now, like, go with you tonight, but the army’s leaving soon, and I have responsibilities. Why not wait for your friend, the dude with the wings, then deal with him together?”

Olivia laughed and slapped Victor’s knee. It wasn’t much of a reach—Victor’s legs jutted out from the chair like an adult sitting on a child’s stool. “I like that, Victor. I *will* wait for my winged friend, and I have a few other friends who wouldn’t mind paying that man a visit.”

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Lesh’ro’zellan stood and stretched, arching his back, twisting the thick muscles of his shoulders until he heard popping sounds. “Ah,” he groaned, “that’s it.” He moved through the stone archway, his entrance to the dwelling, and stood on the black basalt ledge, gazing over his domain. Enormous black and gray peaks stood against the crimson, smoky sky, but none so high as his mountaintop abode.

Lesh had been gone too long. Gaining power was important. Crushing his enemies was a worthy endeavor, but it was just as essential to savor his accomplishments along the way. Standing there, he could look down on all the ledges and caves of his people; even his father’s home was beneath him. How excellent it was to see his triumphs laid out before him! How fulfilling to know he’d risen to the peak of his clan and that, in time, he’d be able to vie for the crown in the Blood Circle.

“Are you sore, love?” Yassa’wikterl, his ledge mate, asked, her voice sleepy, almost a purr.

“Aye, Yassa. The campaign was too long! So frequently did I fight that my breath Core never recharged. Last evening, I wanted to savor you, not dwell on my troubles, so I didn’t mention it, but one of the Chuglan Ogres hit me squarely with a flung boulder. My scales earned their metal, but my bones ache!”

“Gods! Your poor back! I hope it didn’t harm your wing beds.”

“Hush, love. My wings will come in just fine. Another evolution or two, and I’ll be soaring.”

“Just so, love, just so.” Yassa sighed softly, rolling over in their nest, and Lesh admired her form. Everything about her called to him on a primal level, from her coppery scales to the seductive curve of her hips. From her slender limbs to the gentle bumps of the budding horns

along her brow, she reminded him of their promised glory, the majesty of their draconic bloodline.

“We’ve come so far,” he said, and Yassa opened one of her wide eyes, narrowing it as she studied him down the length of her coppery snout. Her iris was a pale greenish-yellow, and as it caught the glow of the light crystal, it shone at him with cunning.

“Admiring me? Admiring how we’re closer and closer to leaving our kin behind, leaving this world, and joining true dragons elsewhere?”

Lesh hurried back in from the ledge and fell to his knees, grabbing her by the shoulders and turning her to look him fully in the face. “But we are true dragons! Just because we were born dragonkin doesn’t mean we are lesser! All the work we’ve done, all the work left to do, will make us stronger when we join their ranks. We’ll be mighty in here.” He thumped his chest, “Much stronger than those mewling dragonlings who are lucky enough to be born pure.”

“Your father doesn’t see it that way.” Was she taunting him? Was she trying to incite his wrath? Was she simply trying to help him focus his prodigious drive?

“He’s a fool! A small-minded man, worried about this backwater of a world when he should be looking beyond. Why would I listen to him, anyway? His bloodline is barely beyond the basic ranks. He has no horns, while I have three! He’s hardly scaled but look at me! Look at my metal!” Lesh leaped to his taloned feet, held his thick, half-scaled arms wide, and bared his shiny chest to her. He really was a striking figure; his skin was dark, almost as black as his scales, and the green luster of his eyes radiated the corrosive Energy in his Core.

He liked to think he was close to evolving to the next stage of his bloodline, but, in truth, his dark skin gave the impression that he was further scaled than he was. He supposed only about half of his body had those thick metallic scales covering it. Still, it was far more than his father, far more than any other dragonkin in their clan. “There’s a reason I’m leading the clan while my father yet breathes.” The last was spoken softly, more to himself than to Yassa. He refocused on her and added, “As I said, love, a few more evolutions. Another century or so, and then I’ll fight for the crown. When I take control of the World Stone, then it will be our time!”

“Yes, love. Yes!” Yassa pulled back the silken blankets, beckoning for him to crawl back into the nest with him. “Come. Help me to make a strong, healthy brood to support you.”

Lesh frowned, though, his lips turning down from his short, toothy snout. Something had appeared in his vision, something he’d only grown accustomed to seeing when he advanced somehow—a message from the gods-cursed System.

**\*\*\*You have been offered a quest: Travel to the world of Fanwath and slay Victor Sandoval. Reward: One Heart of Evolution. Accept? Yes/No\*\*\***

“Elder gods!”

“What is it, Lesh?” Yassa sat up, her slender, coppery tail curling around beneath her.

“The System, gods curse it, has just offered me a quest. Yassa, the reward is a Heart of Evolution—the same as I won from the Crag Troll King! It pushed me from improved to advanced! Do you remember?”

“How could I forget, love? Tell me, what must you do?”

“Simply slay a man. I’ll have to travel off-world, but I’m sure I can gain permission when I explain the quest. I’ll need to leave now, though. The trip to Garspire will take nearly a week.” He frowned, then added, “Well, I don’t see a time limit on the quest . . .”

“Still, best not to tarry.” Yassa was on her feet now, naked and wonderful, but she stooped to gather up her skirts, continuing to speak, “What if the System offers the quest to others? Perhaps this man has angered it. You could be competing with hunters from other worlds.”

“Gods! You’re right, love! What am I without you? I must make haste!” Lesh leaped to his feet and snatched up the handle of his great cudgel, Belagog, the Bone Cracker. The black, metallic handle was warm in his hand, flowing between his fingers to allow for a better grip. The weapon was clever and eager to fight, and Lesh always felt a grin pulling his lips back from his long, white teeth when he hoisted the two-meter rod of star metal and allowed his eyes to fall on the hundreds of diamond-hard spikes along its length. “We have work to do, blood brother,” he said to the cudgel.

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Victor sat atop Thistle’s back, riding at a steady, easy trot away from Persi Gables. Valla and Uvu kept pace, the big cat occasionally chuffing loudly and groaning, even purring; he was clearly thrilled to see his mistress. Thistle had been well taken care of, fed, brushed, and exercised daily, but Victor couldn’t ride him comfortably without reducing his form; the beast was big and strong but not meant to be carrying a half-titan, for that was what Victor had come to consider his natural state.

“You’re a good boy, and I missed you, but I might have to send you to live with your sister soon. I won’t stand to see someone else take you.”

“It’s true,” Valla said, her tone carefully neutral. “He’s a great mount, but you can’t ride him into battle. You must be at your full strength when we’re in the field.”

“Yeah. What am I going to do? Get one of those elephant birds?”

Valla snorted with laughter and said, “You mean a bundii? That would be quite a sight! I’ve never seen one mounted, but if anyone could do it . . .” her words were lost in another fit of giggles; she was apparently rather vividly imagining Victor attempting to ride one of the elephant-sized ostriches.

“Well? Seriously! What can I ride?”

“A thunderak, perhaps? Those are the giant . . .”

“Lizards, yeah, yeah. No thanks. I think I’ll take a trip into the spirit plane. I learned a lot when I made Tes’s spell in my pathways. I told you a little about the feat I gained, but I think I’m just scratching the surface. What if I used some of the principles that make her spell so potent on one of my other spells, say the one that lets me find and create totems from my spirit? The way I envision it, I think it might allow me to gain more totems; maybe I can find one that I could ride—I saw a Mustang in there once.”

“A Mustang?”

“A kind of horse.” Victor chuckled and hurriedly added, “Which is a kind of mount from my world. They’re like vidanii, I guess, but without the horns. Maybe prettier, too. I guess horses are known for being clever and spirited, but Thistle’s pretty clever, aren’t you, boy?” Victor patted the coarse reddish fur of the animal’s neck, and he shivered, shaking his head and snorting.

“If you could truly do that, summon a totem you could ride, that would be ideal.” Valla tugged on Uvu’s reins, pulling him a little closer so she didn’t have to shout, and added, “You don’t want to try to train a thunderak!”

“Hey,” Victor said, changing the subject, “What did you think of Olivia?”

“Your cousin?” Valla grinned at him slyly, and Victor had to wonder for a moment what she was getting at. Was she trying to point out to him that he had some family again? He supposed that was nice. Olivia had seemed like someone he could grow to like—smart, ambitious, pleasant, and he’d enjoyed how she’d spoken in threatening undertones about ap’Gravin. Yeah, he decided, he could grow to like having a cousin like her.

“Well, not a first cousin. But, yeah, I take your point. What did you think of her?”

“She’s very talented, according to the professors at Fainhallow. I know, I know, that’s not what you’re asking me. I liked her. I hope she can produce the results she promised. I hope ap’Gravin won’t present her with too much trouble.”

“We’ll find out,” Victor said, shrugging. “We’ve got Farscribe books now, so at least she’ll be able to update me.” He clicked his tongue and twitched his reins, urging Thistle to move a little faster, and as Valla and Uvu surged to keep up, he said, “We’re going to be marching in a couple of days! Feels like ages since Rellia first spoke to me about the Untamed Marches. I’m nervous but also pumped as hell. How about you? Are you excited?”

“I am, but also apprehensive. I know you’ve been in plenty of fights, and you know how ugly combat can be, but it’s different on the scale of armies. It’s different when those you’re responsible for start to die. I hope you’re ready for it.”

Victor didn’t answer her, and his grin faded as a storm brewed behind his eyes. Abstractly, he’d thought about the army clashing with whatever sorts of enemies would be waiting in the Untamed Marches. He’d thought about fighting with ambushers from the Empire, but he hadn’t really thought about what it would be like if he, as he tended to do, came out on top, but a bunch of his soldiers died. Right now, the soldiers were mostly faceless to him, a mob of willing fighters, but how would it feel when he stood on the battlefield with them and they started to fall?

Impulsively he asked Valla, “Who’s the best military brain in our legion? Who’s going to be coming up with tactics? I know I’m in charge, but who should I be listening to for advice? Other than you, I mean.”

“Rellia has a keen mind for strategy, as does Lam, but Borrius is a military genius. Get him away from Rellia to hear him speak frankly, though; his desire to please her can make him agree to stupid things.”

“Good advice, Primus. Thank you. Now, try to keep up!” With that, Victor urged Thistle into a gallop, and he howled as the wind began to sing in his ears.