

Victor stared at his prisoners, sitting in the grass a dozen feet away from their tethered mounts. He and Valla had stripped the pair, Chokodo and Reesha, of their jewelry and weapons, secured their hands behind their backs, hobbled their ankles with a short length of rope so they couldn't run, and blindfolded their eyes with dark strips of cloth Victor had torn from an old cloak. Valla felt confident neither of them would be able to effect an escape, but Victor still felt nervous about them; he knew if it were him, some ropes and blindfolds would never hold. "How long did she say?" he asked for the third time.

"Sometime tonight. Make a big fire, and they'll have no problem finding us in this valley."

"And you don't think these two will have help coming?"

"Chokodo says no. He says he and his men acted without sanction; they were meant only to observe us and report back. We'll see."

"Not what his wife told me . . ."

"Yes, well, it's quite possible he hadn't been entirely forthright with his wife, don't you think?" Valla smirked and tapped a long, black-polished nail on the pommel of her sword.

"I guess. Well, we need to watch them closely. How about you keep your eyes on them, and I'll go collect the bodies and build a fire." He glanced at the shadowy form lying in the grass, the man Valla had killed. She'd brought the body back in a storage ring, leading the badly injured Chokodo to see if Victor needed help. By then, he'd already bound Reesha and was thinking about going to fetch her anyway.

"Right. I suppose we can't leave them where they fell, not with potential information or wealth in their containers. Rellia will be able to identify them, even if Chokodo or his wife don't want to share."

"Whistle if something happens. I'll be listening," Victor said, turning to jog upslope into the woods. He had a good sense of direction, far better than it had ever been in his old life, though he'd never tested it the way he did on Fanwath. Twenty minutes later, with no alarms from Valla, he'd tossed the other two bodies next to the first. Valla had built a small fire near the prisoners and was watching them as the shadows of night lengthened, the sister moons mostly obscured by clouds. She saw him and nodded, offering a short wave before returning her gaze to the prisoners.

Victor stooped to the dead bodies, pulling rings off fingers, checking necks and wrists for other jewelry. He tucked anything that seemed like it might be a dimensional container into the little sack where he'd stowed Chokodo and Reesha's jewelry, then he put the rest, including their weapons, into one of his own rings. He'd just finished and was taking a last look at the weird cat-Ardeni when Valla called him over. Victor walked over the grass toward her, and halfway there, he called out, "What's the deal with the cat-looking guy? The Ardeni."

"A Feeradi? Truly?" Valla looked surprised.

"They killed, Ewwin?" Reesha said, her voice hoarse from screaming and crying earlier.

"I told you I killed them. What would you have done? Fall to your knees and let them kill you?" Victor growled, tired of the woman acting like he was the bad guy in the situation.

“Yes,” Chokodo said, his voice sullen and weary, “he was a Feeradi. His bloodline rank was approaching the epic tier. What a loss.”

“It’s an uncommon bloodline, Victor, but that doesn’t excuse vile behavior. He was a criminal of the worst kind, hiding behind his social rank to commit atrocities.” Though Valla addressed Victor, it was clear she was speaking to Reesha.

“He,” Reesha croaked, struggling to speak with her sore throat—whatever healing abilities Chokodo had, she didn’t share them. “He was serving the Empire!”

“Killing a bunch of sailors is serving the Empire?” Valla spat. “Your husband has already come clean, Reesha. He and his lackeys weren’t sanctioned in this attack.”

“He’s saying what you want to hear,” she cried, her words fading to a rough whisper.

“Hush, dear. Hush. I’ve heard of Rellia ap’Yensha. She’s known as a fair woman; let her hear our tale.”

Valla snorted, but Victor turned and stomped toward the trees. He’d heard enough. He needed to get a bigger fire burning if he was going to have something to guide Rellia’s airship in. At first, he’d tried to talk Valla into riding the strigaii to Persi Gables, but she’d refused; apparently, the beasts were finicky, hard to master, and very loyal to a given rider. She said Rellia’s people would need to spend months retraining them. Luckily for them, Valla had been writing a lot more often to Rellia, so her copy of the Farscribe book was constantly monitored. When they’d reported the attack on their airship, Rellia had redirected her scout ship from practice maneuvers to pick them up. “Here’s hoping she’s not overly optimistic about them finding us.”

Victor hefted Lifedrinker, remembering how, in a Viking movie he’d watched, one of the warriors had lectured his son about using his war axe as a tool. “You don’t mind, do you, *chica*?”

*A tree will not harm me, love.*

Victor grinned, enjoying her use of the endearment more than he probably should have. He lifted her high and brought her down on a tall, slender tree with white bark. The bole was probably only eight inches in diameter, but Victor laughed with pleasure as Lifedrinker ripped through it in one swing. The tree toppled downslope, and Victor cut another just like it for good measure. An hour of honest exercise followed as he chopped the trunks and branches into yard-long segments and piled them together in the big meadow.

Nearby, he constructed the bonfire, stacking the logs loosely in a square that tapered together with each layer. All told, he figured he’d used about half a tree’s worth of lumber to build it. “Valla,” he called, “you have a spell to light this up?”

“Yes. Come watch these two.”

Victor switched places with Valla, but he put the slope to his back so he could observe the prisoners and Valla at once, and he grinned happily as she ignited the wood. It wasn’t dry and would have been difficult to light with conventional means, but a bit of Energy apparently solved that. As Valla walked back, she said, “I’ll teach you that. It’s funny the gaps in your knowledge.

Simple things every child is taught, you don't know, but how to battle an ancient wyrm? That's something you can do."

"Yeah, well, trial by fire, I guess."

"So, it's true. You were off-world?"

"Did I give it away?" Valla asked, her tone taunting. "No ancient wyrms on Fanwath, are there? So, tell us, Chokodo, who at Fainhallow alerted you to our presence? Why did you seek to slay Victor? Why not get some of this out in the open before Rellia has to have her Mind Mage dig it out of you?" Chokodo frowned beneath his black blindfold but didn't speak, and Valla shrugged.

"You think it was someone at the academy?" Victor ran his mind through all the people he'd spoken to in the little town around the academy.

"It had to be; where else did we go?"

"Well, I mean, we both sent messages in the books." Victor jerked his thumb toward the north. "Could be a leak in that direction."

Valla frowned and plucked at some grass. "I think not. Rellia only has two people watching the book, and they're well-trusted. She and Lam both have too much to lose to let information like that slip out."

"I hope you're right." Victor stretched and sat down on the grass. He was feeling quite good; not long after he'd disarmed Reesha, he'd received a decent influx of Energy for his victories, and though he didn't level again, he still felt energized and fresh. "If you're tired, take a nap. I'll watch these two." Victor eyed Chokodo for a reaction to those words, but the man still sat, slumped, defeat written in his demeanor. He didn't trust him, though, and Victor didn't intend to give him an inch of freedom, not until he was much more thoroughly bound.

"No. I'm not tired at all."

"Listen," Reesha said, her voice a whisper, "would you please allow me to wear my veil? It's unseemly to have my face thus exposed."

"No, Lady," Valla said. "Your veil has enchantments, and it's bonded to you. Those gems felt quite potent. Would you like me to wrap more cloth over your face rather than just your eyes?"

"No, no." Reesha sighed, her voice cracking with emotion as she looked down.

"What's the deal with that? The veil? I've never seen anyone in Persi Gables or Gelica wearing one."

"She's in line to be one of the emperor's wives," Valla shrugged as if her sentence made perfect sense.

"Come again? I thought Chokodo was her husband." Neither of the prisoners spoke, but Valla seemed happy to fill him in.

“Only in name. His relationship with her is more like a big brother or guardian. The emperor has dozens of such women similarly bound to him.”

“*Chingado*,” Victor said, his voice rising with disbelief. “People just stand for that? Him claiming women?”

“It’s not just him, and it’s not just women.” Valla tugged some blue-green grass blades and tossed them toward her little fire. Then she looked over her shoulder toward the bonfire, illuminating the clearing for a hundred yards in every direction, perhaps weighing her words, perhaps lost in memories the discussion had pulled to the surface.

“It’s really only in Tharcray,” Chokodo added. “Those with the Ridonne bloodline, the rulers of the Empire.”

“Like you?” Victor asked.

“I’m a Princep, true, but no Ridonne blood runs in my veins. My authority is granted at the whim of the imperial family.” He paused, and everyone was quiet for a little while, and then the blindfolded man said, “You’re strong, Victor, stronger than we were led to believe, but you’ll pay for what you’ve done here. The Ridonne will hunt you, and they’re a force to behold.”

“*Pfft*,” Valla hissed, turning away from the distant bonfire. “No one’s even seen the emperor in my lifetime. The Ridonne are just as puffed-up and soft as you. Victor will crush any that come after him.”

“Uh, not to mention, all I ‘did here today’ was keep you assholes from killing me and Valla.”

“Your *wrong!*” Chokodo said, facing Valla, though he couldn’t see her. “You might not have experience with them, but there are those of the Ridonne who could bat me aside and pull the flesh from my bones with two waves of their hand. I might be ‘puffed-up,’ but, believe me; there’s a reason the Ridonne rule Fanwath.”

“We’ll see,” Valla sighed, sitting back on her elbows, her eyes drifting up over the prisoners and the tethered strigaii behind them, looking into the night sky. “It’s good to see familiar stars again.”

Again, silence fell, allowing the crackling of the campfire and the distant roar of the bonfire to fill the night air, and Victor began to relax, thinking about Tharcray, wondering if it could possibly stack up to Coloss. He’d heard the name Ridonne plenty of times and had known it was the name of the Empire, but he hadn’t known it was a Shadeni bloodline. Could they really be all that tough, though? He’d already speculated that the Empire was hoarding knowledge, hoarding access to more advanced worlds. Was it such a stretch to think the people in the capital, especially the ruling party, all members of some potent bloodline, wouldn’t be stronger than the average Energy user?

When Victor thought about brutal fights in his life, the one that stood out the most was his duel with Rellia. He’d come close to dying plenty of times, sure, but she’d really schooled him. If she was weak compared to the Ridonne, then he supposed it was worth being cautious, especially if they were acting against him and the expedition.

“My wrists ache,” Reesha whispered, her throat apparently too raw for more than that.

"This is harsh treatment for one such as she," Chokodo said, and Victor gave him a long look. The man's limbs were all straight; each of his many fractures had healed. He wore a simple white shirt over a heavily muscled chest, for Valla had stripped him of his pretty blue armor. Still, he looked strong and dangerous. Victor didn't reply but stood and moved around behind the man. He was a huge Shadeni, to be sure, probably close to seven feet tall, but next to Victor, he wasn't very imposing, especially bound on the ground as he was.

"Lean forward," Victor said, bending at the waist and pressing Chokodo between the shoulder blades. He saw his wrists were still bound and that the man still sported a stump for a left hand. "Can't regenerate your hand, huh?" Victor didn't doubt Chokodo could pull his wrist free from his bindings, what with no hand attached to anchor the ropes. He hadn't done so, though; had he truly given up all resistance?

"No, sirrah, I cannot."

"Use respect when you address him!" Valla growled, her voice thick with venom.

"No, sir," Chokodo amended, frowning.

Victor simply grunted and stepped past him to Reesha, and, using a sharp knife he'd picked up from one dead enemy or another, he cut the bindings on her wrists. "Oh," she sighed softly, pulling her hands before herself and rubbing at the dark spots on her soft, pale red wrists. Victor reached down and took hold of her upper arm, pulling her effortlessly to her feet. "No! Please! Don't hurt me!" she croaked, trying to yell despite her lack of a voice.

"Don't take her!" Chokodo wailed.

"Relax," Victor said. "I'm just moving her over by Valla, so she can't get herself in trouble trying to help you or something." He gently pulled the woman's arm, guided her around the fire next to Valla, and said, "Sit here." As she collapsed, clumsy with her eyes covered and a length of rope holding her feet close to each other, Victor pointed to the bonfire and said, "Be right back." Valla nodded, and he walked over to his pile of logs.

While he tossed half a dozen big logs onto the fire, he thought about the System and how it seemed to breed corruption. People who grabbed power were rewarded, perpetuating their positions of strength and incentivizing them to keep what they'd earned. Never satisfied, the System seemed to encourage people to continue their climb, always seeking the next advancement. He let his mind drift back to home, to Earth, and he almost laughed at himself, at his own naivete.

"It doesn't take a System for people to want power." At least with the System, with Energy, he figured people with good intentions could grow powerful. Back home, it didn't always feel that way. He knew that was a cynical take, and he also knew he'd been a dumb kid, too worried about sports and girls to really know much about how things worked, but he couldn't help the feeling that things *could* be better with Energy. He wondered if every world would be like Zaafor and Fanwath with a corrupt ruling class. Maybe some of them were more egalitarian; maybe some had systems in place to share treasures and Energy.

"How would that work, though?" Victor frowned, staring into the bonfire. How would he feel if he went and cleared a dungeon, doing all the work, only to have to share his trophies with the

people back home who'd been too lazy or scared to go with him? "Yeah, that would suck," he sighed. His mind started to wander away from the topic, mainly because he felt he had a lot to learn, and there were probably people who'd done a lot of thinking on the subject already—something to study on the road with the army, perhaps.

A soft breeze blew in from the northern end of the valley and lifted embers and sparks up into the black night sky. Victor watched them swirling, wondering about the future, wondering if the Empire would move against his legion openly or if some of the Ridonne would come to challenge him. He hoped not, not yet; he wanted to get done with the conquest of the Marches, get some defenses established, and bring in the people loyal to ap'Yensha and maybe some others.

"What others?" Victor asked the night, watching the smoke rise from the fire, and his mind drifted to people he'd met, people he wouldn't mind seeing settle in lands he conquered. What about the Naghelli? They didn't have a home, and they were supposedly fierce fighters. Maybe he should reach out. Hadn't Vellia told him to? Hadn't she given him a necklace for just that purpose? He let his inner eye drift through his dimensional containers, and there he saw it, the silver necklace with the big ruby gem.

Perhaps on a whim, perhaps listening to his instinct, or perhaps being foolish, Victor took the necklace from his ring, held the gem tightly in his fist, and thought about Vellia. Nothing happened at first, but after a few moments, the jewel throbbed in his hand, and he felt her. She was far away, a distant presence off to the north and east, but he remembered her words; she'd know he was holding the gem, know he was looking for her, and she—they—would answer his call. "Good," he nodded. "Maybe they'd like to earn a new home."

He almost put the necklace back in the dimensional container but paused. What if she couldn't feel it in there? The chain was too short to wear around his neck, so he slipped it into one of the pouches tied to his belt, protected by the wurm-scale vest. "Who else?" he mused, turning back to look at Valla and her two prisoners. They sat as before, though it looked like Valla was speaking to Reesha, and Chokodo was slumped forward, perhaps asleep.

"Tellen?" Victor asked the night, though he knew he meant Thayla, knew he really wanted to see Deyni. "Wouldn't they like lands to hunt in outside of the Empire? Wouldn't they like their own hunting grounds where they wouldn't have to worry about brigands or imperial patrols?" He turned to the sky, searching for Gallia, the little moon. He saw her edge peeking out behind a cloud and reckoned she was nearly full. "That means Thayla will be looking for me on the spirit plane soon," Victor said to Lifedrinker, grasping her handle and resting her cool metal on his forehead. "Remind me, will you? I'd like to talk to her and try to convince her to come with us."

*More fleshy women for you to lust after.* The axe sounded irritated, her voice sharper than usual, and Victor bit back an automatic denial. Instead, he thought about what she'd said, taking her seriously.

"Is that what you really think? You know me better than anyone, Lifedrinker. We've been through hell together, and I've never lied to you. You've seen me at my lowest, my worst. Tell me the truth, is that really what I'm after?"

*No, love. Can I not tease thee? You gather those who are lost like yourself. You gather those about whom you care. I see you and your spirit, and I carry not an ounce of regret for my bond*

*with you. Do what you will, but remember, I am here. I am always here. You are never alone so long as you have me at your side.*

“Thank you, beautiful. Thank you.” He clutched her hand warmly and then walked back to Valla’s little campfire and their prisoners, willing Rellia’s scout ship to hurry; he had work to do, plans to make, and people to lead.