

At the crowd's reaction to his words, Victor immediately began questioning his decision not to put some weight behind his statement. Maybe he should have let his aura loose and allowed the people in the audience to understand that his words weren't empty. He'd struggled with his Quinametzin pride, though, and won, and now he wouldn't change course. Many people had shot to their feet, crowding toward the speaking stones. There were four of them, with four different queues, but orderly patience had been cast aside as some of the audience members apparently took Victor's words about 'grinding his enemies to dust' as a threat.

Despite the noise-dampening magic in the amphitheater, the buzz of the crowd was loud enough to make the people at the front of the lines feel they had to shout. The stones amplified those shouts, so they felt they had to contend with each other, creating a chaotic din in which Victor began to revel. It almost sounded like a battlefield to him, and something of a mad grin spread on his lips as he stood tall on the stage and watched the chaos unfold. Alec wasn't so content to let his town hall fall apart. He stood and, red-faced, began to shout. Whatever magic the amphitheater employed allowed his voice to cut through the clamor.

"Quiet! Order! Keep your seats! We have a process here, and you all know it. Victor will be happy to answer follow-up questions, and, as you can see, he means no harm with his words." Alec gestured to Victor as he stood calmly atop his speaking stone, arms loose by his sides, a—perhaps disturbing—smile on his face. "Order! Quiet! One at a time!" Alec continued to admonish the crowd until, after four or five repeated requests for order, the buzz finally began to die down. Alec pointed to the man at the front of the centermost line of waiting townfolk. "Richard, you were about to leave, and now you're at the front of the line. I see the people behind you are content to allow you to hold that spot, so why don't you ask your question."

Victor could see what Alec was doing. It was evident that more than half the audience hadn't liked his response. It was also apparent that they had some ring leaders among them, and this guy, Richard, was one of them. If Alec let Victor deal with his questions, he probably figured the town hall could move on to more productive topics. As Richard, a thin man with very broad shoulders wearing clothing that wouldn't have been out of place in an Ancient Rome revival, cleared his throat, Victor stared down his nose at him and folded his arms. "Ahem, yes, Victor, is it? Right, well, would you mind clarifying what you just said? Was that meant as a threat to First Landing?"

Victor looked around the audience and saw that most of them had settled down, and the queues had returned to orderly lines near the speaking stones. He looked down to the front row where Issa and other high-ranking guests sat. She was impassive, though he thought he saw something of a smile in her eyes as she watched him. However, her neighbor, an older man with swarthy skin and hard eyes wearing a very Earth-style suit, looked more than disturbed. Victor figured he'd try to turn the tables on the guy asking him questions. "I was talking about people who sought to do me harm. Did you take that to mean you?" As he spoke, he unfolded his arms and tried to look relaxed and reasonable.

"Perhaps you could enlighten us. Whom have you been grinding to dust during your time away from Earth? Why should we be entertaining a violent warmonger?"

"Are you entertaining me?" Victor's smile faded, and his eyes began to glower, his restraint on his pride fading far more quickly than he'd anticipated. "So far, I'm unamused. To answer your question, I was brought into this world as a slave, and I killed most of those who wanted to keep me that way." Victor was, of course, simplifying things, but he wasn't feeling charitable with his words just then.

Alec had seen enough, and it was clear he was starting to worry that the town hall would devolve into a shouting match again. “Do you have a question for our guest, or are you going to badger him? The topic at hand, I believe, is spirit Cores.”

“Certainly.” The man adjusted the sash-like belt around his waist and straightened up, clearing his throat. “We’ve learned through our study that the use of spirit Cores is relegated to the low-affinity species of this world because they are directly tied to emotion. As anyone who’s studied history can tell you, emotion isn’t what successful nations are built upon. Why should we take advice from you, a man who is, admittedly, a slave to his emotions?”

Victor chuckled, shaking his head and rubbing his chin as he tried to unpack the loaded question. Again, he felt frustrated being tied to the speaking stone; he was a man who liked to move and especially so when he was trying to think. Finally, after several long seconds during which he could hear the faint buzz of the audience growing impatient, he replied, “First, I’d say that you need to revisit your studies. Spirit Cores aren’t tied to emotions, but our emotions connect us to our spirits. Notice I said ‘our.’ All of you have spirits, but those of us gifted with a spirit Core are able to harness that Energy. I’ll say one final word on this matter publicly: A person with a spirit Core isn’t a slave to their emotions but rather one who must learn to master them. If not for my many hours of torturous introspection, I would have lost myself to one emotion or another during this town hall, for instance.” Victor nodded as though confirming his words to himself, and then he sat down.

“But that’s not . . .” the man started to say, only to be cut off from Alec.

“Let’s keep things moving, folks.” He pointed to another queue and said, “Raif, what’s your question?”

“Ahem, yes. I was wondering if we might hear some more about this invasion that took place. How did an army arrive on Fanwath from another world? How many soldiers were there? Why was it imperative that you do battle? Rumors I’m hearing are that mere thousands of people were fighting over millions of acres. Couldn’t negotiations have taken place?”

Valla stood up. “I’ll take this one.” She stepped onto her speaking stone and, with a clear, unemotional voice, said, “That’s an interesting question, and I can see why you’d ask it, being that you and your people are from a world untouched by the System. Those of us who’ve lived our lives under the System, though, know that while it may seem like a deity at times, it does not, in fact, care about us, or, if it does, it cares in the way a mother boyii hound cares about her young—survival is the only important goal. If there’s only food for three pups and she has four, she will abandon the weakest one.

“Think of the System as that harsh mother hound. It sees growth as the most important thing, and to foster that growth, it will pit its ‘pups’ against each other. In the case of the invasion from Dark Ember, the System chose invaders who were fundamentally incompatible with us, opened a portal, and allowed them to funnel tens of thousands of their people into the land we were marching to settle. To foster the competition, the System offered rewards for conquest along with the high stakes of knowing that if one side failed, it would spell doom for their kind on this world.”

Valla clearly wasn't done speaking, but the man interjected, "How can that be? What sort of doom? We've not seen any evidence of world-ending weapons on this planet. No nuclear technology or plague or . . ."

"Sir, if you'd allow me to finish, the answer to your question may become clear." Valla paused, but the man nodded, waiting, so she continued, "Firstly, if you've not seen any world-ending magic or plagues, you've not been here long enough. They exist. Secondly, these invaders were just such a thing—a plague given sapience. They were undead, and not only did they seek to subjugate all the peoples of Fanwath, but they sought to turn the very land into a haven for their kind. As they spread . . ."

Valla continued to expound on the dangers of the undead, answering many follow-up questions about the System, about conquests, about portals, and her evidence for the System's harsh nature. It seemed that the people who wanted to press for more and more detail were never satisfied, and Victor began to remember how frustrating it could be to argue with those who'd already made their minds up about something. The entire town hall was a bit of a sham in his mind. Issa's people thought a certain way, her competition thought another, and they both sought to make the other look stupid. It felt like Issa was the more rational, correct one, but Victor couldn't help feeling used.

While Valla spoke, he wondered if they were just wasting time. Looking around the audience, the same people looked incredulous as when he'd first pissed them off by talking about how he'd crushed his enemies. He was beginning to understand why Issa had talked her opposition into setting up a "demonstration" of their war machines. It was going to take the slap of harsh reality to make them see reason. ". . . perhaps Nia, here, will better be able to illustrate that point." Victor snapped his mind back to reality as Nia, nervously clenching her hands together, stood up to speak.

"Hello," she said, flinching as her voice echoed through the amphitheater.

"Ah, hello, Miss Nia," Alec said, trying to smooth the transition. "Allow me to repeat the question—would you say the, um, 'great undead lords,' as Lady ap'Yensha called them, are equivalent to the Ridonne faction of the Empire?"

"I . . ." Nia paused and licked her lips, glancing at Victor. He nodded at her, and he could almost see the determination take shape in her eyes as she steeled herself and kept speaking, "I haven't met your Ridonne, but I've heard plenty of tales. The soldiers I've fought with, they told me about the Ridonne Lord Victor fought, and they sounded fierce, indeed. Still, those soldiers said Prince Hector was worse, that his bone dragon alone was enough to send a Ridonne running. Well, Prince Hector was a lickboot on Dark Ember, a 'princeling,' the great lords called him. So, to answer your question, aye, the great lords are like your Ridonne, but only 'cause they rule over a world. If they were to come here, the Ridonne would be on bent knee within a day."

Victor grinned as he watched the crowd's reaction. The suppressed hum of conversation rose in volume, and several people tried to speak using the stones at once. Alec calmed them down, and then Victor listened as the following ten questions seemed to be aimed at getting Nia to admit she was exaggerating. She wouldn't budge. The town hall went on like that, and Victor tried to stay seated as much as possible, giving his companions plenty of opportunity to speak. Borrius did an excellent job dragging out the responses to questions about the Ridonne Empire, its ruling practices, and its military capabilities.

Valla spoke at length about Zaafor and Coloss, but she grew frustrated at one point trying to describe the disparity in strength between the Warlord and his war captains, so she asked Victor to help explain things. He stood up and spoke about how the Warlord kept his colony stone under tight control, issuing tokens for its use and keeping the best rewards for himself. The real lesson wasn't there, though; it was in how the Warlord himself was stagnating, so Victor tried to explain, "What you all need to understand is that the Warlord, despite spending more than a thousand years working to improve his Core and gain levels, was kind of stuck. He'd reached the limit of what he could do in his world. I believe that's a good lesson for you if I understand Lady ap'Roald's concern."

"Pardon me?" the man at the speaking stone asked. Victor didn't remember his name, but he was a member of the First Landing parliament. He looked fit, and if Victor were guessing, he'd say the guy had eaten a racial advancement or two. "Is that the concern *Lady Issa* has? What nonsense. How can staying in one world stagnate a person? Innovation doesn't cease because you've not ventured forth. Rather than support Issa's stance, I believe you've undermined it. This man, the 'Warlord' you speak of, exemplifies how trying to gain power through Energy cultivation is a fool's errand. Rather, we need to demonstrate to these backward peoples what technology is capable of. If someone like this 'Warlord' presented a threat to us, how would he fare versus a missile strike?"

Victor snorted and shook his head. "You aren't listening. The Warlord worked for millennia to improve himself. He grew powerful enough to rule his world, and, if he came here, he could conquer this one easily. You can't stop a guy like that with guns or bombs—you'd never see him coming! Forget him, though; he was nothing next to a dragon I met . . ."

"A dragon? What's next? Are you going to join in on the hysterics of Doctor Bennet about fairies and . . ."

"Ah," Alec said, speaking over the man, his master speaking stone making his voice impossible to ignore, "That's just about the end of our time, and I feel it's a good note to end on—Lester, you speak about the superiority of human technology and, as you know, Victor has agreed to participate in your party's demonstration. By his own admission, Victor has a long way to go before he's at the Warlord of Coloss's level, so it should be a good indication of how ready our defenses are when it comes to powerful invaders." Several people tried to speak using the stones, but Alec did something to turn them off, fiddling with a stone he held.

Victor noticed the stone he stood on was also no longer glowing, and he turned to Valla. "What a bunch of assholes."

"Oh, I don't know," Borrius said, "I sat in many sessions of the Imperial Senate, and this was far less contentious. Politics is an ugly business, Victor."

"Was I all right?" Nia asked before Valla could formulate a response to Victor's declaration of assholery.

"You were great." Victor held out his hand, and Valla took it, standing up beside him. As the audience began to file out, men and women wearing blue and gray uniforms and carrying bulky musket-like guns walked in from the stage's wings. They stood at the aisles, ensuring everyone left and that Victor and his companions weren't accosted by people wanting to get some one-

on-one questions in. “These people really have already made guns,” he sighed as Alec walked over to them with Issa.

“I’m so sorry,” Issa said before Alec could get a word in.

“Nonsense,” Valla said, smiling. “As Borrius just said, politics are ugly.”

“I’d so hoped to have something more academic in this town hall! When Olivia proposed it, she’d thought you’d have time to detail your experiences and, through them, convince people of the need for cooperation and mutual edification. I didn’t think we’d have to talk in circles again and again while the P and Ds tried to discredit you. Alec, how did they get so many representatives in the queues?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, Issa. We interviewed everyone, but they must have lied.”

“P and Ds?” Valla raised an eyebrow.

Issa sighed, shaking her head. “They’re the opposition party to everything we try to accomplish. Progress and Dominion—a platform for recapturing their Earth technologies and expansion through, as the name implies, dominion. It’s ugly!”

“Excuse me,” a deep-voiced man said from off to the left. Victor looked to see a familiar figure—the guy in the business suit. He had two men walking behind him, and they both carried weapons that looked very much like fancy, hand-crafted machine guns. He wasn’t very tall, but he was stocky and clearly well-muscled beneath his suit. He had a full head of wavy, dark hair, and his equally dark eyes twinkled with amusement as he chuckled, approaching them all. “Oh, dear, that wasn’t anything like we’d hoped, was it, Issa? I had so many questions we never got ‘round to. I hope we might sit down together before you all leave.”

“This is Darren Whitehorse, a member of our parliament and the leader of the P and D party.”

“Right, right,” he nodded, extending his hand to Borrius, “My apologies, I should have introduced myself.” Borrius shook his hand, and Victor regarded him. He had a certain vitality that was missing from some of the others in First Landing he’d seen. If he were guessing, Victor would say this man was higher level than average for the humans, which surprised him considering his party’s stance. Maybe it was his ranks in intelligence, maybe it was his gut, or maybe it was just more obvious than it should have been, but Victor connected some dots.

As he shook the man’s hand, purposefully barely squeezing, he said, “I think I can see why a political party would want to push an agenda like yours.”

“Oh? What an interesting greeting. What agenda do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? When people learn about the strength they can unlock through Core, level, and racial advancement, when they learn there’s competition for resources to improve those things, they’ll do what they can to suppress the interest of others.”

“Ah, hmm.” Darren frowned, then shrugged. “An interesting take, sir. In any case, a crowd is gathering on the northern wall, and the demonstration is ready. Are you still willing to put yourself on display? My people are eager to show everyone what we’ve accomplished.”

“Mmhmm. After that ‘town hall,’ I’ve got the urge to break something.” Victor smiled, put an arm over Valla’s shoulders, and gestured toward the stairs leading out of the amphitheater. “Shall we?”

“Of course, of course. There is just one small matter we need to discuss on the topic of liability. We’re rather worried that your allies and,” he glanced at Nia and narrowed his eyes, “followers will seek retribution should something untoward happen to you during the demonstration.” He held out his hand, and one of the machine-gun-toting soldiers handed him a rolled parchment. “Would you mind agreeing to an Energy contract indemnifying us?”

“Hmm? Oh, that shouldn’t be a problem. I believe Borrius has one for you as well. He’ll review your contract while we walk.” Victor looked at the solemn-faced old commander. “That’s right, isn’t Borrius?”

“Indeed. We wouldn’t want First Landing to grow angry if you destroy their war machines.”

“Right, right.” Again, Victor gestured to the stairs. “Shall we?”

“Yes, right this way,” Issa said, leading their small procession off the stage and up through the now-empty amphitheater.

“Oh, but . . .” Darren Whitehorse hurried to walk beside Victor as he took the steps two at a time. “Wouldn’t you want to read the contract?”

“Borrius will read it. He’s written and signed hundreds of them.” Victor looked at the man, offered him a sly wink, and added, “Wouldn’t want to strain my primitive mind on all those words, you know?” He would have said more, would have maybe tried to pick a fight with the guy, but Valla squeezed his biceps where she held his arm as they walked, and he convinced his inner titan to hold back—it was almost time to break some shit.