

Victor handed the pouch to Gorro ap'Dommic, nodding as though the act sealed the deal they'd made. "On a hillside with a view of the sea." It contained hermitage blueprints and all of the exotic building supplies it would require to build.

"Of course, Lord Victor. I'll hire a proper surveyor to select the most idyllic location for your home. In the meantime, I'll run things from my travel tent—it's quite luxurious, and the command table I liberated from the Legion when I retired will aid greatly in the logistics of mapping and plotting your lands as the surveyors complete their work. With the funds you've given me, I'll be able to hire your personal staff and begin forming the militia. You won't recognize the place when you return! I've got big plans for your town layout, beginning with the central fountain square . . ."

"Right, right." Victor held up his hand. "No need to rehash it all; I'm sure it's going to be great." The truth was the guy liked to talk, and Victor could swear they'd been over his plans for the town square three times in the last couple of hours. He didn't know why he had to establish a town, but Gorro seemed to think there would be homesteaders flocking to his lands, seeking property in the form of leases and grants, depending on what they had to offer. Gorro said his massive land holdings would fund everything he needed if appropriately managed, and that all started with getting some tenants. If he were honest, Victor was kind of annoyed that he had to leave; it sounded like a lot of fun and a nice break from constantly fighting.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. I know you're in a hurry to get things ready for your journey." Gorro nodded to Nia, standing near the doorway leading out of Victor's library. "Do I understand correctly that Nia will be working for your household guard, not the militia?"

"That's right. I also want you to give special consideration to any other veterans from the conquest who want a position with either my household or the standing militia."

"I was under the impression that the bulk of the legion soldiers were receiving their land grants from Lady ap'Yensha."

"That's right, but, like I said, if any of them want to settle on my lands, work with them."

"Understood."

"All right. Let's head out 'cause I need to pack up my house." Victor started for the doorway, nodding to the dark-haired, scar-faced woman standing there. Nia had been following him even more closely than before the trip to First Landing, and Victor wondered what she would do with herself when he and Valla left. As he passed, he said, "Nia, let's head out. I have to pack the house. Governor ap'Dommic is counting on you to help secure my new homestead and build up my household guard. You're up to it?"

"Yes, Lord Victor."

"I know you have some friends from Dark Ember, and you can hire any who want to come to work for me, but make sure you never turn away anyone from the ninth. God, I wish Sarl was here." Victor saw Nia look down at the mention of the dead captain. Victor shook his head and forced himself to acknowledge that Sarl had been a lot more than a captain to him. "Not because you aren't doing good work, Nia, but because he was a friend, and I wish he could see what we've won."

"I understand," Nia's voice was soft, and, glancing down at her, Victor saw her eyes were distant. She understood loss.

Outside the house, in the corner of the garden he and Valla had claimed, he found her squatting beside Uvu, scratching the big cat's ears and cooing soft praises. "He'll be all right." Victor walked over to her, Gorro and Nia in tow.

"Yes, he will. It's a paradise here for him—he's getting fat. I'm wondering if he'll find a mate, but so far, there don't seem to be any predators around, not even boyii hounds. I think the undead left quite a void."

Nia cleared her throat. "Lady Valla, I'm sure they'll start to creep back in now that the threat's gone and that miasma has disbursed. Your big cat might find a friend."

"Oh, he will, but sooner than you think. Nia, this is Uvu. Uvu, Nia." Valla grinned and stood up. "Give him a scratch, will you? I want him to follow you down south to Victor's holdings. If he's going to hunt and range about, I want him to do it from our home."

"Oh, Lady, I couldn't . . ." Nia shrank back, her pale face going paler.

Victor chuckled, but Valla reached out and snatched Nia's hand, tugging her closer to Uvu. "Nonsense. He already told me he likes you."

"Truly?" Nia's eyes were wide, and she licked her lips nervously.

"Oh, very truly. He can sense a person's intentions, and he thinks yours are good. Do you like to hunt, Nia?"

"I do, though the sheriff only allowed it if something threatened the lord's game."

"Well, you're not on Dark Ember anymore. Uvu will hunt with you, and I think you'll become fast friends. Does that sound all right?"

Nia gingerly reached out to scratch the cat's enormous head between his ears, and Uvu chuffed, arching his neck and pressing against her hand. "He . . . He likes it!"

"Have you ever had a pet?" Victor asked.

"No, we weren't allowed such. The vampyrs would know. I tried to keep a fox cub once, but my mother, in a frenzy of terror, swatted my butt and took the animal out to the woods."

"Well, Uvu's not a pet, but he'll be a companion. You see, I don't want him to get lonely while we're gone."

"I will do my best to be a boon companion to him!" Nia's joy was palpable, and Victor felt good watching her. It reminded him that, despite his blunder that had cost so many soldiers their lives, he'd managed to do some good in the campaign. He caught himself thinking about how he'd been fooled into entrapping himself in the caldera, and, as Khul Bach had counseled him, he turned his ire toward Victoria, or, more accurately, Catalina. He was just minutes away from finally starting on the road to catch up with her, to bring her justice. The Energies in his Core swirled at the idea, eager to be let out, eager for him to do some bloody work. At least, that was

his interpretation of his eagerness—it might have been the Quinametzin in him coloring his perspective, though.

“Ready?” Valla asked.

“Yeah. Let me get the house.” Victor heard Gorro asking Valla questions about Uvu as he turned back to the house, but their conversation faded to the background as he began to wonder what was in store for them. If they found someone who could trace Edeya’s spirit tether, someone powerful enough to reach out and open a gateway to Dark Ember, what would it cost them? He assumed they wouldn’t find Dark Ember as a destination when they reached the hub world. With countless worlds in a universe impossibly vast, the odds seemed slim.

When Victor had unlocked world travel on their stone, only five destinations had been offered as options. He had no idea how it worked, exactly, but it seemed they’d have to advance the stone a lot more to open up a broader list. Were the five worlds chosen by the System for them? Were they the closest? Were they of similar level? As he touched his house and gave it the command to shrink, Victor, again, lamented his lack of knowledge. Luckily, Lesh seemed to know quite a bit more than he or any of the Fanwathians—Victor hated that he was using that term, but he figured it might be technically correct.

Lesh had looked at the list of worlds, pointed to the third one, Sojourn, and said it was likely a world hub. When Rellia had asked how he knew, he’d shrugged and said that worlds that worked hard to open all the travel options often prided themselves for it, seeking to name themselves in such a manner. He’d seen world hubs called Portalus, Veridian Gateway, Waypoint Crossroads, and Odessey. Knowing that, Victor had to agree that Sojourn was a good fit. The other travel options were Zikza, Ves, Monota, and Robal—each one an order of magnitude cheaper to travel to than Sojourn.

Victor stooped to pick up his house, clipping it to his belt. When he turned back to the others, they looked at him expectantly. “Well, this is it, I guess. Gorro, I can’t thank you enough; it makes it easier to leave knowing my lands will be in good hands. Nia, I’m counting on you to ensure the Naghelli and Shadeni are treated well. Make sure you both keep in touch through the Farscribe book. Depending on how far away we get, there will be some delay, but I’ll respond as soon as I see any messages.”

“As you say, Lord Victor.” Gorro bowed and stepped back, eyes on Nia.

“Thank you, Lord Victor and Lady Valla. I feel like I have a home again, and I’ll be sure to keep your lands clear of threats. The first thing I’ll do with the budget you and Gorro approved is hire a few rangers.”

“You’re welcome, Nia. Uvu will help you range, too.” Valla took Victor’s hand and tugged him toward the path. “Come. Lesh and the others will be waiting.”

“Right.” Victor waved again, smiling as Nia saluted and Gorro bowed, then he and Valla hurried through the garden toward Rellia’s central keep on the hill and the System stone nestled in its bailey. The keep was still under construction, but the wall was in place and formidable. It wasn’t as high as the one in First Landing that he’d nearly wrecked, but he knew it was enchanted with earth-attuned magics, and there was little chance he could collapse it. It gave him comfort knowing that Rellia and the people here in the Free Marches weren’t quite as clueless as they might be if the Ridonne had their way.

The gates to the keep were wide open, and some soldiers Victor recognized were on guard duty—many of them had signed up for new commissions with Rellia, Borrius, and Lam. He was sure Gorro and Nia would end up hiring quite a few veterans for his household as well. Inside the courtyard, things were quiet. It was still early enough that only the cooks and the kennel master were up and about. The workers hadn't yet arrived to continue building up the keep, but Victor could see the scaffolding and the framework they had in place. It was going to be an impressive structure when finished.

As they'd leveled the stone, the System had built, for lack of a better word, infrastructure around it. It still jutted up from the cobbled courtyard, but a low marble wall surrounded it, and a recessed stair led down, under the ground, to the lower level—the stone had expanded into the earth as they'd purchased more and more upgrades. It was in that underground level that the teleportation platform awaited. Despite the low traffic and protective wall, Rellia had guards on duty, watching anyone who approached the stone. They waved Victor and Valla through, though, without a second of hesitation.

The filigreed, shiny silver gates at the base of the stairs were open, and Victor could hear the weird echo of a conversation taking place within—weird because the hollow stone chamber caused the voices to reverberate oddly, the sounds mixing and muffling. "Ah, I hear large feet clomping. Is that you, Victor?" Rellia's voice rang out sharply, and Valla looked at Victor with a knowing smile. She'd teased him the other day, referring to Rellia as "their" mother, and he'd almost had a fit.

"It's us," Victor said, walking around the stone partition that separated the stairs from the chamber beyond. Warm yellow light suffused the space as if shed by the very stone. Broad stone hallways led away from the central chamber where the dark, rune-covered System stone stretched from ceiling to floor. There was another level below them that had yet to populate with any functionality, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the people of the Free Marches expanded the stone further.

Rellia stood beside the stone with Lesh, Lam, Edeya, and, irritatingly, Darren Whitehorse. Victor paused to take in the sight of them. Lesh was dressed, as always, sparingly, preferring, it seemed, to let his scales be his garb. Still, he wore black leather pants, boots, and a thick leather baldric from which his absurdly heavy, jagged bludgeon hung. He was resting a massive hand on Darren's shoulder, and Victor could see they'd been talking. Darren wore gray suit pants, shiny leather shoes, and a tailored burgundy dress shirt. Over his shoulder, he'd slung a hand-tooled leather satchel, and Victor knew it was a dimensional container crafted by one of the Artificers back in First Landing.

Lam was dressed sharply in her military-style pants and jacket. She'd stolen the design of the Ridonne Legion officer uniforms but changed the colors—pale, creamy trousers, shiny brown boots, and a soft leather coat with shiny polished horn buttons over a gauzy mauve blouse. Her hammer hung at her waist, and her wings dripped golden motes onto the polished marble floor. Edeya, sadly, looked wan and limp, her wings sagging and her eyes staring blankly over dark circles. Lam had dressed her in silky blue robes, which looked comfortable, but he doubted Edeya would have liked them if she were cognizant.

"You two look ready for war." Rellia hurried over and grabbed Valla in a hug.

Victor shrugged. They were wearing their wyrm-scale armor—Valla had found an Artificer capable of altering it to allow for her wings. Her armor had tones of blue, while his had shades of red, but they were clearly crafted by the same person. It wasn't exactly a uniform, but anyone who saw them would know they were together. Other than that, Victor had Livedrinker slung over his shoulder as always, and Valla wore Midnight at her waist. It wasn't like they had helmets and gauntlets on. "Should we not wear armor?"

"No, no. I'm teasing. This armor is so fine that you're sure to make a good impression." Rellia had to look up as she examined her adoptive daughter. Victor watched her and saw the pride in her eyes but also the angst and worry. She'd always meant for Valla to help her build this new nation, and now she was leaving.

Almost reflexively, he said, "We'll be back."

Rellia jerked her gaze away from Valla to look at him, and he saw her narrowed eyes soften. Then, she opened her arm wide and hugged him, too. "I know you will. You've been so good for Valla, Victor. I'm not upset that you're leaving, especially because young Edeya here needs your help! She and I fought back to back more than once during this campaign, and I'll not see her fade and die with her spirit held captive on some distant world. You need to make her whole, and you need to find that traitorous bitch who did this. Don't let her get away!"

That was the most clearly anyone had spelled out his mandate, and Victor felt a spur of eagerness in his chest at the command. His voice was a growl, deep in his gut, and he saw Darren flinch back behind Lesh when he spoke, "Justice will have his due." The words weren't as impactful on Lesh and Darren as they were on the others—they'd seen Victor wearing the Inevitable Huntsman's guise, and their faces said they almost pitied Catalina when Victor caught up to her. He looked away from Rellia to the others and asked, "Everyone has their fare?"

The System was charging them each a hundred thousand Energy beads, or, in Lesh's case, the equivalent of Energy-rich metal coins. He hefted a dimensional pouch and rumbled, "Aye, but I'll need to make some money in the next world if we have to pay the System for travel again."

"I think that's true for most of us," Lam said. "I'm rich on paper, but it wasn't easy scrounging up the beads."

"If there's an emergency, and you must return in haste, Valla has funds she can lend."

Valla nodded, and Victor said, "So do I. Provided we don't spend it all getting help for Edeya."

"We shouldn't be paying the System," Lesh grumbled. "I had to find Fanwath, but there are those with the power to open gateways. They rarely charge as much as the System stones."

"Right. Well, with any luck, we'll find someone like that on Sojourn."

Rellia jostled Valla's shoulder, still clinging to her with one hand. "Write to me right away! I'll want to know what that world is like and that you're all right. Keep us informed on the details of your quest."

"We will, Mother."

“Um, I’ll be happy to help in that endeavor,” Whitehorse said, stepping out from behind Lesh to look up at Rellia. He held out his hand, and a neatly bound book appeared. “I brought several of these Farscribe books, and I have no one to report to. The folks in First Landing aren’t interested in my correspondence at the moment, but hopefully, I’ll gain some favor with a detailed record of our journey and all that I can learn.”

“Thank you.” Rellia took the book, offering the man a smile that, if Victor could believe it, made him look away like a blushing schoolboy.

“Right. Enough stalling. Let’s get going.” Victor stepped forward to the stone and rested his hand upon it, navigating the menu with his mind until he saw the selection for world travel. He scanned the offered worlds again, saw nothing had changed, and selected Sojourn.

*****Travel to the world of Sojourn? The cost of travel from this stone is 100,000 unattuned Energy beads.*****

Victor looked around the room, and when his eyes locked with Rellia’s, he asked, “Any final objections? Last chance.”

“No objections, but a request: Please be careful and keep Valla safe.”

“Mother . . .”

“I’ll try.” Victor nodded, then answered the stone in the affirmative. Suddenly, the world spun away with a weird rippling shift, like he was sliding backward through a person-sized kaleidoscope. Just as the dizziness became overwhelming and he thought he was going to pass out or vomit, it faded, and the world snapped into focus. Victor found himself standing on a big metal circle made of bronze or some similar alloy. The circle was inlaid in a marble floor that stretched for hundreds of yards in every direction toward mountainous walls that rose to a cavernous ceiling suspended by magnificent, filigreed metal arches.

Eight enormous circular windows of stained glass lined the ceiling, each depicting a different stylistic scene, from a shepherd by a stream to an unmistakable fire-breathing dragon. The hall itself was jaw-dropping in its gargantuan proportions and splendor, but the thing that had Victor dazed and, quite frankly, speechless was the thronging crowd. Thousands of people of all sorts milled about, walking to and fro, materializing out of thin air or disappearing just the same. People with suitcases, people in armor, people in fancy clothing, and people wearing nothing but tattoos.

And what people! If Fanwath’s species were diverse, here there was an extraordinary spectrum of existence—Giants and fairies, lanky skeletal creatures and squat teddy bear men, people that looked almost human, and others that reminded him of elves from video games. Victor was gaping like a fool, turning in a slow circle as his companions materialized around him. Perhaps because he was the most alone among them, Darren said what they all were thinking, “It doesn’t seem like anyone noticed our arrival.”