

Victor sighed and stretched, arching his back, listening to the bedframe creak its protestations. Though it groaned, the bed was comfortable—he wished he could say the same about the room—too small, too noisy, and too full of light. Through the thin wooden walls, he could hear sergeants or lieutenants barking orders; he didn't know which. He could hear troops marching in time, chanting their strange marching rhymes. He could smell food cooking, bacon grease for sure, and something like bread, but sweeter. Someone was making biscuits, maybe. Despite the noise and sun streaming into his eyes, Victor felt damn good. He was relaxed, mind at ease, more ready for what the future held than he could remember in a long while.

His meeting with Rellia and the senior staff lasted a few hours the day before. They'd discussed the marching route, going over likely ambush sites and possible alternatives. He'd learned quite a lot about army logistics, a topic much different than he'd anticipated when considering the ubiquitous nature of dimensional storage containers. When Victor had asked about the need for any wagons at all, he'd been informed that the wagons themselves were dimensional containers, each holding a vastly greater amount than a simple ring could contain. Among the twenty-five wagons serving the legion, Rellia and her people had stashed enough food and camp equipment to last the army, at its current size, more than two years.

Additionally, to ensure against the possible loss or destruction of the wagons, each captain carried enough food for his or her cohort to last a month in an emergency-access-only dimensional pouch. Beyond supplies, Victor had learned that the airships had limited range and required constant recharging, so their specialized crew ate a significant portion of Rellia's budget, quite a lot more than Victor had anticipated. He'd suggested getting a squad together of flight-capable Ghelli but had been swiftly schooled about how rare true flyers like Lam were. In their legion, only four were capable of covering more than a couple of miles at a time. Even Lam insisted she'd be exhausted if she had to scout for more than an hour or two now and then.

Not to put too much of a damper on things, Rellia had oozed praise to him and Valla about the captured strigaii, insisting that, thanks to those rare mounts, they'd be able to retire the hired-on airship after a month or so. Victor could recognize a bone being thrown to appease his ego, so he'd just nodded and smiled, biding his time, holding his tongue as he took in the information, learning as much as he could because he was determined not to be a figurehead or a simple brute on the battlefield; he wanted to learn truly to lead these soldiers. The summative point of the command council was that Rellia and Lam wanted to march soon, tentatively scheduling their departure for dawn in three days.

Later in the afternoon, Victor had met with the captains, thanked them for their hard work, and put a face to their names. He didn't doubt he'd need some reminding, but Valla seemed eager to help with that aspect of his job. After that meeting, he'd sparred for hours with Polo Vosh, and, exhausted from a couple of hard days, Victor had gone to sleep early. "And now I get to go meet Olivia, my long-lost relative." A chuckle escaped him as he sat up. In truth, he didn't think much would come of the meeting. What could Olivia tell him? He supposed she might be able to shed some light on how they were related, at least.

Victor dressed, opting to wear his armor but leaving his helmet in his storage ring. The helmet was great, and it didn't feel too cumbersome to wear, considering it was a gigantically heavy hunk of metal, but his head felt a lot better without it. His thinking was that he'd be able to put it on if a fight looked likely, and if he got surprised, his Quinametzin bloodline was working to make his skull pretty damn hard anyway. He slung Lifedrinker in her harness and, after a visit to the rough but private bathroom, he made his way down the rickety wooden steps to the fort's entrance hall.

He wasn't surprised to see Valla standing near the door, waiting for him. "Morning," he called.

She frowned at him and said, "You're small again."

"Small?" Victor's voice rose with indignation. "I don't think so!"

"I mean, you aren't your usual size, which means you're binding your potential. We're about to ride into a city where assassins may lurk."

"Yeah, I get it. I just wanted to fit in my bed. Is that a crime?" Victor reached into his Core and severed the connection to his spell, suddenly surging upward, more than a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier. "Better?"

"Your helmet?"

"*Pinche* . . . I'll put it on when we get close to town." Victor paused in front of her, noting her critical expression, and decided to give her a little trouble of her own. "Hey, I have a job for you, Primus."

"Oh? What's that, Sir Legate?"

"Remember when we arrived in Persi Gables, and I went to deal with that pit boss, Yund?"

"Yes, and you sent the indentured fighters to the army when you liberated them."

"Good memory. Anyway, I was asking around yesterday, and I guess the leader of that group, Sarl, was made a lieutenant. I want you to pick one of the captains for him to replace."

"What?"

"Yeah. Pick one of the captains, preferably not Polo or Ordus, and give him their post. Well, I don't care about Ordus, but he's your uncle, so . . ."

"What do I tell the captain I'm cutting loose?"

"Isn't that something you can handle, dear Primus?"

"Can you tell me why I'm doing this?" Valla hadn't really shown any emotion about the request, but she didn't look happy.

"Trust is number one, Valla. That's why I have you as my right-hand . . . woman. I trust Sarl, so I'd like him to be in charge of one of the cohorts."

Valla nodded, idly tugging at one of her strands of bright, teal-colored hair. Victor kept wondering if she would cut it and put it back into its tight, formal, military style, but he knew better than to make a remark. "I can do that. I'll arrange for the promotion and the handover when we return from Persi Gables. Will that be all right?"

"Yeah, perfect."

“Shall I strip the unlucky captain of his or her rank, or shall I allow them to retain their captaincy while acting as a lieutenant?”

“That’s fine.” At Valla’s nod, he walked through the open doors, squinting at the bright sun and breathing deeply of the fresh air. “How are we traveling?”

“We’ll take Rellia’s coach to her residence where, hopefully, Olivia Bennet will meet us, and then we’ll get Uvu and Thistle.”

“Oh? She didn’t confirm?”

“Rellia’s agent delivered your request, and she seemed open to the meeting, but nothing is certain.” As she spoke, the two walked out the palisade gates to find Rellia’s sleek black coach waiting, drawn by two vidanii, quite a bit smaller than Victor remembered Thistle. He gave the coach a second glance and frowned.

“Really, Valla? You couldn’t wait until we got out of the coach on the other end to bug me about my size?”

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Olivia finished her tea and motioned for Innkeeper Zel to approach her table. As the rather silly, rather sweet, older Vodkin came near, pushing his spectacles up on his white-furred nose, she placed five of her quad-attuned Energy beads on the table and said, “It’s been wonderful staying here the last few weeks. It’s about time I got back to work, though; the notes from my professors grow increasingly irate.”

“Ah, so you weren’t here on academy business?”

“Well, I told you I was, and it was true at first, but that was settled after just a few days—an overzealous Death Mage trying to work out a portal to a plane best left disconnected from ours. My mentor expected me to return to the academy, and the older student, the one responsible for our ‘mission,’ wasn’t too pleased to leave me here,” Olivia chuckled, remembering Relip’s face when she’d said she wasn’t going with him back to Fainhallow. She shrugged and added, “I needed some time, and I’ve had it, so now I think it’s best I get back to work.”

“Just so, miss, just so. Well, we’ve certainly enjoyed your company, and you’ve been the best-paying client I’ve had in some time. If you need me to vouch for how hard you’ve been studying, just say so! I’ve seen you with your nose in those books sitting here all evening, every evening.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Gorse, but I’ll be all right. I’ve had some leniency granted due to some . . . circumstances last year. Still, I hope to return soon. I hope you’ll pass my compliments on to your wife; I haven’t been this well-fed in a long, long while.” Olivia stood and brushed a few crumbs from the front of her splendid, magical robes, currently colored a soft, pale sky-blue. She reached up, adjusting the Crown of Nightmarch, wondering, as she often did, if it was too much. It didn’t matter; she’d promised Alyss, dear Professor ap’Rall, that she’d wear it and that she’d ignore her self-doubt. It was a promise she meant to keep, the least she could do for her lovely, sweet, dead friend.

“Farewell, Miss Olivia!” Mr. Gorse called from the inn’s doorway as she strode up the cobbled avenue, and Olivia raised one hand to wave, allowing a bit of Energy into her pathways so it was limned with blue flames.

“Right! Now, let’s go see this mysterious Victor fellow. How’d another human get here, I wonder? Something to do with the Fae?” The streets and sidewalks were quiet; it was the end of the week, and few people did much in Persi Gables, she’d come to learn, in the morning hours on weekends. As usual, she marveled at the people she did see and, of course, their animals. She was always on the verge of asking little kids or friendly-looking adults about their pets—questions like, “What would be a good companion for a person living in the academy who travels frequently?” or, “Is that cute little bunny-looking thing as friendly as it seems?”

She saw a Shadeni coaxing a large draft animal, an elephant-sized bird, out of an alley, and she admired his long, thick horns, wondering why Oylla-dak didn’t have such. Then again, Oylla had those star-filled eyes, and Olivia had yet to broach their subject with the woman. “Must be something to do with a bloodline. Perhaps I could bring it up in relation to Morgan. I could say he wanted to know more about bloodlines in general . . .”

“Did you say something, miss?” an older man sweeping the walk she’d just trodden across asked.

“Sorry, good sir! I’m someone who tends to talk to herself. Nothing to worry about!”

“Right. Good day to you,” he nodded his white-haired head, lifted the pipe he’d been smoking back to his lips, and returned to sweeping, not sparing her another glance.

Olivia resumed walking and chatting aloud, “I’ll bring it up next time we’re having a friendly meeting. I do want to study bloodlines, and it makes a perfect segue into asking for more access to the closed libraries.” Olivia sighed and pressed her lips together, realizing she was getting carried away with her self-talk. She’d been doing it more and more ever since Bronwyn left, ever since Alyss had been killed, and ever since she’d stopped spending time with Adaida. Sadness loomed darkly behind her eyes as she continued following the messenger’s directions to the ap’Yensha estate.

She’d not heard of Rellia ap’Yensha, which, she supposed, was a good thing. The only nobles she’d come to know anything about all seemed quite villainous. Lord ap’Gravin was the prime example, and she still had half a mind to pay him a visit. Morgan had insisted that he was handling the matter, and she had plenty on her plate, or at least it had seemed that way when they’d parted ways. Was he back yet? Surely there must be some news by now.

A surge of guilt blossomed in her stomach as she thought about the colony, the council, and poor, pregnant Issa, all alone, waiting for Morgan; shouldn’t she have been helping somehow? Wasn’t it selfish of her to hide out in an inn for weeks on end? “And now another wrinkle,” she sighed, stepping up to the guardhouse outside the ap’Yensha estate.

“May I help you, Miss?” the liveried young Ardeni asked.

“I’m Olivia Bennet. Here to meet Valla ap’Yensha and a fellow named Victor.”

“Right, right. I have a note right here. Please walk to the estate.” He gestured to the left of his little guard station, up a lovely path lined with flowering shrubs and the occasional, well-trimmed fruit tree. “Just follow this cobbled path, and someone will be waiting for you.”

“Thank you.” Olivia lifted her robes slightly in a curtsy, something she’d picked up from Adaida and Shani back when they’d been closer. “Oh, God. You act like you’ve been estranged for years; it’s only been a month or so!” Shaking her head at herself again, she walked up the path, oblivious to the guard’s slack-jawed expression. She hardly noted the beautiful, blooming flowers, the scents hanging in the air, and the nearly perfect spring weather. Her mind had, once again, found something darker to focus upon.

The guards at the front door ignored her, but a young woman in a plain gray dress and a white apron guided her through a few nicely appointed rooms and hallways until they came to a set of glass-paneled French-style doors. “The lady and her guest are within,” the soft-spoken young woman said, wringing her pale blue hands and hurrying away.

“Oh,” Olivia said, walking up to the doors. “I’ll just let myself in, then, I suppose.” She turned the handle, but before she pulled on the door, she saw the man she was supposed to meet through the glass. It had to be him. At first, she thought he was sitting in a child’s seat, so thoroughly did his frame dwarf it. That illusion was shattered, though, when she saw the fully grown Ardeni woman sitting beside him, her body easily encompassed in an identical chair. Victor, for this must be he, was an enormous man.

Still, Olivia didn’t pull the door open. She stared at him, some strange sense of déjà vu or recognition puzzling her mind. He was clearly human, but unlike any human she’d ever seen. Even if she compared him to Morgan, Olivia didn’t think she’d ever seen anyone pull the gravity out of a room like Victor was doing. She couldn’t stop looking at him, couldn’t stop trying to figure him out.

His size was the first thing that caught her attention, but it was hardly the only thing. He had thick black hair, cut short like you might imagine a military man would do. His eyes gleamed from under his dark heavy brows like amber, honey-filled wells. The bones of his cheeks and jawline were sharp as though he was chiseled from granite, and everything about him simply screamed power, vibrant, rich, and ready to spring forth. Olivia had half a mind to activate some of her defensive spells or to take on an Elemental Form. She settled on pouring a bit of Energy into the shielding runes she’d tattooed onto her body. Finally, exerting her not-insignificant will, she forced herself to pull open the door and step through.

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Victor heard the door latch jiggle, but Valla was in the middle of a sentence, so he didn’t look up right away, “. . . and, yes, I think it makes perfect sense that you’re wary about the contracts. I feel Lam’s proposal of a relatively benign one is a good compromise, though, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Victor sighed and turned to the door. The glass reflected the sun from the open balcony doors; they were in one of Rellia’s seldom-used sitting rooms, and it was a nice place for their little interlude. They had a pleasant view of a blooming orchard outside the wide-open double doors. That said, the glare made it hard to see through the interior door, though he thought he saw a figure standing there. “Is that her?” he asked softly.

“Perhaps it’s the maid. You frightened her, you know . . .” Valla stopped speaking abruptly as the door opened, and a woman stepped through. Victor felt a lot of strange, conflicting emotions when he laid eyes on Olivia Bennet. First of all, he was stunned by her beauty. She was tall and thin, with long black hair gleaming like spun onyx in the sunlight. She had pale, almost porcelain skin, and fiery, pale-blue eyes met his from beneath her dark brows. Those crystal-clear irises literally looked like they had flames dancing behind them.

Victor caught himself admiring her attire—multi-layered robes that hugged her figure yet created a flowing silhouette, intricate jewelry, shiny, clearly magical boots, and, on her head, a black crown that exuded a power of its own. Victor saw that crown and couldn’t help a little nagging tug of jealousy at the center of his being.

If you took away Olivia’s exotic features and fantastic clothing, what really stunned Victor into an awkward silence was that she looked very much like photos he’d seen of his mother. He stared at her for a long while, dimly aware of Valla standing to shake Olivia’s hand. He heard Olivia say something to him, but all he could do was mentally erase the obvious racial enhancements Olivia had gone through and try to compare her to his mom; everything else was just background noise.

“. . . all right?” Olivia asked, and Victor shook his head, cleared his throat, and stood up, towering over the two women.

“Sorry,” he grunted, then held out a hand, “Good to meet you. I’m Victor.”

“Good grief!” she said, looking him up and down. “Were you a football star back home?”

“Ah! Right! So, they told you I’m from Earth, huh?” He gestured to the seat across from his and added, “Sit, please. They brought us some tea and little cookies. They’re not bad.”

Olivia looked at the tray on the table between all the chairs and daintily bent to pick up one of the cookies. “I do love a sweet.” Then she sat down. Victor and Valla followed suit.

“So, yeah, I’m from Earth, but if my suspicions are right, my Earth is a little different from yours.”

“Go on. How’d you get here? Have you heard about us? The arkship? *Pilgrim-9* was our designation. I’m sure you studied our mission, about when we left orbit, yes?”

“Nah, that’s the thing—when I left Earth, there weren’t any arkships. I think they might have been conceived, started even, but I was a kid; I was worried about community college and my girlfriend. I hardly ever watched the news. What year was it when you left?”

“Well, we left orbit in 2064. Add a couple of hundred years to that, though, if you’re wondering what year I think it is on Earth now . . .”

“*Pinché* fuck!” Victor sighed, sitting back and rubbing his hands through his short, stiff hair.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Well, when I got summoned here, it was 2021. And, no, I haven’t been kicking around here for a couple hundred years. I’ve been on Fanwath for less than two.”

“How . . .” Olivia frowned, and Victor saw the flames dancing in her eyes start to move a little faster, and then she looked at him more directly and asked, “Why did you want to meet with me, specifically? Was it just my proximity, or was there something more?”

Valla shifted, and Victor glanced at her. Her face was impassive, but he wondered what she was thinking. Was he making a mistake laying all this out for Olivia? He didn't know her at all, other than that she might be related to him. She certainly didn't seem like a normal human, spacefaring or not. Still, Victor wasn't one to beat around the bush, and he wanted to get on with his life. “They didn't tell you anything, huh?”

“No. Lady ap'Yensha's messenger said another human, not from our settlement, was in Persi Gables and wanted to meet with me.”

“Well, I got summoned to this world by a real asshole wizard and the noble he was working for. A guy named ap'Gravin.”

“Ap'Gravin!” This time Victor was sure of it; Olivia's eyes began to blaze with blue fire, and, more than that, her shoulders, head, and crown came to life with flickering white-blue flames. “The professor or his father?”

“Well, both were involved. You see, in order to summon me, he needed something from someone related to me, someone attending Fainhallow.”

Olivia surprisingly cooled noticeably at Victor's words, her flames faded away, and her hands, previously clenching the arms of her chair in a death grip, relaxed. “In that case, it's high time I paid the fool a visit. Are you familiar with First Landing? The human settlement in the western frontier of the Empire?”

“No.” Victor looked at Valla, and she, too, shook her head in the negative.

“Well, not to bury the lead, I mean about us being related, but Lord ap'Gravin tried to enslave most of the humans from First Landing, our settlement, a few months back. We fought free, and our, well, champion, for lack of a better word, Morgan Hall, has gone to Tharcray to attempt to gain legitimacy for us in the eyes of the Empire. The goal is to gain some protection from further actions like ap'Gravin's. But, Victor! Tell me! How are we related? I swear I see something . . . a hint of familiarity in your eyes, maybe?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. When were you born? Who are your parents?”

“I was born in 2036; my parents were Cindy and Thomas Bennet.”

“Thomas! Holy shit!” Victor looked at Valla, met her wide eyes, and said, “My cousin. My mom's nephew.” He sighed and sat back, many thoughts and feelings crashing through his mind. It felt good to have an answer, to know for sure what had happened. It also felt terrible to think that everyone he'd known back on Earth was dead—dead for hundreds of years. “Why the fuck?” he sighed. “*Abuela*.”

“I'm, uh, it's unsettling, isn't it? To think no one you know is alive back home.” Olivia frowned and reached out a hand, gently resting it on Victor's knee. “I know that feeling, Victor. Often, I think about my parents, friends, and colleagues back on Earth rather than sleeping, pushing

away the final thought that they're all dead until the last possible second. Sometimes it's with tears soaking my pillow that I find rest."

"Why'd that fucker summon me from the past? Why not one of your relatives who's alive?" Victor groaned, rubbed his head again, and while Olivia looked at Valla, perhaps wondering what to say, Victor shook his head and said, "I'll never know. The wizard who cast the spell is dead. Ap'Gravin's just the money behind the operation. Still, if he's fucking with the humans, maybe we should kill him before we march." That got a reaction from Valla; she opened her mouth to say something, but Olivia beat her to it.

"You're . . . marching somewhere?" Olivia lifted one eyebrow, then said, "Maybe we should tell each other what we've been up to in this new world, hmm?"