

"I don't get how an Energy contract is going to help here," Victor said, looking at the document in Borrius's hands. "If I die, how is a bargain I struck going to keep my 'allies and followers,' as he put it, from seeking revenge?"

"Ah, well, it's quite a complicated contract. As you complete it, you'll be required to list three individuals who will suffer an Energy-fueled backlash of sorts should punitive action be taken against First Landing as a result of your demise. Before the contract is complete, their signatory party will have to approve the names."

"Nah, that's bullshit. I'm not putting others at risk. Go back to them and work something else out." When Borrius frowned, Victor heard his words and tone echoing in his head and tried to soften them. "I know it's not your fault, and I appreciate you helping with this. Can you please try to negotiate something else? I'm afraid I don't have the tact."

Borrius nodded, his frown smoothing over. "Of course." He turned and approached the group of First Landing representatives—members of parliament and their aides—about twenty paces away. They were standing atop the southern ramparts of First Landing's outer walls. Now that the sun was well up, Victor had to admit the walls were pretty spectacular. Much about the settlement was impressive. After the town hall, they'd taken a leisurely walk with Alec and Issa as guides. Despite knowing that Darren Whitehorse and his "Progress and Dominion" party were waiting for them, Issa insisted that they see some of the infrastructure the colony had been hard at work implementing.

The roads were the first thing Victor noticed—they were straight, flat, and orderly, laid out in a pattern that made him realize just how different the cities of Fanwath were from those he'd known on Earth, an admittedly small sample. In Persi Gables, for instance, the streets were narrow, winding, and very difficult to navigate if you weren't a native. In First Landing, once Victor had learned that the tall, metallic tower was on the southern side of town, he never had any trouble figuring out where he was. It also helped that the center of town was on higher ground, with streets leading away from it like spokes on a wheel. Avenues circled "Bronwyn's Hill," every one of them crossing the two central boulevards. No matter where a person was, they could walk along one of those gently curving roads, and eventually, they'd come to Broadway or Main.

Victor wasn't impressed with the creativity in their street names, but he couldn't argue with the practicality of the layout. As they'd walked, Issa pointed out the streetlights powered by Energy, which wasn't a big deal to Victor, but when she pointed to weird copper posts on every corner and said they were "communication hubs," allowing nearby homes and businesses to connect to a telephone system, Victor had to give props to the artisan-engineers who'd come from Earth.

The other standout was the cars. Victor had seen vehicles powered by Energy in other cities, especially Coloss, but the humans had gone a long way to recapturing the look of modern automobiles from Earth. They had metallic bodies and glass windshields and were painted in bright colors. More than that, they were aerodynamic, had some kind of rubbery material for tires, and were equipped with brake lights and turn signals. Nothing like them existed in the other cities of Fanwath.

Standing atop the gigantic, white-washed outer wall, Victor could look back toward the town, across a large expanse of mostly empty land where residences were being constructed, to the older, earthen wall that surrounded the central built-up part of First Landing. Jutting above it, on the gently sloping ground, was the gleaming brass tower that Issa said was her home. It was tall

and imposing, considering it was made of metal, and it made for a good landmark. Issa had explained that the System had awarded it to Morgan Hall for completing some kind of dungeon.

“What are you thinking?” Valla asked, turning toward him and leaning an elbow on the chalky, white crenelation. “Seems you’re avoiding looking out at the field. Are you getting nervous?”

Victor scoffed, shook his head, and then smiled at her. “You’re joking, right?” He turned to the field beyond the high wall and looked at the twenty shiny steel tanks. There was no mistaking that they were tanks. They had treads, not wheels, no windows, and they all sported a turret with various types of protruding tubes—clearly weapons.

“They’re large and made of thick, enchanted metal. Are you sure you can damage them? What if you injure Lifedrinker?”

“If I were a normal person, or, well, even a low-level cultivator, I’d be worried. I’d say they have to weigh ten or twenty tons each, and I bet the Energy weapons these guys have cooked up are impressive. They figure they can blast some airships out of the sky and steamroll some little soldiers, but they’ve never seen a titan. Anyway, don’t worry about Lifedrinker. I have another axe I’ve been holding onto, one I got from Karl the Crimson while you were sleeping the days away back at Sea Keep.”

“Oh? You never showed me.”

“We got kind of busy after you woke up.” Victor winked at her, and Valla laughed, her cheeks flushing just a little as she squinted at him in the bright sunlight.

She nodded toward the rampart behind him. “Here comes Borrius.”

Victor turned and smiled at the dour-faced old commander. “What’s the verdict?”

“I have managed to strike new terms with them. They ask that, in lieu of you signing the contract, Valla does. She must agree that the Free Marches will not hold them responsible for your demise, else she will suffer Energy depletion.”

“Not a chance . . .”

“I’ll do it. When does it expire?”

“In two hours’ time. They think that will be plenty for the demonstration.”

Victor frowned at Valla and shook his head. “I don’t want you getting tied up in this BS.”

“It’s nothing, Victor. We need the quick supply of Energy beads if we want to help Edeya soon. If you were to lose, I wouldn’t blame them anyway. You’ve agreed to this with open eyes. It bothers me a bit that they don’t trust our honor, but I’ll sign the stupid document.”

Victor stared at her for a long moment, then turned to Borrius. “You’re sure nothing sneaky is in the language?”

“Nothing at all, and that Darren Whitehorse fellow will be signing my contract, the language of which explicitly states that he is not being duplicitous.” He paused, shook his head, then added,

"I suppose I should state that they insist on a single line in the contract that gives me some doubt."

"Yeah?" Victor raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. The terms of the contest are that they can bring to bear 'all defense machinery on the field, visible or otherwise."

"Huh?" Victor looked out at the twenty shiny tanks, squinting as he scanned the field for anything else. "Something invisible?" A thought occurred to him, and he summoned his little magical spyglass from his ring. Scanning through it at the tanks, he saw they had no halo at all. Either the magic of the spyglass thought he was right, and they wouldn't be a problem, or it didn't work on non-living machines. He figured it was the latter.

"Or hidden inside the machines?" Valla speculated.

Borrius nodded and shrugged. "Or under the ground. Does it concern you?"

"Nah." Victor put his spyglass away.

"I thought not. Shall we?" He gestured toward the group of First Landers.

"All right." Victor wasn't happy about Valla signing the contract, but if it only lasted two hours and all she had to do was not seek retribution, he couldn't see how it was a problem for her. The real issue was that Darren and his people thought they needed it. Why were they so confident that Victor was going to die? Were they simply underestimating him, or was he the one doing the underestimating? He'd seen plenty of videos featuring tanks back on Earth. He'd seen them drive through buildings, smash cars and trucks like they were made of cardboard, and, of course, shoot their cannons, destroying all manner of things. Was he being stupid? Could he take on twenty tanks, even as a titan? Victor chuckled at the lack of concern he still felt. Maybe his Quinametzin pride was making him stupid, but he wasn't worried.

"Amused?" Whitehorse asked as they approached.

"Yeah, I guess so." Victor shrugged.

"Victor, you don't have to do this," Issa said, stepping around Whitehorse to get closer.

"Like I said earlier, I'm looking forward to it. I haven't had any exercise in a couple of days." Victor heard muttering and incredulity from the crowd behind them. He'd met a lot of the members of parliament and some other government officials, but if he were being honest, Victor didn't feel like memorizing all of their names. Maybe if he came back after helping Edeya and stuck around for a while, he'd make more of an effort, but right now, they were just a bunch of politicians to him. Issa and Alec were friendly faces, Whitehorse was kind of a prick, and that was about the extent of his desire to get to know these people.

"Excellent." Whitehorse smiled, and to Victor, he looked like a cat getting his ears rubbed. Why was the guy so damn happy? "Let's sign these documents, and you can use the lift there to descend to the gate." He pointed to the large freight elevator they'd built into their wall. Victor stepped back and let Borrius and Valla handle the paperwork. He leaned against the wall and stared out at the field, wondering what Whitehorse was hiding. He supposed the tanks could be

full of robots. Maybe they really didn't understand the difference between a tier three or four human and a tier six Quinametzin. Did they think they could overwhelm him with numbers? He smiled in anticipation.

"That's a very hungry grin on your face, Victor." Issa had quietly come to stand beside him.

Victor looked into her bright, golden-yellow eyes and saw concern. "Hey, relax. It'll be fine."

"I just want you to know that Darren's Engineers have been hard at work preparing for this demonstration. They've really talked it up. You can see," she gestured down the walkway atop the rampart, past the roped cordon and security guards, at the enormous crowd gathered to watch the event, "that they've been running a promotional campaign. He thinks this will catapult his party into primacy."

Victor shrugged. "Okay, well, I don't intend to make them look good. I mean, it can't have been cheap to make those things. I almost feel a little guilty."

She looked at him, tilting her neck to take in his height fully. "You're a big man, no question, but not much taller than my Morgan. He has powerful magic, and I'm sure he could destroy these machines. At least one of them . . ." She frowned and trailed off. When Victor didn't respond, she blurted, "I've seen how thick the enchanted metal armor on those things is! How can you hope to damage them with that axe?"

"This axe?" Victor pulled Lifedrinker from her harness and held her toward Issa. "I'd never abuse this beauty by making her smash up some dumb machines. No, she's too good for this sort of thing." Lifedrinker buzzed in his grip, pleased by his attention. Her heart-silver blade gleamed in the sunlight, but she was cool—not a hint of heat or smoke drifted out of her. Smiling, he slung her back over his shoulder, and her harness snatched her up, pulling her tight to his back. "Don't worry, Lady Issa."

"That's that," Darren announced, coming to stand beside Issa. He was grinning from ear to ear, displaying very nice, straight white teeth. "I appreciate your willingness to help us demonstrate the effectiveness of our machines. As I'm sure your representative, Mr. ap'Gandro, informed you, should things prove difficult and you wish to save your own life, simply run for the gate, and we'll let you in. The contest will then be over."

"Mmhmm. And you guys?" Victor looked at him, still grinning, still excited at the idea that he'd soon be breaking things.

"Us?"

"Yeah, how will you signal for me to stop? Breaking your little machines, I mean."

"Little, hmm? Well, don't you worry, Mr. Sandoval. That's not an eventuality that we're concerned with."

Victor cocked an eyebrow at him and then shrugged. "You signed the contract, yeah? I'm not paying for 'em."

“Of course, of course.” Whitehorse had the nerve to squint slightly in amusement and wink at Victor. Victor felt a little heat start to leak out of his Core into his pathways; if he hadn’t been ready before, now he really wanted to smash some shit.

“So, you want me just to go out there and stand in the middle of the field? Are you going to signal when to start?”

“Of course! We’ll fire a flare to make it clear, but the machines will also begin. Please be on your toes, sir, and remember my offer to cease hostilities should you run for the gate.” Whitehorse smiled and turned, gesturing toward the elevator, but Valla, who’d followed him over from the document signing, stood in his way.

“I’d like your assurance that you’ll stop the machines if I ask you to as well. What if Victor can’t break free?”

“Valla . . .” Victor started to protest, but Whitehorse responded immediately, effusive in his eagerness to please.

“I will happily agree to that! No one wants to see Victor lose his life today.”

Victor sighed but decided to let it drop; if it made Valla feel better, he was fine with the condition. Since he wasn’t arguing, he hopped atop the white-washed crenelation and, amid the gasps and startled exclamations of the crowd, said, “I’ll head down. Don’t start ‘til I wave.” He didn’t wait for a response; he simply stepped into the air and let himself fall nearly a hundred feet to the hard-packed gravel ground. As the wind whistled past his ears, he severed his connection to his Shape Self spell, expanding from something near seven feet tall to nearly ten.

He doubted anyone on the rampart could see the change now that he was below them and some distance away, but it was important because once he was back to normal, his Titanic Leap ability allowed him to land from the great fall without any discomfort. Even so, his impact was loud, and the ground rippled beneath his feet, a dust cloud bursting up around him. Victor had good hearing, along with all his other senses, and he could hear the gasps and exclamations from atop the wall. He smiled in his dust cloud, wondering what they thought.

As he caught himself enjoying the reaction, he felt a little guilty, a little childish. He hadn’t even hugged Valla or said goodbye, so intent had he been on catching the First Landing folk by surprise. “Ah fuck it. I’ll see her soon enough.” With that, he started forward, striding out of the slight depression he’d created and onto the field. At ground level, the tanks were bigger than they’d seemed from the ramparts. “Shit,” he muttered, looking at the twenty gleaming, colossal vehicles. They were probably ten feet high at the tops of their turrets, maybe just as wide and twice that in length. “These things are going to take a pounding.” Victor scanned through his storage ring, looking for Karl’s axe. “Don’t be upset, *chica*; I’m just going to use this other axe for a little while, just to smash some big tin cans.”

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Issa watched the young human drop from the ramparts and smiled as most of the people around her responded with alarm. She knew better; even she could survive that fall, and she’d yet to reach tier three. Undoubtedly, someone who was, if the rumors were to be believed, higher than tier five wouldn’t be overly harmed by such a drop. The fact that Valla didn’t so much as flinch was a good signal that nothing was amiss. Still, it illustrated how much the

people of First Landing had to learn. Many of them clearly thought he'd just leaped to his death. When he impacted the ground, and the sound traveled up to their lofty position like a brief rumble of thunder, that was another matter.

"Is he all right?" she asked, peering over the crenellation to the cloud of dust that obscured the man from view. "That sounded like quite an impact!"

"He's heavier than he looks." Valla smiled at her reassuringly. "He's fine." She looked over her shoulder at the startled, even panicked, faces of the governmental delegation. "He's fine, everyone. Don't worry."

"He walks!" someone cried from the audience further down the wall where the large crowd of onlookers had gathered. A smattering of applause broke out, and even a few cheers as Victor strode out of the dust cloud, walking as though out for a stroll into the middle of the field of short, blue-green grass. He looked tiny compared to the giant metal automatons Darren's people had been toiling so hard to build over the last months.

"He'll eat that up," Valla said, sighing as she leaned over the crenelation. Her words said one thing, but her smile said another.

"You truly love him." Issa's face flushed, and she quickly added, "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"It's anyone's business who wants to know. I love Victor Sandoval with all my heart."

"Yet you're not worried?"

"He's worried me before. I was worried when he faced off against a thousand undead reavers. I was worried when he chased a mad Death Caster up the slopes of an active volcano. This doesn't worry me much."

"Well," Darren said, speaking up from Valla's other side, "I'm very sorry for any harm that may come to him. You heard me warn him. Please be ready to throw in the towel for him." Issa hadn't heard the expression before, but she could figure out what he meant. She was sure Valla did as well. He cleared his throat, and Issa could tell he was getting ready to signal the start of the demonstration, but then he coughed and started to laugh. "God! Look at the foolish man. That axe is larger than he is! Can he even swing it?"

Issa jerked her eyes back to the field and Victor. He still stood in the center of the field, but a few things had changed. He wore a black and red armored vest that shimmered as the bright sunlight reflected off its scales. Atop his head was a thick dark metal helmet that covered the top of his face, shielding his eyes behind angry, angular slits. He also now held the handle of a weapon in his hands. An impossibly massive, black metal axe rested on the ground behind his shoulder, on which he held its handle. The handle had to be fourteen or fifteen feet long, and at its end, half buried in the grass, was a chisel-like axe head that probably weighed a thousand pounds.

"Oh," Valla said, a slow smile spreading her beautiful lips, "he can swing it."