

## Victor BK8: Ch51

### Book 8: Chapter 51: Going Home

Victor looked around his cultivation chamber, deep beneath Dar's home, and slowly nodded to himself. This would be a good place for Lifedrinker to consume the treasure Lira had given him in the Iron Prison. He'd thought about keeping her in his vault, keeping her locked safely away and concealed around his neck, but when he mentioned the idea to Dar, his master had vehemently discouraged the plan. He said that such an evolution would require the ebb and flow of Energy and that Lifedrinker's spirit might feel stifled in such an environment. He feared such containment might lessen the potential of her evolution.

So, Victor had agreed to leave her behind to slowly consume the enormously dense "soul ore." Dar had vowed to keep the axe safe and sound, so Victor wasn't worried about her. He knew he'd feel a little naked without her, though, and that was probably why he hesitated to set her on the ground. "You know why I'm leaving you, yeah, chica?"

*I must feast! I must grow more powerful to better fight at your side! I do not fear the solitude.*

"Heh, okay, okay." Victor pressed the side of her blade against his forehead and basked in the warmth of trust and love, then he knelt and gently laid her on the stone ground. A moment later, he summoned the absurdly heavy lump of ore from his storage container, and it slipped through his fingers to the ground with a resounding clunk. Victor's eyes widened as he saw hairline cracks in the solid stone spreading out from the edges of the ore. "Okay, beautiful. I'm gonna put your blade on this stone. Take your time and do it right."

Victor had no idea what he was talking about. Was it possible for Lifedrinker to not take her time? Could she do something wrong when it came to incorporating this new, powerful metal? He didn't know, but she didn't correct him. She was silent and only emanated eagerness as he picked her up and gently propped her at an angle with her metallic axe head resting atop the ingot. Victor sat back and watched for a moment, and, at first, he didn't think anything was happening. Then he saw it.

Where her metal touched the ore, a hazy gray cloud was forming, and, as he peered more closely, Victor could see tiny sparks of electricity, almost like static, dancing in the hazy barrier between the two metals. Victor put his hand over the glow lamp he'd brought with him. As the room plunged into darkness, he saw the real light show. Lifedrinker was aglow—not just her metallic head, but her haft, as well. More than that, she danced with tiny sparks, and the space between her and the ore was like a miniature hurricane as the weird reaction continued to build.

Victor stood, looked at his wonderful axe, his steadfast companion, one more time, and nodded. "Okay, then. See you soon." Then he left, rapidly climbing through the tunnels to Dar's home. He was late; he and Valla had been heading to the coach when Victor had remembered the ore and decided he should get Lifedrinker started on it.

Feeling rushed, knowing Cora and Efanie were probably waiting for them, he jogged through the house, then outside to where Mr. Qwor had pulled the coach. It hovered above the ground, door open, but it wasn't alone; Trin's coach was there, and, to Victor's surprise, Edeya burst through the front door and hurried past him, aiming for the little submarine-shaped vehicle without sparing him a glance.

"Hey," he called. Edeya froze and turned to look at him, and Victor was sure it was surprise he saw in her eyes as she took him in.

"Oh, Victor! Sorry, we're in a rush!"

"Where to?"

"Um, to pick up a friend of Trin's. An avian woman—" She frowned and shook her head, then, in a jumble of hurried words, tried to explain, "We think Darren's waking up a bloodline. He's, um, growing a, uh..." She threw up her hands and blurted, "He's growing a beak, Victor!"

"Oh? Shit..." Victor wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Should I stay? Should we postpone our trip?"

"No! No, you go. We can handle this. Lam's with him now, in case he wakes, but Trin has an avian friend who should be able to explain things to him better."

"All right. Keep me posted. I'll check the Farscribe book when we get to Fanwath."

"Have a good trip!" Edeya waved and then jumped into the vehicle, which, with a weird burbling, buzzing sound, drifted away toward the city.

Shaking his head, Victor climbed into Mr. Qwor's coach. He pulled the door closed with a thud, then collapsed into the cushioned seat beside Valla. He tapped on the panel with his knuckles, and Qwor launched them into the air. "Sorry for the delay," he sighed, stretching his legs out toward the opposite seat.

Valla, shaking her head but wearing a wry smile, took ahold of his hand. "You got your axe situated?"

"Yep. She's all set." Victor leaned back and sighed. "You should have come with me. That ore is so wild—I think you would have enjoyed seeing it before Lifedrinker eats it. I couldn't hold it up with only one hand. It fell to the cave floor and cracked it!"

"I hope it's not too much for your lady axe to handle." Her tone was light, but Victor still felt a twinge of worry. He hoped so, too.

In an attempt to not dwell on his anxiety for Lifedrinker, he changed the subject, "Did you hear about Darren?"

“Yes. I suppose it’s a lucky thing that the winged people of my origin world didn’t have beaks—seems such a thing would make kissing difficult.”

Victor frowned. “Yeah, I hadn’t thought about that. I guess the universe is big and full of variety, huh?” He still wasn’t sure about where he stood with Valla, but he took the fact that she was holding his hand as a good sign. Almost tentatively, he leaned toward her, but she was quick to take the hint and closed in for a kiss. He smiled as they parted. “I’m damn glad you don’t have a beak.”

Less than an hour later, they exited the coach and approached the row of token vendors at the World Hall; sure enough, Efanie and Cora were standing there waiting. Efanie had shed her Volpuré livery, and both she and Cora were dressed similarly in rather formal-looking layered skirts and blouses. They looked nice, and Valla said so as they approached, taking a minute to lean forward and fuss with the frilly fabric around Cora’s collar. Victor watched, and he could see that Cora was starstruck by Valla, staring into her eyes with the first expression he’d seen on her that wasn’t tinted by sadness or anger.

When Victor had come to Sojourn, the System had charged him a toll of nearly a hundred thousand beads. With that in mind, he was a little surprised when the attendant, after looking up Fanwath on her elegant, crystalline tablet, quoted him a price of only two hundred thousand beads for four “transport tokens.” He didn’t complain, but it puzzled him enough to bring it up with Valla as they walked toward their designated transport circle.

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“Perhaps it has something to do with the level of Sojourn’s System Stone.”

“Undoubtedly,” Efanie chimed in. “I paid a hefty fee when I left my world, which has a much less advanced stone.”

As they worked their way through the crowd, through the enormous chamber with its many support pillars, arched ceilings, and decorative mosaics, Victor saw that Cora’s eyes were wide with wonder as she looked around. It puzzled him slightly, considering she’d been the only child of a very wealthy, powerful man, and, before he could think better of the question, he nudged her shoulder.

“Hey, have you been away from Sojourn before? Were you born here?”

“I’ve never been to the World Hall, milord. I went with my father to visit my homeworld once when I was nine, but he used a portal created by a great magus from Lord Volpuré’s household.” She almost stopped speaking, but then she seemed to remember the rest of Victor’s question and added, “I was born on Avendus, but my father brought me to Sojourn when I was three—a-after my mother died. I have no memory of that trip.”

“Ah.” Victor cleared his throat. “I see.” The more he learned about the girl, the more he realized his own sob stories were certainly less than unique. Inwardly cringing, afraid he was about to pull open a fresh wound, he asked, “And you have no other family on, uh—what was it? Avendus?”

“That’s right, milord. When we visited, my father was settling old business. I spent the time in a hotel room.” She spoke flatly, with little expression, and Victor decided to let it rest. He caught Valla looking sideways at him as if judging his reaction, and he offered her a tiny shrug, ensuring Cora couldn’t see the gesture. Valla squeezed his hand, and they continued in silence.

Soon enough, they came to their transport circle—a smaller one in an alcove set off from the main hall, and when they’d all moved to stand at its center, Victor nodded to Efanie and Cora. “You two first. I’ll follow as soon as I see you’re safely away.”

“As you say, Victor.” Efanie placed one of the travel tokens in Cora’s upturned palm. “Channel a little Energy into this.” Cora nodded, and then, with a flicker of light and a tinge of ozone-scented air, she was gone. A bare second later, Efanie disappeared. Victor looked at Valla, locked eyes with her, and they both channeled Energy into their tokens. As before, the world vanished in a flash of light, and then, almost instantly, Victor found himself standing in the dimly lit, quiet portal room beneath the Colony Stone of the Free Marches.

The space, while large enough to hold dozens of people comfortably, was tiny in comparison to the World Hall, which added to some of the disorientation common with teleportation. Cora was kneeling in her skirts, Efanie leaning over her, gently stroking her thick, curly hair. Before Victor could see if she was all right, stomping feet alerted him, and he spun to see several guards in Rellia’s household livery approaching from the stairwell. They had weapons drawn, but when they caught sight of Victor, they relaxed, and expressions of excitement replaced their alarm.

“Lord Victor!” one of the guards—a former member of the Ninth, if Victor wasn’t mistaken—shouted. His eyes scanned the rest of their party and widened noticeably when he saw Valla. “Lady Valla! Welcome!” He turned to one of his comrades. “Run! Alert the Seneschal! Lady Rellia will want to know about—”

“Easy, man!” Victor laughed. “We’ll be here a while, no need to have a meltdown.” Despite his words, one of the guards had already sprinted for the stairs, and Victor could hear her feet pounding on the steps as she ascended. He chuckled, then turned to Cora. She was already up on her feet, and though she was a little pale, she seemed all right. He looked at Valla. “Ready to see your mom?”

She folded her hands before her, fidgeting a little, and gave him a surprisingly easy smile. “I actually did miss her. Yes, it’ll be nice to visit.”

Victor inhaled deeply, feeling some nebulous satisfaction. He turned to Efanie. “Let’s head up. You two all right?”

“Fine, um, Lord Victor.” Victor groaned inwardly but didn’t bother trying to correct her; they were about to be surrounded by guards and attendants who would refuse to be casual with him. He led the way up the stairs, and when he came

out on the platform surrounding the City Stone, his eyes widened as he took in the changes to the budding capital of the Free Marches.

In the time they'd been away, the walls that used to surround the Colony Stone had been much reduced, and Rellia's keep moved back nearly half a mile. Huge, cobbled boulevards led away from the central hill—one toward the sea, one in the opposite direction toward Rellia's ever-expanding fortress, and then another that ran north-south. All along those wide avenues were buildings, almost exclusively built from pale stone. It certainly didn't look like a frontier town any longer.

Massive city walls loomed in the distance, though the area inside them was less than crowded, and Victor could see plenty of places for expansion. Aside from Rellia's keep and the enormous observatory jutting up from the shore, only a few buildings were taller than two stories. More than the changes in architecture, the increase in population drove home to Victor how much the town was growing. He judged it was still early morning based on the sun, but he saw throngs of people milling about outside stores, at restaurants and taverns, and bustling to and fro.

"Lovely," Efanie said, and Victor turned to see her staring toward the Silver Sea. The waters were tinted orange and yellow by the rising sun but shimmered to reflect their namesake as the waves rolled toward shore.

"Yeah, it's pretty country."

"Lord, Lady, will you follow me to the keep? I'm sure Lady Rellia is eager to greet you."

Victor looked to the guard who'd followed them up and nodded. "Yeah, we'll say hello." Victor had already written a note in his Farscribe book tied to Gorro ap'Dommic, his governor, so he doubted Rellia was really going to be surprised to see him and Valla. As he thought about it, he looked at Valla. "Didn't you message Rellia?"

She shook her head. "I wanted to surprise her." She took his hand and pulled him down the steps toward the roadway leading east to the keep and its tall, pale walls. The guard hurried to lead the way. He was a Shadeni and decently well-built, but he had to veritably scurry to keep ahead of Valla's and Victor's long strides. Recognizing that, Victor looked over his shoulder to see Efanie and Cora falling behind, so he slowed a little, tugging Valla's hand.

She realized what he was doing and laughed. "I really am eager, aren't I?" She turned back to the keep, and Victor followed her gaze. The gates were the same as before—huge and metal, prepared long before the Free Marches were conquered and transported from Gelica. They stood open, and the gap between them was already filling with soldiers forming on either side, creating an honor guard for Rellia and her "noble" visitors.

The street was lined with what seemed to be governmental buildings. Victor saw a library, a courthouse, and even a constable's office and jail. He lost track of the other sights as Rellia appeared, flanked by her more important advisors and courtiers. She walked between her row of impressively armored and armed soldiers.

She looked different—taller, more regal, and certainly more finely dressed than he remembered. She wore a high-collared purple cape and a form-fitting black gown, ribbed and tooled to accentuate her tall, lean posture. Her rapier hung at her side, and her lustrous, curly red hair was pinned back and held down by a glittering diamond-studded tiara. Despite the finery and the show of regal bearing, her face looked the same as ever. Rellia's crimson eyes glittered in the morning sun, her red-painted lips spread in an enormous smile, and she broke away from her guards and hurried toward Valla, lifting her skirts to keep from tripping.

Valla's feathers rustled as she softly fluttered her wings, boosting her forward to smash into her mother. She caught her in an embrace, lifting her off her feet and spinning around once. Victor laughed and slowed, giving them a little space, holding out his hand to signal Efanie and Cora to stop. He looked at them and said, behind one hand, "That's Valla's mom."

Cora's eyes widened. "Her mother rules these lands?"

Victor shrugged. "Kind of. Really, it's a republic of sorts, with landholders having the voting power. I, uh, have a lot of votes." As Valla and Rellia finally separated, Victor stepped forward and couldn't help but smile in response to Rellia's genuine enthusiasm for seeing him. She held out her arms, and Victor scooped her up in a hug.

"It's good to see you, Victor! Are you always this big now?"

"Nah, I can make myself smaller. This is my normal size, though." As he set her down, she took one of his hands and pulled him toward Valla. Victor resisted and said, "Let me introduce Efanie and Cora."

Rellia paused and turned to the two smaller women, one who looked like a human child and the other who looked very much like an elfin Fae. "Companions of yours?"

"Cora," Victor pointed at the girl who looked down nervously, "is my ward. Efanie is looking after her." Efanie tugged on Cora's sleeve as he spoke, and the two performed remarkably graceful curtses.

Rellia raised an eyebrow at Victor. "Welcome to the Free Marches. As Victor's ward, Cora, you're a member of his household, and, as a member of his household, anything you ever need, I will endeavor to provide."

"Thank you, Lady." Cora curtsied again. Some weird, primal part of Victor felt proud of her in that moment.

"Come," Rellia said, tugging his hand again as she reached out with the other to take Valla's. "We have much to discuss, and something tells me you're eager to see your own lands. I think you'll be pleased when you do! First, though, I must insist that you and my daughter join me for an early brunch." She turned to Cora and Efanie, "You'll both attend, of course."

As they nodded, Victor allowed himself to be led toward the keep, uncomfortably emotional by the sensations washing over him. Was this what it felt like to come "home?" Was Rellia so much like family to him? Had he forgotten his real home?

Tucson felt like a distant dream, his cousins, aunts, even his abuelita, ghostly and faint in his mind's eye. He supposed he'd given up on ever seeing them. He'd accepted that his grandmother was gone for good, at least in this lifetime, and hadn't thought about that part of his life at all.

As they stepped into the shadows of the gatehouse, he felt a similar shadow in his heart—a melancholy acceptance rearing its head, reminding him that, despite all he'd gained, he'd certainly lost plenty, too. The thought had a strange effect on him, and he turned to look over his shoulder at Cora. Her eyes were wide as she looked around at the guards and regal décor. At that moment, he vowed that she wouldn't experience any more loss, at least not until she was well and truly grown and no longer his responsibility. She was still young—hopefully, young enough to build enough joy atop her own melancholy experiences to help her avoid the kind of ephemeral despair that had chosen such an odd time to grip his heart.

#### Book 8: Chapter 52: Nothing Better

Victor rode Guapo at a sedate pace alongside the carriage Rellia had provided for Cora and Efanie. He glanced up, shading his eyes to see if he could spot Valla, but she'd flown too far off, eager to survey the landscape. She wanted to spy out the things that had changed on Victor's land, promising to stop and alert Thayla to his impending arrival before rejoining Victor at his estate. He was jealous, of course, but also understood; she'd felt stifled around Sojourn, nervous about flying with so many other vehicles and powerful beings populating those skies.

As the carriage's wheels rumbled and bounced on the cobbles, Victor, once again, found himself impressed by the fact that there were cobbles; Rellia and Borrius had made it a priority to establish "highways" between their lands and the various keeps and strongholds in the Free Marches. Such an endeavor might have taken decades on medieval Earth or even years with modern technology, but with Earth Casters and stoneworker artisans, the job had taken mere weeks—at least the initial broad, single-lane paths like the one Victor and his companions currently traversed.

They'd passed quite a few burgeoning villas and farms as they went through Rellia's holdings, but as they crossed into Victor's lands, traffic had fallen off considerably, and they'd not passed a single dwelling, signpost, or farm in hours. He wasn't too surprised. Most of the lands he'd granted early on were further south and east, on the way to the Shadeni and Naghelli holdings. He didn't even know where his "hermitage" was, trusting Rellia's assertion that this road would lead him right to it.

The carriage was open on the front and sides, with a black fabric roof that could be rolled back. Efanie had left the roof up because the sun was hot—much warmer than Sojourn's—and despite her dark brown hair, Cora had very pale skin. Victor urged Guapo closer to the vehicle, drawn by two hearty-looking roladii, and leaned close so Efanie could hear him. "I think we're getting close. Maybe another hour or two."

"Good! This carriage was a nice gesture, but it's not a smooth ride!"

"Yeah, Fanwath could use some advances in magical vehicles, that's for sure."

"Perhaps you could send one home!"

“Yeah, maybe, but if I’m not wrong, I bet Deyni and Chala will be teaching Cora to ride soon. You might as well get in on the action.”

“Oh, I can ride!” Efanie laughed. “We’ve quite a few swift beasts on my homeworld.”

Victor nodded. “Should have guessed that.” He clicked his tongue, and Guapo slowed, allowing the carriage to pull ahead. Then, he rode up to the other side so he could speak more easily to Cora.

“What do you think?”

“What about, milord?” She shaded her eyes to peer out at him.

“Fanwath!”

“I thought Lady Rellia was beautiful, and her home was quite lovely. I enjoyed the meal. However, this carriage is rather rough, and those beasts do smell a bit foul.”

“Yeah, but what about the world?” Victor waved one arm expansively, indicating the fields of blue-green grass, brilliant red and orange wildflowers, and the distant mountains under the deep blue sky.

“It’s enormous! I was awestruck when I saw the sea, but then we rode into these grasslands, and it seems they are just as vast and far more colorful! I saw a pack of brightly furred hounds racing beside us for a while. What are they called?”

“Those are boyii hounds, and they’re dangerous for a girl all alone, but they wouldn’t dare approach while I’m here.”

“Wild beasts? Is the land so untamed?”

“Yeah,” Victor chuckled, “I guess it is. That’s why there aren’t any people or houses around; these lands were uninhabited by people for a very long time. I’m glad you liked the sea—my house is supposed to have a view of it.”

“Supposed to? You haven’t seen it?”

“No! I had to hurry to Sojourn to help a friend after we conquered the invaders here. I hired a governor for my estate and gave him instructions to build my home.”

“I see.” Cora had let her gaze drift to the countryside, but she looked back at Victor, her eyes touching his for the first time since coming to Fanwath. “You help your friends often, don’t you, milord?”

“I try to, Cora, but I’m not a saint. I’m selfish in ways, too. I let my temper get the best of me, and I like to fight too much. I try to make sure I’m on the right side of



things, but sometimes, it's not always black and white. Do you know what that means? Black and white?"

"Yes, milord. My father taught me about shades of gray. He said his service to Volpuré was shaded in gray. He used the 'black and white' argument more than once to explain to me why he wouldn't leave. Why he wouldn't stop fighting."

Victor nodded as Cora looked down, and it seemed like that was a good spot to end the conversation. It felt like he'd made some progress, and he didn't want to push things. They traveled in silence for a while, though Victor pointed out some wildlife a few times—large colorful birds, another pack of boyii hounds, and a herd of wild deer-like huldii. Eventually, the road, which meandered mainly to the south, veered west and began to climb a steep slope. When they reached the crest of the hill, Victor stopped Guapo, and Efanie pulled the reins so they could take in the view.

From the ridgeline where they sat, the road wended down a grassy slope into a vast basin bordered by hills and mountains to the south and east and the Silver Sea to the west. Craning his neck, Victor saw nothing but grasslands and small copses of trees to the north for as far as his eye could see. The road curved south, though, and passed through a patchwork of small fields neatly planted with a variety of crops. Farmhouses dotted the landscape and, just at the edge of his vision, far to the south, Victor could see the walls of a small village that butted up against the slopes of a prominent hill. He wasn't sure, but he suspected the structure on that hill was his new home.

"What a beautiful place!" Efanie cried. "Isn't it wondrous, Cora? Such lands would be impossible to find on Sojourn!"

"Does it remind you of your home, Miss Efanie?" Cora's voice was hushed and, if Victor were any judge, wonderstruck.

"A bit, love, but the weather is more pleasant here, and where we had trees, I see meadows and flowers."

"There are forests here, Efanie. I'll have Nia assign someone to show you around and introduce you to the other factions nearby; I don't want you stumbling into the Naghelli lands before they know who you are."

"Naghelli?"

Victor chuckled. "I'll explain, but first, let's get moving; I want to see my home!" He nudged Guapo forward, and Efanie clicked her tongue, flicking her reins. That final leg of their journey went by quickly as Victor's interest was piqued the entire time. He watched the farmhouses go by, waved at the folks working in the fields, and, more often than not, had to stop and exchange greetings with former soldiers who recognized him. It seemed like most of the people living in that wide coastal valley were former members of the Ninth, and Victor couldn't have been happier to learn it.

"You're quite well-liked," Efanie remarked as they finally passed through the little village—a tavern, a general store, a tailor and bootmaker, and a broad market square—and approached the steep cobbled road that led up the hill where Victor

could see stone-block walls surrounding what he suspected was the courtyard of his home.

He nodded. “We fought for these lands together, so, yeah, we respect each other.” A single guard stood ready with a spear near the open gates, so Victor slid off Guapo’s back and sent the steed back to the spirit realms before he approached. He’d only made it to within twenty yards before the guard stiffened, slammed the butt of his spear into the ground, and shouted, “Lord Victor approaches!” Victor chuckled, shaking his head. He supposed it wasn’t hard for folks to recognize him; compared to the Shadeni and Ardeni, who made up the majority of the population, he was a giant.

He waved a hand in greeting. “At ease.”

“Welcome home, Lord Victor!”

“Thank you.” Victor turned and waited for Efanie to pull up in the coach, then moved around to help her down. When he held out a hand for Cora, and she took it without hesitating, he smiled with genuine pleasure. She took the steps in a single bound, and, with everyone on the ground, they started for the gate. Several groomsmen hurried past, aiming for the carriage and the roladii, and Victor called after them, “Arrange for that coach to be sent back to Lady Ap’Yensha.”

“Will do, milord!”

Victor nodded and led the way into the courtyard of his new home. It was evident that the outer wall, courtyard pavers, and house’s first-story walls were all built from the same stone—pale and smooth but slightly porous. It contrasted nicely with the dark, polished wood of the trim, doors, and second-story walls. The windows were made of tinted, crystalline glass that obscured his attempts to peek inside, and the steeply slanted roof and gables were covered in bronze-colored, metallic shingles.

The home wasn’t massive, but it was artfully built of materials that were clearly uncommon. It had a grand, central entrance, with high, ten-foot doors made of finely tooled, dark mahogany—Victor knew this from having inspected the ingredients in the “hermitage” container—and, branching out from that central structure were long wings where he knew, from studying the plans, he’d find bedrooms, a “trophy” room, more than one parlor, a dining room, a library, and even an “exercise hall.” The central structure before him would hold the entry hall, the kitchens, and a great room complete with a grand fireplace. From the outside, Victor was pleased with how it all came together.

“Welcome home, Lord Victor,” a familiar, deep, gruff voice said, and Victor looked down from his perusal of the house to see Gorro ap’Dommic, his governor. He stood on the hardwood decking that ran the length of the central building, just outside the broad double doors.

“Goro! I see you got the place cleaned up for my visit.” Victor chuckled and stepped forward, holding out a hand. Goro took it, though it was more accurate to say Victor’s hand engulfed Goro’s as he gave it a solid squeeze.

“Just so, Lord Victor! We just finished washing away the remnants of last night’s debauchery.”

They both had a chuckle, and then Victor let go of Gorro’s hand and looked around, surprised to see no one else in the courtyard to greet him—not that he really missed the attention, but he’d expected it. “Kind of quiet.”

“The kitchen staff are busy working on your welcoming feast, the grooms are seeing to your carriage, and the cleaning staff are busily finishing off their preparations for your return—airing the lord’s suite and guest rooms, dusting, bringing in the house plants and all of that fine work. I’m sorry, milord, but the house has largely been unused since we finished construction as I only require my small room, the map room and study, and a single place setting at the dining table.”

“And what about Nia and the guards?”

“She’s just on the eastern edge of town. We’ve begun construction of a guard barracks, courthouse, and jail, and I thought it wise for her to oversee the work.”

“Ah, fair enough.” Victor nodded, looking around. Then, Efanie shifted, and he remembered her and Cora. “Oh! Gorro, this young woman is Cora Loyle, the ward I wrote to you about. Efanie is her...” Victor trailed off, unsure of the proper term for Efanie and her role with Cora.

Efanie opened her mouth, but when she failed to speak immediately, Gorro cleared his throat.

“Based on what you wrote, milord, I believe the term you’re searching for is ‘governess.’ Yes, I believe that would be appropriate. We’ve prepared rooms for both of them overlooking the garden.” He smiled and sketched a short bow toward Cora and Efanie. “I believe you’ll be pleased, ladies.” He turned back to Victor. “The kitchen staff is anticipating a large party—Sir Tellen and Lady Thayla with their family. Do you have any confirmation regarding their attendance?”

“Not yet, but I’ll be surprised if at least Thayla and Deyni don’t come. We’ll know soon; Valla flew out there to ask.” Victor gestured to Efanie and Cora. “Why don’t you show them their rooms, Gorro? I’m sure they want to unwind a little before all the company arrives.”

“Yes, of course, Victor—it is still all right if I address you so?”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“Very good. Victor, I was hoping I might speak to you about the estate’s balance sheet while you’re here. Will we have time to sit down and go over the lease and tax income? We should review a list of employees and—”

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Victor waved his hand, chuckling, and clapped the older man on the shoulder, careful not to knock him over. “I’ll sit down with you, don’t worry.” He nodded to Efanie. “Go on now. I’m going to take a walk around before anyone else arrives.”

“Your rooms are—”

“Up the stairs and all the way to the end of the east wing.” During the campaign, when he’d been idly passing the time before sleep, Victor had often studied the building’s plans, imagining the finished product.

Goro nodded and waved toward the doors. “This way, ladies.”

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Several hours later, Victor sat in the gardens behind his home with Efanie, Thayla, and Valla. He’d spent time wandering around the town, reuniting with Nia and several members of his “household guard,” who were all former soldiers in the Ninth, and then Valla had arrived with Thayla, Deyni, and Chala.

They’d hugged and made small talk, catching up on all the news they had already shared via Farscribe book, but Victor enjoyed seeing their faces again and feeling Deyni’s little arms wrapped around his neck. After a while, they’d eaten a delicious dinner featuring roast game hens and a pie that reminded him of dates and cinnamon. Now they watched Deyni demonstrate how her latest pet—a feline that resembled a bobcat save for its lustrous blue fur and short white tail—could perform a variety of tricks.

Cora sat on the cobbles near Deyni and her cat, and Victor couldn’t get over the fact that Deyni was nearly the same size as the other girl despite being three years her junior. He didn’t know if Cora was just small, a late bloomer, or if Deyni was ahead of the curve. Considering the question, he realized he was thinking in human terms, and, despite her very human appearance, he had no idea what Cora’s species was.

Did she seem human-like because of a common Fae ancestry like so many of the people he’d seen on Sojourn? Whatever the case, they seemed to be getting along well, and he was pleased to imagine Cora taking up with Deyni and her older stepsister. He frowned at the thought. “Where’s Chala?”

“She’s napping.” Thayla gestured toward the house. “Last night, she didn’t sleep—she’d set a snare in the field near our village, hoping to capture a lone boyii pup that’s been coming around, raiding the feyris pens.” Thayla laughed, shaking her head. “She stayed up watching the snare in the hopes of taming the little beast and adding it to the girls’ menagerie.”

Valla chuckled and gently stroked Victor’s arm as she leaned against him, speaking almost wistfully, “Did she succeed?”

“No! He never showed his little thieving face! Now Chala’s worried he met with the wrong pack and was killed by an alpha.”

Victor sighed, too, and shifted, trying to get comfortable on the little stone bench. He’d come to the amusing realization that his home wasn’t built for a man his size; he’d had to reduce himself

drastically to enjoy the furniture and accommodate the door frames. He looked beyond the little square where the girls sat and saw the final rays of the sun on the glimmering waters of the Silver Sea. The view was even more spectacular from the windows and balcony of his suit in the house.

“God,” he said wistfully, putting an arm over Thayla’s shoulders and pulling her to his side. “It’s so nice to be here. Look at that view!”

“It’s beautiful,” Thayla agreed. “You’ve got to come and see the village, Victor! There are so many little details I want to share with you! Ancient trees, mystical little hollows, burbling springs with water so pure and clear that you’ll never want to drink anything else—I could go on and on. Everyone’s so happy to be here!”

“It is a wondrous piece of land,” Valla agreed. “I saw so many animals! Herd after herd of huldii and great flocks of ranevii. It seems the wildlife had fled the undead, and now they’ve made their way home. The forests are alive with colorful songbirds, and the fish in the streams are so thick, their scales shimmer and reflect the sun as I fly over.”

“Ancestors!” Thayla chuckled. “I’d love to see the land from the air. What a thought! I never considered how such a perspective could color things.”

Efanie cleared her throat—she’d been quiet, probably nervous to be in the company of people who were so close and affectionate. “I’m delighted that we’ll be staying here.”

Thayla’s eyes widened, and she nodded. “That’s right! This must be a very big change for you! Are you nervous?”

“Only in that I don’t know anyone. I know how to take care of myself otherwise.” She winked, and Victor laughed.

“She’s tier eight, Thayla.”

“Eight?”

“Well, I stopped pushing myself decades ago.” Efanie sounded almost defensive as she added, “I grew busy with my career as a weapons instructor and guardian for the Volpuré girls, and then—”

“I was impressed!” Thayla held up a hand to protest. “I wasn’t being critical!”

“Oh!” Efanie blushed crimson.

“Things are different on Sojourn,” Victor added. “Anyway, I think it will be nice having her around, but her priority will be Cora.”

“Of course!” Thayla smiled at Efanie. “As for not knowing anyone, you can rest easy—you know me now, and I’ll show you around the neighborhood. Have you told her about the Naghelli, Victor? I think Kethelket would be quite interested in sparring...”

As she launched into a description of the Naghelli village and the wonders of their architecture, Victor smiled and leaned back against the wrought-iron garden fence. He was pleased to have Thayla close again, even if it was just for a few days. More than that, Valla had been so affectionate that he could almost forget they were putting off a more serious discussion until after they'd spent some time relaxing on "vacation."

As the conversation drifted from topic to topic, he found his mind wandering, watching Cora pet Deyni's cat, giggling as it rumbled a fierce purr that Victor could hear from a half dozen yards away. He had a lot on his mind, or more precisely, a lot he'd buried away in his mind, but at that moment, things were good, and he was happy. Valla let go of his arm to lean closer to Efanie as she described the flowers of her homeworld and how they differed from those growing around Victor's garden.

"I'll be right back," he murmured, standing up. Valla smiled at him, and Efanie nodded, continuing her description. He stepped away from the bench and onto the patio with Cora and Deyni, pausing to squat down beside them for a moment. "Hey, Deyni, what do you think? Could you help Cora tame a pet like this?"

"Um, maybe not like Ziff, not at first, but we could find her a boyii cub! Oh!" Her magenta eyes sprang wide. "Victor! Chala almost caught one last night! Could Cora come over? We could help!"

"Not tonight, but soon, for sure. Does that sound fun, Cora?"

Busily stroking the cat's smooth fur, Cora didn't look up. "It does, milord."

"Milord?" Deyni giggled. "You can call him Victor."

"Is—" Cora looked like she wanted to ask permission, so Victor finished the thought for her.

"It's perfectly all right. I prefer it, actually, but you can call me whatever you want." He looked back at Deyni. "I was glad to see you and Chala, but I noticed Chandri's not around. Is she back at the village?"

"Oh, no." Deyni shrugged, reaching to tickle the spot above the cat's fluffy white tail with her nails; the creature's purr intensified. "She's exploring. She took a boat onto the Silver Sea."

"Really?" Victor's grin grew wider. "She wanted to do that. I'm glad she went through with it."

"She formed an exploration group with soldiers and a, um, what's it called when someone makes maps?"

"Cartographer?"

“Right!”

Victor nodded, pursing his lips in thought. “Do you girls want to see the beach? There’s supposed to be a path that leads down from the garden.”

“There is!” Deyni laughed. “I’ve seen it.”

“Can we?” Cora asked, looking around the garden and over at the other adults.

“You can. This is your home now if you want it to be, Cora. Go explore.”

“Come on!” Deyna grabbed Cora’s hand and snatched up the delicate silken leash for her cat. Its purr turned into a grumble as it stood, arched its back in a massive stretch, and followed the girls down the path. Victor, a permanent-seeming grin stuck to his face, trailed behind. He watched as their walk turned into a run, and then they were gone, slipping through a wrought-iron gate and dipping out of sight as they descended the hill toward the shore.

The only thing he could think about was how much he would have loved growing up in a place like this, with people like Thayla and her family around. He felt some heaviness lift off his heart at the thought, realizing Cora had a good chance of finding real happiness again.

When he reached the fence and leaned against it, looking down the hill to see the two diminishing figures as they hurried down the path, he turned his gaze toward the water and imagined Chandri out there on a ship, sailing toward distant shores, finding new “untamed” lands. He almost envied her, but he had his own adventures ahead, and he couldn’t find it in him to be jealous. Soon, he’d be learning how to travel, physically, through the Spirit Plane, and he’d be visiting another world with strange customs and people descended from the likes of Ranish Dar.

His purpose for travel was different than Chandri’s. He wasn’t an explorer, but that didn’t mean everything wouldn’t be new to him. “Besides,” he sighed, reaching up to touch Lifedrinker before remembering she wasn’t with him. Folding his empty, grasping fingers into a fist, he gently thumped it against the fence, “I might not be going to explore, but I’ll be going to fight. What’s better than that? Nothing.”

**Status**

**Name:**

**Victor Sandoval**

**Race:**

**Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 2**

**Class:**

**Herald of the Mountain's Wrath - Legendary**

**Level:**

**68**

**Breath Core:**

**Elder Class - Improved 3**

**Core:**

**Spirit Class - Epic 1**

**Breath Core Affinity:**

**Magma - 9**

**Breath Core Energy:**

**2200/2200**

**Energy Affinity:**

**Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1**

**Energy:**

**34045/34045**

**Strength:**

**466**

**Vitality:**

**611 (672)**

**Dexterity:**

**190**

**Agility:**

**213**

**Intelligence:**

**172**

**Will:**

**649**

**Points Available:**

**0**

**Titles & Feats:**

**Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Greater Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness, Battlefield Presence, Aura of Command, Epic Quinametzin, Mountain's Resilience, Behemoth's Regeneration, Blood Supremacy**

**Skills:**

**System Language Integration**



**Not Upgradeable**

**Spirit Core Cultivation Drill**

**Advanced**

**Breath Core Cultivation Drill**

**Advanced**

**Cooking**

**Basic**

**Animal Taming**

**Basic**

**Unarmed Combat**

**Basic**

**Knife Mastery**

**Basic**

**Spear Mastery**

**Basic**

**Bludgeon Mastery**

**Improved**

**Axe Mastery**

**Epic**

**Grappling**

**Advanced**

**Sovereign Will**

**Advanced**

**Titanic Leap**

**Improved**

**Aura Veil**

**Basic**

**Spells:**

**Iron Berserk**

**Epic**

**Inspiration of the Quinametzin**

**Epic**

**Channel Spirit**

**Improved**

**Enraging Orb**

**Basic**

**Globe of Insight**

**Improved**

**Project Spirit**

**Improved**

**Dauntless Radiance**

**Basic**

**Heroic Heart**

**Basic**

**Spirit Walk**

**Basic**

**Tether Spirit**

**Basic**

**Harsh Light of Justice**

**Improved**

**The Inevitable Huntsman**

**Improved**

**Aspect of Terror**

**Advanced**

**Imbue Spirit**

**Improved**

**Honor the Spirits**

**Improved**

**Alter Self**

**Improved**

**Energy Charge**

**Basic**

**Banner of the Champion**

**Basic**

**Wild Totem**

**Advanced**

**Impart Nightmare**

**Improved**

**Guard Ally**

**Basic**

**Volcanic Fury**

**Improved**

**Wake the Earth**

**Basic**

**Roots of the Mountain**

**Basic**

**Greater Spirit Binding**

**Advanced**