

Victor BK10: Ch1

Book 10: Chapter 1: - Onward to Bandia

1 – Onward to Bandia

When Victor stepped through the portal into the palace at Gloria, a dozen soldiers lowered polearms in his direction, though when their captain saw it was Victor, he quickly barked, “Stand at ease!”

Victor nodded to the man, tugging at the lapels on the brocaded uniform jacket he’d put on for the visit. It was part of his official attire as Gloria’s champion, and he never wore it when he was at Iron Mountain. Since the queen had returned to her palace, though, she’d been more of a stickler about formality.

This was his third visit since she’d moved back into the renovated capital, and nearly a month had passed since the previous one. Victor had an idea about why he’d been summoned; Bryn had come to him just the day before with rumors that Kynna had finally cornered Queen Madge Hajarnen of Bandia into accepting a duel—the first Victor would have to fight since defeating Trinnie Ro almost four months ago.

As he walked, nodding to the guards and royal staff he passed by, Victor couldn’t help feeling a little dread at the thought of another duel. It wasn’t that he was afraid. No, it was more the opposite; Victor didn’t want to be pitted against someone he could easily dominate. The three kingdoms between Gloria’s expanding borders and Bandia had all bent the knee to Kynna, folding after only a little pressure—a result of Victor’s hard-fought triumph over Trinnie Ro. They simply didn’t have a champion in Victor’s league.

The same could be said about Bandia, from what Victor had learned in his intelligence dossiers, but Kynna wouldn’t allow Bandia to bend the knee, not without death for their queen and banishment for the royal family. Kynna had come to believe in her accusation that Madge had been behind Thorn’s betrayal, and she wouldn’t let her rival walk away from the situation with her life. Of course, that put Victor in the position of having to fight whatever champion Madge could come up with.

When he arrived at the queen’s study, the two Queensguards stationed there saluted sharply, and one of them opened the door wide, announcing, “Your Majesty, I present His Grace, the Duke of Iron Mountain.”

Victor nodded to the woman—a familiar face, but he’d never learned her name—and stepped through the door. Kynna sat, regal as always, behind her enormous polished desk, the cherry-colored wood luminescent in the light streaming through the blue-and-white, stained-glass windows. Kynna’s crystal crown reflected that light and seemed to gather it, creating a sparkling halo effect between its tall peaks. Her lips smiled when she looked at Victor, but her blazing, fiery eyes were intense, and no humor marred the angle of her brow. “Thank you for coming right away. Please sit.”

“Your Majesty.” Victor bowed and then did as she’d asked, sitting in one of the high-backed chairs before her desk. Things had been more stilted between them lately. He figured it had started when he’d implicitly rejected her advances after his win with Trinnie Ro. It didn’t help that the queen felt some guilt about that duel—she’d received very favorable terms for not contesting Lovania’s sudden acquisition of a steel-seeker champion from the eastern continent. In her mind, she’d put Victor’s life at unnecessary risk, though he’d assured her that he was up for it.

“Let’s dispense with formalities for the moment, shall we? How are things at Iron Mountain, Victor?”

“Things are...peaceful, I guess, is the best way to put it. The Haveshi clan do most of my job for me, so I’m left to my own devices.”

Kynna smiled and nodded. “It was wise of you to employ them in the management of your duchy.”

Victor snorted, shaking his head. “You were the wise one. I just followed your lead.”

“You’re kind to mention it. So, tell me about them, these ‘devices’ of yours. What have you done with the months since you were last called to do battle?”

“I’m pretty sure you know. You hired half the personnel in my palace.”

Kynna’s smile faltered a little, maybe turning a bit more toward chagrined, and she tapped her nails on the desk as she admitted, “More than half, I’d wager.”

Victor smirked, mimicking her by drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair. “So, wouldn’t it be easier if you just asked me what you want to know?”

“Hmm.” She leaned back in her chair, the leather squeaking slightly as it compressed. “Tell me about the project you have the Artisan Trobban occupied with. My people tell me he’s taken over the western ballroom of your palace and that no one is allowed in and out.”

“You don’t know any more than that?”

“Only that you have guards watching over him around the clock, and rumor has it that he’s working with materials valuable enough to warrant new magical wards being engraved on every wall and even the ceiling.”

Victor didn’t want to lie to Kynna, but he also wanted to protect Arona’s secrets. If he were honest, he’d admit that he thought Kynna knew more than she was letting on, that there was no way Trobban’s activities could have been thoroughly hidden. That being the case, he knew honesty would be the best road forward. “I hired Trobban to create a new vessel for a friend of mine, one who had her body destroyed in a dungeon.” **ꝛꝀꝒꝀꝀ**

“Her spirit is intact?”

“Yeah. She had a phylactery.”

“Ah,” Kynna frowned, distaste clear on her face. “A Death Caster. I hope you haven’t—”

“She was a Death Caster. That’s going to change when her new vessel is complete.”

“Ah! A change of affinity? Yes, the materials your Artisan is working with must be potent, indeed. So.” Once again, her nails drummed on her desk. “Need I worry that this ‘friend’ of yours will distract you when your project is finished?”

“I’m not sure what you’re suggesting,” Victor sighed, “but no. If anything, I’ll be able to focus on my duties more easily, knowing I have an ally close at hand.”

“Very well. You’ll tell me nothing more about her?”

“What more can I tell you? She’s a friend, and she needs a new vessel. It was a project I took on before coming here, so I felt duty-bound to complete it. She’s not going to cause any trouble for you.”

“Isn’t that what you said about your other ally? The one who mysteriously appeared at Iron Mountain without using the teleportation network?”

“Kynna, what are you fishing for? I introduced you to Tes the day after her arrival. She’s been at Iron Mountain the entire time since, and she’s been nothing but helpful. She’s training me. You should be grateful to her, not suspicious.”

The queen folded her arms over her chest, causing the pearl-studded embroidery on her sleeves to shine and glitter in the sunlight that shone through her high windows. “You certainly have a way of surrounding yourself with interesting, potent women.”

Victor’s mouth partially opened, but he stopped short of asking her if she was jealous. He was beginning to think that was exactly what the issue was, and he didn’t want to upset her by calling her out, not directly—that wasn’t how things were done on Ruhn. Instead, he tried to placate her. “Kynna, your words are true, and no, I don’t know why, but I’ve always had more female friends than male. I’m lucky to have you and Bryn—strong women I can confide in—but I’m reasonably good friends with Draj and Feist and Florent. I’ve spent many long hours with Trobban as he worked on his project, learning from him as he went.”

“And Tes? She’s not steering you away from my ancestor’s plan?”

“What? No, Kynna! She’s just being a good friend, trying to help me prepare for the champions I’ll face when we start challenging the great houses. She’s smart, and her advice is objective—she doesn’t have a dog in this fight.”

“A dog in—”

Victor waved his hand, shaking his head. “Never mind. That’s a saying from my home world and one I’ve never used before—no idea where I dredged it up from. All I’m saying is that she’s not part of the political machinations on Ruhn; it’s been good for my mental state to have her to talk to. She’s simply a friend.” He shrugged, deciding not to elaborate further—better to let Kynna fill in the blanks.

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“Thank you, Victor, for being willing to share that with me. I’m your queen here on Ruhn, but I know better than to consider you a simple subject. I know, especially with a friend like Tes, who seems able to travel between worlds without using the System Stones, that you could leave me and all my problems behind. I suppose it’s simple insecurity that has me making such personal inquiries.”

“I made you a promise, and before that, I made one to your ancestor. I’m not someone who would back out of obligations like that.”

Kynna inclined her head, the light glittering in her crown dazzling Victor as it reflected on the walls of her study. “Understood. Shall we speak about why I called you here? Shall I confess yet another reason for you to hate me?”

“What? Kynna, I don’t hate you!”

She smiled wryly, the right side of her mouth higher than the left as she shook her head and clicked her tongue. “Perhaps you don’t, but you’ve reason to. I’m not proud of the negotiations I made before your duel with Trinnie Ro. Now, I have an opportunity to advance our cause, but it, once again, comes at your expense. Will you hear it?”

“Have you agreed to it yet?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Nor will I, should you refuse.”

“Then there’s nothing for me to be upset about. Stop being so hard on yourself. Kynna, you’re a queen. Your people are your main priority. I don’t think the deal you made before my last duel was unfair. Didn’t I tell you that I could win that fight?”

“It’s not a matter of whether I was right, Victor. No, the issue is with how I felt when I made those negotiations. I knew what the great houses were doing. I knew why Trinnie Ro was suddenly willing to fight for an insignificant kingdom thousands of miles from the center of the empire. Trinnie Ro was manipulated, I was manipulated, and, in turn, I manipulated you. I knew you would agree to the fight! Have you ever backed down from one?”

“Um…” Victor couldn’t remember doing so.

“So, I used you. Whether I was right to do so matters not to me. Victor, as a queen, I’ve had to study philosophy and ethics. Most rulers follow a simple dictum: what benefits the most people in their care is the correct choice. My father ruled differently. He believed that every individual was inviolable. Do you know what that means?”

Victor frowned. “That he wouldn’t use a person for something.”

“Precisely. In his mind—and he credited the Philosopher Surnass for this—no man or woman should be used for a purpose that wouldn’t align with their own free will. Most rulers would say, ‘One man to save a thousand is a good trade.’ My father believed in absolutes, however, and he believed that there was no situation in which even a single person should be used as a tool, no matter the benefit to the nation.”

“Sounds like he was a man I’d like to follow, but it also sounds like it would be hard to stick by those words when push came to shove—as a king, I mean.”

“I learned that lesson very pointedly when I chose to allow you to fight Trinnie Ro with no preparation and without trying to void her placement as Lovania’s champion. I fully expected you to die, and regardless of your assurances, I cannot allow myself to accept what I did lightly.”

“Fair enough, Kynna, but just so you know, I’m not holding a grudge about it.” Victor shrugged. He thought her father’s philosophy was admirable, but he also understood perfectly well the pressures Kynna had felt.

“Thank you, Victor. However, that brings me to our current situation.”

“Which is?”

Kynna stood from her chair and approached her tall, multi-paned windows. The panes in the center weren’t stained glass and provided a clear view of her rebuilt palace gardens. Victor stayed in his seat, watching her, and after a few moments, she began to speak, “This situation has much to do with Trinnie Ro, so it’s appropriate that we began this discussion with a reminder of what I did prior to that duel.”

“Yeah?”

She turned to face him. “Yes. You see, the reason you haven’t had to fight since that duel is because Trinnie Ro obviously outclassed the champions on the western continent—all of them. When you beat her, it sent a message to our neighbors: to stand against Gloria is to court death. So, we’ve annexed three more kingdoms, and now we surround and harass Bandia, the seat of Thorn’s cousin, Madge.”

“I’m aware.” Victor folded his arms, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“She’s tried to sue for peace already, but she knows I won’t let her remain in power, so she stops short of offering a full surrender. Now, I have her surrounded on all sides save one: the east, where her country has two hundred miles of coastline. You know Gloria was besieged by Xan and Frostmarch, but we still held out for nearly six years.”

“So you’re saying it could be a while before Bandia is suffering enough that the people force the duel?”

“Exactly. Of course, I’d try to speed things along with statecraft and other pressures—buying the loyalty of her nobles and the like—but yes, she could hold out for years, perhaps decades.”

“But

...” Victor was still waiting for her to get to the point.

“But she’s come to me with an offer. She’ll accept a duel on two conditions: I must agree to allow banishment for her and her kin, and she insists that no champion in her stable can stand against you and offers a choice.”

Victor sighed, unfolding his arms. “Are you going to make me beg to hear it?”

“She will agree to the duel if you don’t participate—I can choose another champion from my stable—or if we allow her to field two champions against you.” Maybe Victor didn’t react as she’d expected because her eyes narrowed in consternation when he simply nodded, frowning thoughtfully. “Have you nothing to say?”

“Is that allowed? I mean, will the veil walkers let me fight two champions at once?”

“Unbelievable!” Kynna clicked her tongue again and turned back to the window. “I should have guessed you wouldn’t back down, and here I am again—some part of me knew you wouldn’t. So, do I use your foolish pride to get my way, or do I refuse, regardless of your willingness?”

“Is it allowed?” Victor asked again.

“There is precedent, yes. Similar accommodations have been offered on more than one occasion to coax a lesser kingdom into accepting a challenge.”

“And, any idea the ranks of Bandia’s champions? Do I need to worry about the great houses sending more ringers down here?”

“I inquired with the Council of Oversight and received assurances from Grand Judicator Lohanse that no changes have been made to Bandia’s roster. He also indicated that if it happens after we agree to the two versus one duel, he would invalidate the agreement and force new negotiations.”

Victor smiled and stood up. “So, any idea who I’ll be facing?”

“Two iron-rankers, Victor. Should I infer that you are willing, then?”

“I’m willing. I don’t want to wait decades, Kynna. We need to keep this ball rolling.”

“Well.” Victor saw resignation in her eyes—resignation and guilt. He didn’t know how else to reassure her, and he didn’t think anything he said would matter. She was struggling with her inner demons and the expectations of a father who was no longer there to temper his past words. She’d weigh whatever Victor said against her father’s tutelage, and Victor was pretty sure his words would come up lacking. After a long moment, she nodded. “I will have my people send dossiers to Bryn.”

“Was there anything else?” Victor wasn’t trying to be rude, but he also wasn’t enjoying the queen’s stuffy, formal behavior or her constant attempts to make him see her behavior as a betrayal when he didn’t think it was.

“I’ve had reports that the great houses are increasingly suspicious of me. After we take Bandia, assuming you win, I will no longer have an excuse for expansion. Already, Gloria holds the largest economy on the western continent. By land, we’re the third largest, and with your display against Trinnie Ro, you’re ranked as the top champion. We’ve begun to look like a threat to the great

houses. Once I declare a challenge against one of the eastern kingdoms, I won't be able to disguise my intention to start a war of succession."

"Which will mean what? More assassination attempts?"

"Yes, from the great houses. They'll attempt to put us down before we can engage them in a challenge. We have eight nations to get through before challenging the closest great house, Voth. That said, I'll want you close if we win our fight against Bandia."

Victor nodded. "Makes sense. Should I move back here?"

Kynna reached up to tap her crown, and it rang like a chime as a shield of blue Energy surrounded them. "My study is warded, of course, but a little extra caution makes me feel more at ease." She stepped closer to him, and Victor noticed her fingers nervously worrying at the fabric of her wide cuffs. "I think Iron Mountain is more secure than this palace. I have too many cousins whom I don't trust living here. I will make the move, but I won't announce it. We can coordinate the first strike against the eastern continent from your palace."

"Will they accept the duel? It seems like it would be hard to put pressure on a kingdom across an ocean."

"We'll have to choose a strong kingdom—a ruler with great hubris and a likewise-minded champion. We'll seek a king or queen who will be confident enough to take the risk in order to snatch up all that we've built. You can rest assured that they'll be aided by the great houses, so the champion you face after Bandia will be deadly."

"I figured." Victor shrugged.

Kynna's eyes narrowed in consternation, but she didn't object. She gestured to the door, and though the flick of her fingers was dismissive, her tone was almost mournful as she said, "I've nothing more for you at this time, then. I can find no fault with your willingness to fight, Champion."

Victor wanted to comfort her—to try to make sense of the impossible standard she was holding herself to, but, on the other hand, he thought it was good that they had some professional distance between them. Victor liked Kynna. He liked that she seemed to care so much that she tormented herself over decisions that would have been a snap judgment for most rulers. On the other hand, her moral philosophy was so strict that she seemed to be causing herself pain by simply making good, solid decisions for her nation.

All that said, when Victor's first impulse was to reach out and comfort her further, he stopped himself because he didn't want to send the wrong message. He wasn't sure he was the right person for anyone at that time in his life, let alone a queen with a guilty conscience. So, he saluted sharply, snapping his heels together and pounding his fist against his chest. Then he bowed and turned to the door. Before he stepped through, he turned to face the queen, and, unable to ignore the pained look in her eyes, he said, "I'll be ready, Your Majesty. Honestly, I usually fight better against more than one enemy."

"I hope you're ready for the hero worship coming your way if you pull this off."

Victor stepped closer, putting himself back into the dome of her secrecy spell. "Do you mean the duel or the toppling of an empire?"

Kynna sighed, and Victor could see her fighting and losing the battle against the corners of her mouth as they turned upward in a small smile. "Both, you impossible braggart. Both."

Book 10: Chapter 2: Venting

2 – Venting

Victor flipped through the tome he'd come to think of as his "elder magic book," amazed at the progress he'd made in the last few months. Azforath's spell patterns and notes took up the first few pages, but the next nearly two hundred were filled with his notes from the texts Dar had given him and then his own patterns, pieces of patterns, and further notes on what he'd learned in his experiments and lessons with Tes. He only wrote something into his "elder magic book" when it was perfected after hundreds or thousands of iterations on loose pages that Victor was careful to destroy as he made improvements.

"Quite a lot of good work you've done. Yet..." Tes trailed off, letting Victor fill in the rest of the sentence—probably something like, "Yet, you've not put any of those spells into practice." It was a regular discussion between them. Tes was certain the veil walkers overseeing Ruhn would take note if he started working elder magic because the System would step in and issue a bunch of warnings, just as it had when he'd altered his spell for summoning his totems.

There wasn't anything wrong with doing so, not unless you worshipped the System as a deity, and that didn't appear to be prevalent on Ruhn and certainly not among the veil walkers. No, the concern was that the veil walkers who had hidden allegiances to the great houses might spy from a distance and report what they learned about Victor's talents to potential enemies. For the same reason, Victor refused to use abilities he'd yet to display in the arena when practicing. As much as it pained him, he'd even refused to try out his Flight of the Lava King.

“Yet secrecy is paramount, and you refuse to shield us from prying eyes.” Victor cocked an eyebrow at Tes, wondering if she’d argue.

“I wouldn’t be welcome on this world if they knew who I was, Victor. I can mask our conversations, but to block out the use of elder magic would be to tip my hand. Such a shielding would, in itself, be as much of a signal as if you employed your new spell patterns.”

Victor snorted, closing his book with a thud. “Just making sure you remember why these are untested because it felt an awful lot like you were judging me.”

“I’m not! I’m simply...complaining. Can a woman not vent?”

“Nah, I get it. I’m frustrated, too. I almost hope I’m forced to use one of my new spells when I fight Bandia’s champions. Then, the cat will be out of the bag, and I can start practicing all of these.”
Again, he held the book up.

“Well, that’s why I was teasing you ever so slightly. I feel as though experimenting with new spells in the middle of a fight has the potential for disaster. Better to practice now and let the cards fall where they may if you ask me.”

Victor sighed. This was what he’d been hoping to head off by reminding her why he was being cautious. They went round and round in circles like this every time the topic came up. The thing that worried him was that Tes didn’t always take that side of the argument. Often, she’d be the one pressing for caution. Victor decided to give her a taste of her medicine. “Yeah, you know what? You’re right. I’m going to go ahead and try some of these new patterns out. Might as well get used to them.”

“Victor—” Tes started but stopped, narrowing her eyes at him as he stood and walked toward the balcony.

“Yeah. Figure I’ll test out these damn wings while I’m at it.” Stepping out through the open door, he employed the strange, comfortable pathway that pulled Energy out of his Breath Core and into his feat—Flight of the Lava King. It was so natural and easy that Victor could almost believe he’d had the ability his entire life. He honestly couldn’t remember what it had been like to not be able to do it. Such was the way with abilities his titanic bloodline allowed him to absorb; it was a part of him now.

As fire erupted from between his shoulder blades, Tes groaned, and he felt her magical veil spread to encompass the balcony, hiding his fiery, magma-dripping wings from prying eyes. Victor turned, careful not to burn the furniture on the balcony, and arched an eyebrow. “What?”

“I notice you called my bluff with an ability that won’t draw the System’s ire or signal the veil walkers.”

Victor shrugged, pulling his Energy back and causing his wings to flicker and fade. The little pools of lava he’d created sizzled and popped, rapidly cooling on the cold marble tiles. He stepped back inside. “I just wish...” he trailed off, folding his arms over his chest, tired of rehashing the same frustrations over and over.

“You could be yourself? Free? Unfettered?” Tes stepped closer to him. She wore one of her breezy flowing knee-length dresses, this one layered in shades of pale pink and lavender. Like Victor, she didn’t seem bothered by cold weather. When she rested one of her slender pale hands on his wrist, an electric tingle ran through Victor, and he had to use every ounce of his prodigious will to keep his face neutral. “I play devil’s advocate, but you know what I really think, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course. You agree with Dar and pretty much any military strategist ever: keeping my capabilities obscured is better for my long-term survival.”

“Yes. Now, regarding the upcoming challenge—do you really think you’ll need one of the newer spell revisions we’ve been working on?”

“To beat a couple of iron rankers? I doubt it. I might need to play one of my other cards, though.”

Tes squeezed his wrist and gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod. “And how are you feeling about all that? You haven’t told me much about your conversation with the queen.”

Victor sighed, shaking his head. “I’m fine. I’d rather fight two versus one than beat the shit out of one poor guy.”

“That hubris is going to get you in trouble someday. Not all iron rankers, as the people in these parts call them, are created equal.”

Victor nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t mean it that way. I just don’t like fighting people weaker than myself, and it sounds like that’s going to happen.”

Mischief entered Tes's eyes. "Would you like me to bind part of your potential?"

"Huh?"

"Just as your Energy and potential are reduced when you use the Alter Self spell to make yourself smaller, there are other ways to tie up that power. You can cancel your Alter Self, but if you allowed me to bind your power away, you'd be forced to make do with what you had." She slid her fingers away from his wrist to the meat of his forearm and firmly squeezed the muscle there. "Would you enjoy that?"

Victor looked into her eyes, sky-blue in the current lighting, and narrowed his brows. "Are you being serious?"

"Not really. I'd be beside myself with grief if you died trying to prove some kind of point—trying to hold yourself to a standard no one else adheres to."

"Yeah. I guess it would be dumb to risk everything just so I could feel less guilty about winning."

Tes's eyes glittered with amusement. "I've missed your brand of vernacular, though I feel you've improved your vocabulary significantly since Coloss."

Victor shifted, pulling away from Tes's touch. He was both annoyed by her teasing tone and her flirtation; she'd been clear on more than one occasion over the last few months that she wasn't there for romance. "What was funny about what I just said?"

"Oh, just the use of 'dumb' where anyone else I know would have said, 'foolish.' There's a difference in connotation, you know?"

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"Sure. You got my point, though, right?" Without waiting for an answer, Victor turned and walked back outside, leaning on the balcony as he looked out at the colorful forest carpeting the slopes of Iron Mountain. Fall had come to the duchy, and it was beautiful—broad swaths of red, orange, and yellow intermixed with the deep shades of the evergreens.

Tes came to stand beside him. “You’re awfully broody.”

“Just frustration, Tes. And no, I can’t put it all into words. I think part of it boils down to irritation that people like the veil walkers of this world,” Victor waved a hand toward the gray sky as though the people he spoke of were floating around up there, literally watching over Ruhn, “have so much goddamn say in what I do or how I act. No matter how much I improve, how strong I get, there always seem to be more people like that, ready to exert some sort of control.”

“And you feel I’m being just as bad?”

“No!” Victor turned to glower down at her. “I mean, yes, but not in the same way. I’m frustrated that you don’t take me seriously.” There—he’d said it. He was tired of Tes treating him like a kid brother.

“Oh, Victor,” she sighed. “I take you seriously. I just care about you too much to let you think you’re ready to stand against ‘veil walkers’ and their rules or their cheating schemes. I know I’ve yet to meet any of those looking over Ruhn, but I fail to believe that none have ties with the great houses. I refuse to believe it. Where people exist, you will find corruption.”

“You always do that—say ‘steel seeker’ or ‘veil walker’ as though you’re putting quotes around the terms. What do they call people like that on your world?”

“Aradnue or Luminaris?”

“Aradnue is the name of your homeworld, right? Where dragons live?”

“Yes, and Luminaris is the world where my order, the Celestial Envoys, make their home. Well, no need to choose, I can answer for both places. On Aradnue, we speak of dragons in their various stages of power in terms of maturity. A young or juvenile dragon would be equivalent to an ‘iron ranker.’ Because we don’t accept the System on Aradnue, advancing requires knowledge and practice and the ability to harness Energy in the appropriate quantity. It would be rare for a juvenile dragon to climb into ranks that would be equivalent to that of a ‘steel seeker,’ so I would equate such with an adult dragon.”

“And veil walkers?”

“Hmm. The ranges of power among adult dragons are vast. I’m considered an adult, but on this world or Sojourn, I could easily pass for a ‘veil walker.’ I’d say it’s more a matter of learning at that point. Yes. On Aradnue, a ‘veil walker’ would be something like an adult dragon who had completed many years of journeyman studies and could be called a master of at least one art.”

“Are there any higher ranks for dragons?”

Tes snorted, shaking her head in amusement. “Of course! Just as there is a great range in power among adult dragons, the elder or ancient dragons have a power structure of their own. Among the many thousands of such dragons on Aradnue, each would know where he or she stood in relation to the others. There’s a hierarchy.”

“Sounds a lot more complicated.” Victor shrugged. “I mean, in a way, it’s simpler, but there aren’t any neat labels for people.”

“And how well have labels served the people who sought to kill you?” Tes chuckled. “No, Victor, putting great numbers of people with disparate bloodlines, histories, training, minds, and imaginations into broad categories is a fool’s errand.”

“What about the other world—Luminaris?”

“You’d feel more at home there. It’s not unlike Sojourn, though the world is larger and older and houses a hundred cities as great as the capital where your master lives.”

“Don’t call him—” Victor sighed, shaking his head. What was the use? Ranish Dar, for all intents and purposes, was his master. Wasn’t he stuck on this world, frustrated and irritated, because of Ranish Dar’s demands?

“I’m sorry. I won’t do that.” Again, Tes gripped his forearm, and Victor felt the tension melting out of his muscles. He could feel her touch resonating through his entire body, like an electric charge running through him, and though he loved it, he felt further frustration building. Even so, he didn’t pull away again, and rather than snapping at her, he cleared his throat and tried to steer the conversation back to something interesting.

“Well? What do they call iron rankers there?”

“Knowledge is revered above all else on Luminaris. You can imagine, then, that their labels revolve around learning. When someone gains their first Class on Luminaris, they become ‘initiates.’ As they advance to tier two, they become ‘adepts,’ at tier five, they earn the title of ‘scholar,’ and at level seventy-five, they become ‘sages.’ When someone on Luminaris reaches level 100 and begins to work on their custom Class, they are known as ‘architects.’ Finally, their equivalent of ‘veil walkers’ are ‘lore masters.’ Clear enough?”

“The System is there? On Luminaris, I mean?”

“Yes, though many of the worlds in that part of the universe, like Aradnue, refuse the System access.”

Since he had Tes in such a talkative mood, Victor decided to press his luck. “And? After ‘lore master,’ what is there?”

Tes grinned and squeezed his arm again, threatening to turn Victor’s bones to jelly. “You’re silly, you know that?”

“Come on, Tes! Just tell me this much, if I ever make it to steel seeker and then figure all that shit out and become a veil walker, am I going to learn that a whole other class of powerful pendejos is out there, waiting to remind me that I’m just a small fry again?”

Tes giggled and leaned against his shoulder. “I love it when you speak that way. I’ll tell you this much—there aren’t any veil walkers I know who could push around the titan sleeping under yonder mountain.”

“So...” Victor frowned, feeling a trickle of rage seeping into his pathways. “So there are stages beyond veil walker!”

“Come, Victor! You’ve met more than one.” Again, she nodded to the mountain, but then she surprised him. “And the pretty insect queen you met? What did you name her? Crystal?”

“When did you hear—”

“My first night here, silly! You should be careful when a dragon comes bearing alcohol.”

Vague memories flashed through Victor's mind—Tes, red-faced and laughing; him bemoaning the state of his heart and his frustrating, recurring desire to drop everything and find Valla; and a hundred other, frankly, embarrassing moments. "Ah, yeah. Right."

"So," Tes said, sliding her hand down his forearm so she could entwine her fingers with his. "You've done a good job avoiding my earlier question."

"About?" Victor knew but wanted to make her ask.

"Your meeting with the queen. How are things there? She's awfully suspicious of me, or at least that was the impression I got at our one and only meeting."

Victor knew what she was fishing for: he'd definitely confessed his frustrations with Kynna's advances and his rather surly response to her. He'd been worried that the queen was angry with him, and he'd made the mistake of telling all of that to Tes—damn her potent liquor! "She's still a little cool with me if that's what you mean. I'm pretty sure she thinks I've got something going with you or Bryn or even Arona."

Tes squeezed his hand. "So many options."

"My friends aren't options, Tes, they're people."

She let go of his hand and turned to face him, leaning sideways against the railing. "Oof! So serious! Should I leave you to brood?"

"Nah, I'll try to lighten up. I've got five days before the duel. I'm going to try not to think about it."

"Is that the right strategy?"

"Probably not, but I can't cast any of the new spells or refinements you and I have worked out—not without pissing off the System and getting a bunch of nosy veil walkers around here, so—"

Tes held up a hand, laughing. "Please! Let's not rehash that conversation. No, I might have another idea for you, though."

“What’s that?”

“Well, it might get me into some trouble with the Celestial Envoys, but what if we took a small trip? What if I opened a gateway to that little world where you conquered the, um, what was it? Untamed —”

“You can do that?” Victor turned and grabbed her shoulders, eliciting a laugh from her.

“I can! I have a powerful artifact on loan from my order, but we have to ensure I’m not interfering in any worldly affairs by using it. It’s just a visit, understood? We’ll not steal away any rulers of Ruhn, and you’ll return before your obligations to your queen, and when we go to Fanwath, you mustn’t get involved in any politics. In fact, we shouldn’t announce your arrival to your more... influential friends.”

“Like Rellia?”

“Precisely. Let’s go to your homestead and visit some of your loved ones and, while we’re there—”

Victor snapped his fingers. “I can try out some of the elder magic we came up with!”

Tes’s face was bright with pleasure, and Victor could see his excitement was making her happy. It reminded him that she didn’t owe him anything, and he ought to act a little more grateful to her. “I’m sorry, Tes!” he blurted. “I’m sorry I’ve been venting to you. You know you’re the only person here that I really trust, right?”

“How could I not? You’ve told me as much in a dozen different ways. Well? Shall we? You should arrange things with your people here and ensure you have a shared Farscribe with—”

“I have one with Bryn and also Kynna.”

“Go, then! Speak with Draj and Bryn; I’ll gather my things.” Tes had taken guest quarters beneath Victor’s in the same tower, and she’d made herself at home, changing out the furnishings and decorating with her own art, nicknacks, and curios. Unlike Victor, she enjoyed seeing all of her jewelry and clothing, which meant her belongings were all over her suite and not neatly stored away in a container like most of Victor’s. He only knew as much because Tes liked to cook and insisted he visit her quarters for lessons and meals several times a week.

Victor started for the door, suddenly full of purpose and excitement. “I’ll talk to Arona, too. She’ll want to stay with Trobban.”

“We’ll return the day before your duel, so we’ll only be gone for four days. I doubt anyone will even notice.”

“Yeah, but, as you said, we don’t want people to worry.”

“Wisely said, Your Grace,” she teased, following him toward the door. “Come to my quarters when you’re ready. I’ll prepare the portal diagram.”

Book 10: Chapter 3: Home Again

3 – Home Again

Victor found Bryn on the southern parade grounds outside his palace. Since Tes had arrived at Iron Mountain, he’d given his loyal guardian more free time—no need for anyone to stand watch at his tower when a dragon was nearby at all hours of the day. Of course, he hadn’t said as much to Bryn and her squire, Feist. He’d described Tes as an old friend, a formidable ally, and a tutor in the magic arts. And though Bryn had been reluctant, Victor was the duke—what could she do? When he walked onto the practice field, Bryn, in the midst of combat drills with Feist, threw her squire to the ground and jogged over to him. “Is all well?”

Victor chuckled, shaking his head as he watched Feist struggle to a sitting position and then, upon seeing Victor, flop back onto the hard, yellowing grass, no doubt capitalizing on the extra rest period. “Everything’s fine. I’m going to need you to stay on top of things for me around here for a few days, however.”

“You’re going somewhere?”

“Yes. Tes and I are leaving to conduct some training where we won’t have to worry about prying eyes.”

“You have a duel in just—”

“Five days. I know.” Victor smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. “Can you keep things running smoothly around here for me? Send me a note every day with an update? I’ll reply so you know I haven’t disappeared or died or something worse.”

“Something worse?”

Victor laughed, folding his arms as he inhaled deeply, looking further out on the field where some of his household guards were working on team drills. He didn’t know any of them very well, but he’d come to learn many of their names. “I’m just messing around.”

“What about Lord Draj?”

“He’s aware. He’ll manage the day-to-day business, as usual, but I need you to keep an eye on things. I trust you more, understand?”

Bryn straightened up, her spine stiffening as she nodded. “I understand.”

“How’s your work with the glaive going?”

“Excellently! It’s a wonderful weapon, Your Grace! I can’t begin to thank—”

Victor waved a hand. “No more of that, Bryn! You’ve earned it. Will you keep an eye on Trobban for me, too?”

She nodded. “As always.”

“All right. I’m off, then. Look for my first message tonight; I’ll let you know we’ve arrived safely.”

As he began to turn back to the palace, she asked, “Does anyone know where you’re going?”

“No.” He turned back toward her and sighed heavily. “I’d tell you, Bryn, but I feel like I’m always being watched. You know how veil walkers can be.”

“They’re bound by oaths to remain neutral in all matters—”

“Right. Yeah, I know, but let’s just call me paranoid and leave it at that. I’ll message you in a few hours.”

Bryn saluted before he could turn, so Victor felt compelled to salute her back. With a final nod, he returned to the palace and made his way back to his tower. Inside his little magical elevator, he selected the floor beneath his suite and waited as it hummed its way upward. He yearned for the day when he could openly fly with his fiery wings. He could have soared up to Tes’s balcony instead of walking through the tower and suffering through the elevator’s relatively sedate pace.

Finally, it halted, and the brass doors parted to reveal the little antechamber before Tes’s rooms. He walked to her door, slightly ajar, and pushed it open. “Tes?”

“I’m here. Come in.” Victor stepped into her chambers, chuckling softly at the disarray—dozens of dresses covered one sofa, hat boxes obscured her dining table, and other clothes were liberally slung from chairs, lamps, and end tables. Adding to the disarray, Tes had moved the furniture away from the center of her little sitting room and was setting some glowing silver objects that looked almost like dominos into a complicated pattern on the floor. “I’m preparing our gateway.”

“I was going to ask you about all that. Remember back on Zaafor when you had to find us a, um, acolyte of Boegh’s to open a gateway back to Fanwath?”

“Yes, I remember. I didn’t have this artifact then.”

“But, with all your power, can’t you travel between worlds?”

Tes paused where she knelt, adjusting one of the little glowing rectangles, and looked up at him. “I can travel between worlds, yes, but my method creates a violent, Energy-filled rip in reality that would kill most beings should they enter it. You’d probably survive, hearty as you are, but I promise you this: our departure would not go unnoticed, and you can be certain the veil walkers of this world would be watching for my return.”

“And this artifact?”

“Is subtle and sophisticated, designed to allow one of my kind to enter a world with powerful Energy users undetected.”

“That’s cool.” Victor gestured to the clothes scattered around the suite. “Um, are you still packing?”

“Oh, I was just going through my wardrobe, choosing some outfits. Don’t worry, I’m ready.”

Victor rubbed his chin, nodding slowly. “Ah, I see.” He stepped a little closer. “And what are you doing there? How does this thing work?”

“I can try to explain it sometime, but it’s not as easy as it may look. I have to arrange these nodes in the proper pattern to reach Fanwath. Luckily, when I left Zaafor, I did some research into your surrogate homeworld, and I believe I’ve created the proper pattern.”

Victor nodded again, stopping at the edge of her circle of tiny silvery rectangles and trying to take in the pattern as a whole. It was complicated, with many little offshoots, swirls, and sub-patterns within the greater one. “And if you make a mistake?”

“In that case, we can hope that the pattern won’t work, and I’ll know I need to make adjustments. On the other hand, it may, in a worst-case scenario, open a doorway into the void of space.” She laughed at Victor’s widened eyes. “Don’t worry. If that happened, I could freely use my ability to open a much surer gateway—no veil walkers of Ruhn would be watching.”

Victor nodded. He supposed it made sense; with an epic-tier bloodline and the power of regeneration, he could probably float around in space for a while before dying. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Almost done, love,” she said, clearly concentrating on the placement of one of her “nodes.” Of course, her term of endearment had more of an effect on him than she probably intended, and Victor found himself frowning, wondering about that. Tes wasn’t some young woman unaware of the impact her attentions had on him. When she held his hand or hugged him, when she called him “love” and “dear” and other pet names, she had to know what she was doing. What was her game? She’d overtly rebuffed his advancements, ensuring he knew she wasn’t there for “romance.”

Something crept into his spine—a bit of iron fueled by his Quinametzin pride, no doubt—and he said what was on his mind. “You shouldn’t tease me like that if you don’t want to pursue a relationship with me.”

For a long moment, Tes didn’t reply, but then she set her final node into place with a click, and the entire pattern pulsed with silvery light three times. She stood, smiling and cocking her head sideways as she stepped closer to him. “I’m sorry about that, Victor. I like to tease, and I do care about you. You know that, right?”

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“Yeah, I know it.”

“I’ll tell you this as plainly as I can so we can clear the air and enjoy our visit to your home on Fanwath. I am very intrigued and excited by you. You’re the most interesting person I’ve met in a long, long time. The growth you’ve exhibited over the last couple of years is nothing short of heroic and amazing and—” Victor started to laugh nervously, embarrassed by the praise, and Tes stopped short, staring into his eyes until he became serious again. “The point is that, yes, I would like to explore more with you, but the time isn’t right.”

“Because...” Victor frowned and folded his arms.

“Because your heart is still wounded from your break with Valla, whom I also care about. Need I remind you of that?”

“No, but is that all—”

“And I refuse to be the one you use to mend those sores on your heart. I refuse because, in a year or five or ten, you might ask yourself if I took advantage. If you didn’t, I would. Let’s spend time together, grow closer to each other, and see what fate brings us. I won’t rush anything with you because I care about you too much. Still,” she reached out and gripped his forearms where they rested against his chest, “I don’t see what’s wrong with a little affection. You are very dear to me.”

Victor, being a young man with a heart full of passion, had fixated on a simple point. “So, if you don’t want to be the one I ‘mend my heart’ with, then you’re cool with me getting together with someone else? Don’t you feel jealousy?”

Tes moved her hands to Victor’s shoulders, stood on her tiptoes, and gently, delicately nuzzled her cheek against his neck, holding herself close. She tilted her head so she could whisper right into his ear. “If I must compete with another woman when I feel the time is right, then compete I shall.”

As tingles raced down the nape of his neck, and, figuring he’d already laid bare his intentions, Victor took advantage of her closeness and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her even tighter. She allowed it for the briefest of moments, but then Tes pushed him out to arm’s length, her strength

irresistible—her hands against his chest unyielding bulwarks. Victor grimaced as he tried to resist her briefly, but after just a moment, he laughed and dropped his arms. “Okay, I get your point.”

Tes smiled impishly, brushing some golden curls away from her face. “So? Shall we enjoy our time together, have some fun, and just let fate run its course? Regardless of anything I say, Victor, I’m a person. I’m a woman with feelings, and sometimes, despite my better judgment, my emotions get the better of me, just as they do to you.”

“There you go again,” he sighed, “baiting your hook with hope.”

“I am what I am!” Tes laughed and turned to her pattern. “Ready?”

Victor tried to frown at her for several long seconds. He wasn’t remotely satisfied with their little discussion, but he supposed he’d have to let it go if he wanted to enjoy his time with Tes. They’d already had similar talks at least twice since she’d arrived in Iron Mountain, though this had been the first time she brought up Valla. He supposed he couldn’t hold that against her.

It was a valid concern; if Tes cared about Valla, he could see why she wouldn’t want to reconnect with her—possibly very soon—and announce that she was with Victor now. The implication that she’d been lying in wait, knowing that Victor and Valla would fail together, would be too difficult to deny. He also knew that his acting like a petulant, love-sick boy wasn’t going to impress any woman, let alone a dragon with Tes’s beauty, grace, power, and clever mind. No, he’d have to do better than that.

“I’m ready.” He smiled and shrugged. “I was ready the minute you made the suggestion.”

Tes returned his smile, her eyes bright as she held out a hand. “Join me in the center of the circle, then.” When Victor stepped close, careful not to step on any of the silvery nodes, she took his hand. “Picture your home in your mind. It will help me fine-tune the pattern so we arrive where we want to be.”

Victor nodded and closed his eyes, fixing the garden of his “hermitage” in his mind. He remembered the fountain vividly and the colorful flowers that lined the little patio where Cora, Chala, and Deyni had been playing with one of the girls’ little pets. He remembered the narrow, winding pathway that led down from the garden to the beach. He could almost smell the flowers and the salt air. He could hear the gulls in the distance and the trill of a songbird in the trees nearby. Victor snapped his eyes open and laughed when he saw that he and Tes stood in the very place he’d been picturing.

“Talk about smooth!”

“I told you it was a sophisticated artifact!” Tes grinned and stooped to gather up the little domino-shaped, silvery nodes. Victor couldn’t help watching her for a moment—she’d worn one of her more formal-looking dresses. It was silvery and white, with a section of pale blue in the middle. Like all of her dresses, it seemed multi-layered but effortlessly comfortable. She moved gracefully as she snatched up the little silvery tiles, and as her skirts swished around her feet, he saw she wore silvery, crystalline slippers that somehow flexed with the movements of her delicate-seeming ankles and feet.

“You look really nice, Tes.”

She picked up the last node, tucked it into some hidden storage container, and then stood to beam at him, curtsying. “Why thank you, milord. I love this garden, by the way. It’s understated beauty and calming atmosphere are perfect. I can hear the waves crashing nearby. Is that the Silver Sea you mentioned?”

“Yeah. You’ll be able to see it from inside the house.” Victor gestured to the glass doors leading from the patio into the solarium. “Shall we?”

Tes stepped closer and took his elbow. “By all means! I’m eager to meet your friends.”

It turned out that the only person home to meet Tes was Gorro ap’Dommic, his governor. The man was startled beyond words when Victor strode through the dimly lit house and found him sitting at his little desk, reviewing one of his ledgers. The man stammered and sputtered his apologies, thinking he’d forgotten about a scheduled visit, but Victor reassured him that it was a surprise. Gorro’s eyes flew wide as though he’d just remembered a roast cooking in the oven. He hurried around his desk and stood before Victor, wringing his hands. Victor narrowed his eyes and said, “What is it, Gorro?”

“I’m afraid your charge isn’t home! She and her governess have gone to the Shadeni village to celebrate the hunters’ return. They’re not due back for several days!”

Victor smiled and squeezed the man’s narrow, bony shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Gorro. I’m here for a few days and wouldn’t mind visiting the Shadeni. I’ll go there tomorrow.”

“Excellent, milord. I will call the house staff to duty and see that rooms are made up for your guest.” For the second time, Gorro let his gaze drift in Tes’s direction, and then, with wide-eyed awe, he jerked his face away as though he’d just witnessed the birth of a star.

Victor chuckled. “That’s great. Please do that. We’ll take a walk through the village and down to the beach.”

“Supper will be waiting when you return, milord.” Gorro turned to Tes, quickly lowered his gaze, and stammered, “V-very nice to meet you, milady.”

“And you, dear Gorro. Victor has told me so much about your talented stewardship of his properties.”

Gorro struggled to respond and ended up simply clearing his throat and nodding nervously. Victor clapped his shoulder again, then led Tes out into the courtyard. “He’s smitten with you,” he remarked once the big front door clicked shut.

“Poor man. Has he no wife? He seems quite sad, sitting there in his dim little study, reviewing the import lists from the various towns and villages of the Free Marches.”

Victor chuckled, leading the way to his gate. “Is that what was on the ledger? You’re so observant! Anyway, yeah, Goro’s a private guy, and he seems to thrive by doing his job. It’s what he loves. I tried to tell him it would be fine to keep the house ‘awake,’ as he puts it, but he insists on keeping things shuttered and dark when no one else is home. I’m sure the place is more lively when Cora and Efanie are home.”

“Are you upset that they weren’t here to greet you?” Tes followed him out the gate and onto the cobbled lane that would take them down the hill and into the little village.

Victor paused and turned to face Tes. “I’m not upset, no. Honestly, I’m relieved. I told you about how I came to be responsible for Cora, and, yeah, she seems to have forgiven me, even accepted me as a...well, a person responsible for her, but I still get nervous when I think about talking to her.”

“I’m sure it will be fine, Victor. As you said, life can be cruel, but you were just as much forced into that duel as she was forced into your care—circumstances of fate.”

Victor smiled, pleased, as always, to have Tes on his side. “We should make ourselves a little smaller. If you didn’t notice from the doorways in my house, a big person on Fanwath is six feet or so.”

Tes nodded, and before Victor could blink, she’d reduced herself to the point that she looked like a child beside him. Victor shook his head, unable to fathom how quickly and easily she could cast a complicated spell like Alter Self. He formed the spell pattern, and several seconds later, he, too, was more reasonably sized for Fanwath. He took a step down the path, but Tes reached out and grasped his arm, turning him back to her.

“Of course, I’m interested in seeing your village and meeting some of your people, Victor, but, you know, we’re on Fanwath—no veil walkers are watching you.” Suddenly, delicate, blue wings sprouted from Tes’s back, stretching wider and wider until she stood before him with human-sized dragon wings. He could see the bones in the thin, pale blue membrane as she flexed them, beaming at his reaction. “How about a flight?”

Victor grinned and nodded, sending Energy into the pathway for his wings. He heard the rush of fire as they erupted into being, dripping hot lava onto the cobbles. “Race you,” he cried, looking toward the sky and willing his wings to work. When he launched off the cobbles, leaving behind a spiral of smoky, hot air, he couldn’t stop laughing, especially when he saw Tes surging after him, each stroke of her wings pulling her closer and closer. Victor looked down at his village and, beyond it, to the sea, and with another surge of magma-attuned Energy, he ripped through the air toward the water like a fiery projectile, forcing Tes to contend with a black plume of smoke in his wake.

Book 10: Chapter 4: Old Acquaintances

4 – Old Acquaintances

Victor pulled another driftwood log onto the makeshift bonfire he and Tes had put together. It was damp and didn’t combust right away, but the fire was already roaring, and the log began to steam immediately; soon, it would burn. “That ought to last a while.”

“You’re well-loved around here, Victor,” Tes remarked, watching the couple who’d just stopped by walk back toward the town. Their flight had garnered some attention, and many of the former members of the Ninth had come by to greet Victor and meet Tes as they’d strolled along the beach, enjoying the sound of the waves crashing and the generally charming atmosphere.

“Well, we fought a war together.” He nodded toward the departing couple. “What did you think of Nia?”

“Very intriguing. Her story makes me think the Death Casters who fled Earth for their new world must have been formidable.”

“Is that unusual? For human-like people to reach levels of power like that without the System?”

“Unusual, but not unheard of, and humans have a high natural affinity. My research indicates that there were many great cultivators on Earth before the Energy stopped flowing, and they weren’t all members of elder species like our ancestors.”

“So the undead lords on Dark Ember could be as strong as veil walkers?”

Tes moved a little away from the fire and sat down on the sand as she answered, “I’d say it’s not only possible but likely. To flee through the veil to another world, especially as Energy ebbed—that would require sophisticated magic.”

Victor nodded, turning to face the fire, watching the orange tongues of flame licking the sides of the big, damp log he’d thrown on. He glanced at the sky; they’d just watched the sunset, and now the light was fading entirely from the western horizon, and the stars were beginning to emerge. “Are you hungry?”

“Not particularly. Why don’t you try one of your new spell patterns? It’s why we came here, after all.”

Victor turned to look at her, sitting on the sand, her bare feet curled underneath the skirts of her dress. The fabric shimmered in the firelight, and flames danced in Tes’s eyes—reflections of the fire. He wanted to tell her she was beautiful, but he’d learned that such direct flattery wouldn’t get him far, especially if he constantly lavished it on her. “Which one should I start with?”

“I think the Energy Charge revision. You’ll face opponents with similar abilities—some System-based Classes are awarded them in the high ‘iron ranks,’ as you’ve already seen; only your incredibly sturdy nature saw you through those battles.”

Victor nodded. They’d had the discussion before. One of these days—perhaps soon—he’d face someone who could move faster than his senses could perceive and who also had the ability to do enough damage to him to overcome his sturdy body and regeneration. Such a combination would be difficult, if not impossible, for him to counter. So, Tes had helped him figure out how to take his System-granted “Energy Charge” spell and alter it. The new, elder-magic variant would, theoretically, allow him to maintain the speed of his Energy Charge while moving and fighting for as long as he wanted to expend the Energy required.

More than that, Tes had helped him expand the spell's effects to include his mind. While he moved under its influence, he would no longer feel like a passenger, hanging on for dear life. His mind would speed up commensurate with his body, and he'd—again, theoretically—be in complete control of his movements. The most critical side effect of the revision would be that his enhanced cognition would allow him to perceive other fast-moving people and things.

Victor nodded and sat down, summoning his elder magic book from his storage ring. He flipped to the page where he'd transcribed the final iteration of the revised spell pattern and carefully studied it. At the time, when he'd first copied it into the book, he'd pretty much had it memorized. Since then, though, he'd done the same with half a dozen other spells and, though he could probably write a significant portion of it from memory, parts of the complicated, multi-page pattern were less than clear in his mind's eye.

Tes watched him, shifting so she leaned on one hand in the sand. "It's good that we came here to try this. If you found you needed one of these new spells in your duel, you would have struggled to build the pattern from memory."

"Yeah. I was just thinking the same thing." Victor ran through the pattern twice, then closed his eyes and turned his gaze inward, drawing a strand of inspiration-attuned Energy into his pathways. He could use any attunement for the spell; it wasn't particular. He liked using inspiration when he was learning, though—he felt like it influenced his success rate, even with something like casting a new spell. Of course, he had no factual basis for the belief; it was just an instinct and perhaps superstition, but he'd come to trust his instincts, especially since his vision where Tenecoalt had instructed him to do so.

He had to glance back at his notes several times, but soon, the pattern was nearly finished—just a few more loops and a connection of the final thread remained. Victor stood, then looked at Tes. "Here goes."

"Luck!" She smiled impishly, remaining seated.

Victor swallowed, bracing himself, and then finished the pattern. As the final thread fell into place, the entire pattern flashed with white-gold Energy, but before the spell could engage the Energy in his Core, Victor felt things freeze, and a System message flashed before his eyes:

Warning! The spell being cast incorporates and alters another System-granted spell. If you complete this casting, your System-granted spell will be removed.

Warning! The spell being cast does not follow System-designed iterations and may be too powerful for you. Proceed at your own risk.

Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

Victor had learned his lesson about antagonizing the System with questions and a mocking tone. This time, he simply said, “No.”

A tremendous wave of Energy flowed out of his Core, fueling his completed spell. Victor felt his muscles come alive with boiling power and urgency, and the world turned bright, his eyes blazing with the light of inspiration. He glanced at the fire, and his jaw dropped—it rippled in blinding glory, though the flames' liquid dance was slow, each flicker unfolding in what felt like seconds, each ember drifting off like it was caught in air thick as molasses.

Victor turned to Tes, and she winked at him, but her eyelid moved too slowly to be natural, her cheek rising and her brow descending over the course of several breaths. Victor was aware that a river of Energy was feeding the spell while he looked around, so he decided to try moving before he spent every drop in his Core. He jogged around the fire toward the ocean and saw the waves coming into shore at a snail's pace. His movements felt normal, his thoughts felt unaltered, but looking down at the white-gold Energy limning his body, it was clear that he was moving at a charged rate.

He darted toward the water and kicked one of the near-frozen waves as it descended in slow motion. Water erupted from his foot's impact, but it flew away like it was fighting against an invisible force—a spray of slowly separating, misting droplets. Grinning, Victor turned and ran back to Tes, and then, with a flick of his will, he stopped the flow of Energy into his pathways.

“Bravo!” she cheered, just as System messages scrolled across Victor's field of view:

You have discovered a new spell: Velocity Mantle – Epic.

Your new spell renders a System-granted spell obsolete. Removing.

You have lost the spell: Energy Charge – Basic.

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Velocity Mantle – Epic: You have mastered the intricate art of merging body and mind into a state of heightened synchronicity, pushing the boundaries of speed and perception. Activating this spell drastically accelerates your physical and cognitive functions, allowing you to move, react, and think at rates far beyond normal capacity. This effect enhances your awareness, enabling you to perceive and counter high-speed movements, and grants unparalleled precision in battle or flight. The duration of the spell is determined by the Energy you invest. Energy Cost: Variable.

Warning! This spell is not System-designed! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!

“It worked—epic!” Victor laughed, mildly amused by the System’s passive-aggressive language and behavior; it hadn’t needed to remove Energy Charge from him; the two spells were different enough that he could still find the shielded charge of his old spell valuable. Still, he was pleased enough with the upgrade.

“I told you it was a good pattern. You did an outstanding job with it, Victor. Was it costly?”

“Oh, good question.” Victor called up his Energy level to see how much he’d spent:

Energy: 37099/43812

“Yeah.” He nodded. “It’s costly but not terrible. As I continue to gain intelligence with my Warlord Class, I think it will become more and more usable.”

Tes nodded. “Naturally. I could barely see you move; that’s going to be quite the fun card to pull out when the time comes, don’t you think?”

“Hell yes!” Victor laughed, stooping to pick up his book, eager to try out another one of his new patterns. Tes leaned back on her elbows, staring up at the stars. Victor was about to ask her what spell she thought he should try next when a disturbingly familiar, feminine voice called out from near the shoreline.

“Oh, it was the one we suspected! I thought it was a familiar sound, Fox! It’s the tasty morsel we heard crashing about the spirit plane once upon a time!”

“It’s still so young, though, Three,” came a rumbling basso voice, rolling his tongue as he said, “Three.”

“Oh, shit,” Victor sighed, glancing at Tes. Her eyes narrowed with consternation, and she stood smoothly, moving to stand beside him.

“Step into the light, hunters,” she snarled, her voice suddenly harsh.

“Hunters? We?” Three asked, her smooth, almost purring voice coming from the shadows to Victor’s left. The odd thing about that was that he could see quite well in the dark, especially with the bonfire throwing light in a fifty-yard radius. Still, he couldn’t see either of the strange individuals he’d met so long ago on the spirit plane.

“This one’s different,” Fox rumbled from the other side of the fire. “It’s not meant to be here—perhaps more of a morsel than we care to bite.”

Tes growled, and then she surged, expanding suddenly to what Victor hoped was her actual size—a blue-scaled, four-limbed, winged, reptilian terror the size of a city bus. She pounced into the darkness, and as her claws swept out, a sharp clang resounded, and suddenly Victor could see Fox—the giant man clung to a saber that gleamed with red-black light that seemed to cut his mind as he glimpsed it, forcing him to look away. The fellow looked much like Victor remembered—dressed like a pirate, ten feet tall or so, and with the girth of several similarly sized men rolled into one.

“Ho-ho! Ease your rage, dragon! We’re simply here to investigate!” He chuckled as Tes swiped again and rebuffed her mighty claw with his horrible saber. “It’s angry, Three!”

“Aye,” came the orange-tabby-woman’s sibilant reply, directly beside Victor. He lurched to the side, whirling to face her, but she just winked one of her big, emerald eyes and grinned sideways, exposing her feline fangs. Tes also whirled to the voice, slashing her tail at Fox, who somehow ran ahead of it, circling the fire to stand a bit behind Three. When he sheathed his terrible red-black sword, Tes growled deeply but suddenly stood in her human form again, stepping toward Victor.

She moved to stand before him, folding her bare arms over her chest, her silver-and-white dress flickering with orange and red from the fire. “You made your point. I cannot defend him from both of you, but I swear to you this much: harm him now, and I’ll kill one of you and hunt the other to the ends of the universe for my vengeance.”

“So,” Three made a show of licking the fur on her left wrist, “our morsel has a protector. Hmm. Why do you stand for the disruptor? Don’t you think it’ll bring you trouble down the line?”

“Disruptor!” Tes barked a laugh and shook her head. “Come to Aradnue and meet a world full of us. Your System might have gotten its hooks into him, but that doesn’t mean he’s sworn any oaths. He’s not causing any trouble. He’s not sharing what he learns. He’s not recruiting for a cause—simply learning to fashion Energy on his own, without crutches.”

“Ah,” Three looked at Fox and sighed, “that old canard.”

The big man nodded, his jowly neck jiggling with the motion. “I feared as much, Three.”

Three looked at Tes, reaching one pointed nail up to her teeth as though to wriggle something out from behind her right canine. After a moment, she said, “And who started this tasty morsel on this road? Perhaps you’re the disruptor, hmm?”

Victor stepped forward, well aware that Tes had, indeed, given him his first taste of elder magic. Still, she wasn’t the only one. “Perhaps you’re under the impression that elder magic doesn’t run in my blood,” he growled, severing the thread of Energy sustaining his Alter Self spell. As he surged in size and let his aura flow freely, he said, “I’m a titan, and if I wish to work the magic of my ancestors, I’ll do so.”

Of course, his aura might be impressive to other iron rankers, even steel seekers, but the two before him hardly blinked as it washed over them. They did seem to take his words into consideration, however. Three seemed amused, and she chuckled softly as Fox backed up a step, forced to look up to meet Victor’s gaze. “So it is, so it is! And this one? She didn’t teach you to work the elder runes? She didn’t disrupt

your progress with the System?”

Tes opened her mouth, but Victor spoke first, “She cautioned me off it—warned me not to talk to others about it. If you’re trying to keep people from learning how to make spells outside the System, you ought to thank her.” Victor had a feeling the two could smell a lie, so he didn’t do so. Every word he said was true—Tes had been reluctant to share her Elder magic with him. She’d given him a pattern to learn, but she hadn’t hand-fed it to him. In fact, the thing had been nearly indecipherable to him when she first gave it over. And she’d absolutely cautioned him about it and asked him never to reveal her as the source.

Three licked her claw, arching an eyebrow over her big, emerald eye. “And now? We’ve witnessed you work three non-System spells, morsel. She doesn’t aid you?”

“Enough,” Tes barked, stepping forward. “What I do with my time is none of your business, you pair of opportunistic, sycophantic System-slaves. I’ve provided my testimony—Victor is not a disruptor; he keeps his learning to himself. My actions are my own, and if you care to judge me, then by all means, do so. You haven’t a leg to stand on.”

“We’ll see about that, Celestial Envoy, Tesia’liveen’ashalah,” Three hissed.

“Oh, bravo! You’ve managed to sus out my identity. Not that I didn’t show you my true form. Are there many mature blue dragons wandering this part of the universe? Go ahead, visit Luminaris, make an appointment with the Grand Envoys, and ask if I have permission to be with Victor. Ask if I’ve made a case for my involvement in his progression. I’ll save you the six-month wait—I do, and I have. Now, unless you’d like me to track down your employer, I suggest you leave us to our own devices. You’ve seen what the noise was about; Victor is trying some new spells that he devised and has no intention of doing any disrupting.”

Three never stopped smiling slyly as Tes spoke, but she looked at Fox and shrugged. “What do you say, Fox? Shall we leave this angry dragon to its business?”

Fox yawned, scratching his belly where it hung out over his pantaloons. “I’m bored, Three. Let’s find another morsel. We can check up on this youngster another time—you know how they go.”

Three’s smile widened as she looked back at Victor. “Aye, I do. Maybe it’s not disrupting yet, but I can see it in those eyes. It’s going to be a handful. I think we’ll get our taste eventually.” With that, she put a furry, razor-clawed hand on Fox’s shoulder, and the two turned to walk up the beach. Victor watched them go, counting seven steps before they shimmered like a mirage and disappeared.

“Victor, I think you neglected to tell me something,” Tes sighed, flopping down onto the sand with a heavy sigh.

Victor sat beside her, his mind racing through all the implications of that strange encounter. Had he understood correctly? They were agents of the System? When he cast a non-System spell, it had thrown up some kind of red flag, and they’d come sniffing around? Why hadn’t it happened when he cast Alter Self? He’d always assumed they found him on the Spirit Plane because he’d made such a...bang when he first cast Wild Totem.

“Victor?” Tes prompted.

“Oh.” He looked at her and shrugged. “Yeah. Um, when I revised my totem spell, they found me on the spirit plane. I didn’t realize they worked for the System. What the hell?”

“They don’t work for the System. They collect System bounties. Disruptors are worth a great deal, but they have no evidence that you are one. That’s likely why they left you alive the first time they found you. They’re hoping you won’t keep your knowledge of elder magic to yourself. They’re hoping you’ll start actively working against the System. If they can provide even the tiniest bit of proof, the System will award them tremendously for killing you.”

“Did I get you in trouble?”

Tes smiled and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. “No trouble that I didn’t already have, sweet boy.”

“Man,” Victor grunted, eliciting a giggle out of Tes. “I can’t believe that dude stood up to your attack!”

“Hah! That wasn’t an attack! That was a reminder that he probably didn’t want to tussle with me.”

“Well, I’m glad you were here.”

“As am I.” She straightened and turned to smile at him. “All the more reason for you to learn more spells. Someday, you might have to defend yourself from the likes of those fiends. Come, they know you’re not here teaching your forbidden arts. Go ahead and cast another.”

With a grin, Victor hopped to his feet and took out his elder magic book again, flipping through the spell patterns. “Let’s see here, what will I cast next…”

Book 10: Chapter 5: Domain

5 – Domain

“I think I want to try the one from the dungeon book.” Victor and Tes had spent several days deciphering the strange elder magic book he’d gotten in the Iron Prison. At first, it seemed to have

bits of patterns without a greater purpose—Energy direction nodes, Energy density weaves, Energy gateways, feedback loops, containment matrices, reversal nodes, conversion threads, and dozens of other pattern components. When Victor began to understand the pages and pages of spell components, he thought he'd gotten some sort of ancient primer on elder magic.

In a way, he was right; it was a primer, but Tes had shown him how the first few seemingly disparate components could be put together to form the skeleton of a spell pattern. From there, Victor had diligently added the other pieces of the puzzle to the whole. It wasn't a primer on Elder magic in general; it was a guidebook that deconstructed a highly complex pattern, one that filled an entire—albeit small—book.

Tes leaned back on her elbows, her eyes fixed on the bonfire. There were more embers than flames now, but its heat was comfortable in the cool, nighttime sea breeze. "I'm not sure you're ready for that one."

"What's going to happen to me if I'm not?" The question was rhetorical. Victor was pretty sure all that would happen was that he'd fail to cast it.

"It might completely drain your Core, and then you'll feel sick for a little while."

Victor nodded, flipping through his "elder magic book" to the nearly thirty pages dedicated to the "dungeon book's" spell pattern. "That's all right. I'll be ready for a break after this, anyway."

Tes yawned and then stood up, nodding. "I'm going to walk along the beach for a while. Maybe I'll go for a swim. It'll take you a long time to build that pattern."

"You'll come back before I cast it, though, yeah?"

"Of course! I wouldn't miss it."

Victor smiled, watching her walk lithely over the sand to the gentle, moonlit waves. He sat down and put the book in his lap, and when he glanced up at Tes again, she was gone, but he swore he caught a glimpse of a great blue-scaled tail slipping into the silvery water. "Shit," he chuckled, "wouldn't want to be a fish around here right now." He watched the water for another minute or two, but when Tes didn't surface and he saw no sign of her, he turned back to his book and began reviewing the long, complicated, multi-faceted spell pattern.

Copying a complex pattern into his Energy pathways was one of Victor's fortes. The ability to hold Energy where he wanted it was tied to his will attribute, and with that being his primary focus for most of his career as an Energy user, the spell didn't start getting difficult for him until he'd made it about halfway into the pattern. Pulling his inner eye back, seeing what he'd built as a whole—all three dimensions of the elder magic pattern—he found it hard to believe he was only halfway through it. It was like a hollow cone, with both ends open to Energy strands, filled with loops, whorls, angles, shapes, and intricate weaves.

Of course, he'd chosen inspiration-attuned Energy to build the spell the first time. Part of the pattern was an Energy differentiation matrix, and Tes had taught Victor how it would take the Energy input and format it for the spell's purposes. It was a spell designed to use the caster's Energy to their advantage, so, unlike many of his spells, it really mattered what Energy he cast it with. That being the case, Victor didn't want his first attempt to be with fear or rage.

In addition to inspiration being his most "positive" affinity, it seemed to respond better to his mental nudges, which made it ideal for forming a spell pattern for the first time. Even so, as Victor turned the page in his book and began adding in more and more complexity, he found himself beginning to sweat with the strain of keeping those thousands of Energy lines steady. "Come on, pinché son of a bitch," he growled, gently, delicately tweaking his line of Energy into a bowl-shaped pattern against which a star-shaped cascade of other lines would reflect.

He was vaguely aware of soft footsteps behind him, but he couldn't spare a glance to see if Tes had returned. He knew it was her, though; he could smell the saltwater mixed with her jasmine and citrus perfume. She sat behind him, and when her cool hands pressed against the sides of his neck, Victor felt some of his tension bleed away. "You're doing very well, Victor. I'm quite impressed you've gotten this far; this is a pattern a so-called steel seeker would struggle with."

He didn't respond, but as she gently kneaded the tension out of his knotted neck muscles, he redoubled his efforts, continuing his work. He pushed away the excitement her touch elicited in him, and a tiny part of his mind wondered if she was helping or hindering his progress, but the proof was in the doing: he worked through two more pages in record time, adding their components to the pattern in his pathway.

He was inserting new twists, glyphs, angles, and functions on the interior of the cone now, so he had to strain his inner eye to either see past the outer layers of the pattern or he had to rotate his perspective and push his perception into the bottom of the cone. He chose the latter because it gave him a proper view of the spell's complexity, and he could glance at the whole from the inside to ensure he wasn't breaking anything with the new components.

Slowly but surely, he worked his way through the pages, and all the while, Tes's fingers worked magic, draining away his tension and helping him focus. When he reached the final page, he was sure he was drenched in sweat, but he was no longer aware of his body; his entire being existed in that pathway outside his Core. If someone asked Victor to make an analogy about the effort of will it took to hold those thousands of delicate lines of Energy in place, he would have said it was like balancing a skyscraper atop his palms while participating in a log-rolling competition—absurd, but it made the point.

As he connected the final hexagonal prism of Energy lines to the dangling thread of Energy at the top of the cone's interior, the entire pattern flashed, and Victor felt his Core drain as a flood of Energy populated the completed spell. Just as before, though, everything seemed to freeze in place, and the System sent him an unwelcome warning:

Warning! The spell being cast does not follow System-designed iterations and may be too powerful for you. Proceed at your own risk.

Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

Unlike with the spell pattern that he and Tes had modified, Victor looked at the first warning and gave it serious consideration. This spell was from a book he'd found in a prison dungeon for iron-rankers. It didn't belong. Was it a trap? Was it a boon? He didn't know, but even Tes thought it might be too much for him. Would she let him cast something that could seriously harm him, though? Now that the spell was formed—and frozen in time—he sought some reassurance. “Seriously, what's the worst that can happen if this spell is too powerful for me?”

When she didn't answer, and he realized her hands weren't moving on his neck any longer, Victor looked over his shoulder to see she, too, seemed frozen in time. Was that it? Was the System stopping time, or had it moved Victor outside of time? He had a feeling his awareness had sped up or been pulled away from the normal flow of time as he understood it. After all, affecting him ought to be a whole lot easier than affecting the entire world or universe. Whatever it was doing, the System didn't seem to like doing it long. It flashed the question again, this time with larger, red-tinted letters:

This tale has been unlawfully lifted from Royal Road. If you spot it on Amazon, please report it.

Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

Gathering his courage, Victor mentally pressed the “NO” option. Again, he felt the draw on his Core, like a vortex siphoning the Energy out, and Victor watched as the world around him changed. A wall of shimmering white-gold Energy expanded away from him, forming an enormous dome, something like two hundred yards in diameter. Inside that brightly lit space, the ground shimmered in rainbow-tinted reflections as a bed of gravel appeared consisting of millions of tiny, prism-like crystals. The fire’s orange flames and embers became blue and purple, and the ocean’s waves tinkled like crystalline wind chimes as they crashed at half their normal speed.

Victor stood, his eyes wide with wonder as the clarity of inspiration filled his senses. He whirled to see Tes also on her feet, looking about, her hands covering her mouth as her big sapphire eyes filled with unshed tears. “It’s beautiful!” she cried, walking in a slow circle, the crystalline gravel tinkling with each step. “My mind is so clear! Victor, you have to talk to Valla!”

The comment, out of nowhere, was puzzling at first, but as Victor thought about it, he understood Tes’s point of view. He owed it to Valla to tell her he was home. She deserved to know Tes was there. It was important to clear the air. “I will.”

“If this...environment has this effect on us, what will it do to your enemies?” Tes wondered, reaching out to run her fingers through a slowly flickering purple flame.

“I don’t know, but I can’t hold it long. My Core’s draining like someone opened a valve into a black hole.” Victor took one more long look around, his eyes mesmerized by the dancing motes of white-gold light that seemed to float about the space like fireflies. “God, everything’s so clear!”

“It’s a wondrous spell. You’ve created an environment attuned to inspiration!”

Victor looked at the crystalline waves and then at the strangely beautiful fire, smiling almost sadly as he severed the thick ribbon of Energy connecting his nearly empty Core to the spell. When the mundane world came crashing back, dark, chilly, and clad in the usual colors of nature, he stumbled and fell backward onto the sand, catching himself on his palms. “Damn,” he laughed, “not so pretty out here anymore, is it?”

“Of course it is!” Tes laughed, skipping around the fire, her eyes bright, her smile glowing with pride and happiness. “It’ll just take a moment for the magic of your spell’s effects to fade a little, and then you can appreciate this lovely world again. I can’t wait

until you’re strong enough to keep that spell going longer. Imagine what we could accomplish in an environment like that!”

Victor nodded absently, having realized he had more System messages waiting:

You have discovered a new spell: Core Domain – Epic.

Core Domain – Epic: You have learned to impose your will upon reality, shaping the environment into a reflection of your Core's affinity. By channeling your Energy, you create a localized domain where your chosen affinity manifests in both form and function, altering the environment to empower yourself, support allies, and suppress enemies. Each affinity dictates the domain's effects, making it a versatile but demanding tool. The domain persists for as long as your Energy sustains it, and its influence grows with the strength of your will. Energy Cost: Variable. The greater the Energy invested, the larger and more potent the domain. Prolonged use risks feedback effects, including exhaustion, emotional strain, or destabilization of your Core.

Warning! This spell is not System-designed! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!

Victor read the description twice, then, grinning, read it to Tes. He finished with a question, “Be honest; did you know what the spell would do?”

She shook her head, looking down at her feet where her toes wriggled in the sand. A moment later, she sat beside him and sighed deeply. “I knew it was a spell that would affect the environment, and I could tell it was sophisticated with many different effects based on the Energy being poured into it. Other than that, though, I wasn’t sure. I think I could have studied each component in relation to those around it and come up with a better estimation, but I thought it would be safe to try with a positive Energy source like your inspiration.”

Victor’s eyes widened. “Shit, man, I didn’t think about that! What’s it going to be like when I cast it with fear or rage?”

“Or justice or courage or glory? You know, those other Energy weaves you started might provide even more potent alternatives. You should work on finishing them.”

Victor nodded idly, drawing his fingers through the sand as the fire popped. He’d begun the work of trying to weave glory and fear into some of his other Energies, but it was complicated stuff, and he’d been met with failure so many times that he’d put it on a back burner. Tes was right, though; he was probably missing out on some serious potential.

Another topic was on the tip of his tongue, however. “Why do you think the System still gives me a spell description and adds the new spell to my status sheet? If it doesn’t like people stepping outside its influence, you’d think it would ignore the new spell and make me figure out what it does and keep track of it.”

“The System isn’t foolish. It wants to keep you a part of it for as long as possible. By acknowledging your success, despite its efforts to dissuade you, it reminds you of its utility and, I suppose, helps smooth over any animosity its warnings might have engendered.”

“So, it knows I’m doing my own thing, but it wants to keep some hooks in me.”

“You’re doing your ‘own thing’ to a degree. You’re still gaining levels and earning new skills and spells under the System’s care. Things will change a little when you build your own Class, but even then, the System will take part in your milestones. Unless you break from it, that is.” Tes spoke softly, mimicking his behavior by idly drawing stars and circles in the sand while she spoke.

“Do you think I should do that?”

She shook her head and then leaned her cheek against Victor’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t. Not until you’ve gained all you can from it. Not until you’re ready to stand on your own against the System zealots out there like your two friends who paid us a visit earlier.”

Victor was quiet for a while, thinking about Fox and Three, wondering when they’d next come calling. It felt like they followed some kind of unspoken code. Would they leave him alone as long as he didn’t spread his use of non-System magic to others? As long as he didn’t “disrupt?” He didn’t want to dwell on it at the moment because he’d had another question for Tes, one he was a little reluctant to bring up but couldn’t keep from popping back into his mind. “When I created my inspiration domain, the first thing you said was that I should talk to Valla. Is that because it’s been on your mind?”

Tes sighed again and sat up straight, shifting to look more directly at him. “It has been, yes. I’m sure you realized the wisdom of the words while you were in your domain. Didn’t you? You agreed immediately.”

“Yes.” Victor nodded, smiling crookedly. “It was good for me to break contact with her for a while, but I owe it to her to write. She should know I’m home. She should know you returned. I should be interested in what she’s been doing. Valla’s never been anything but good and kind and supportive to me. Well, until she decided we needed a break, that is.” He chuckled ruefully, and Tes playfully punched his knee.

“You have such big emotions. It must have been so hard for her to talk to you about that! She must have been terrified.”

“What? Terrified? Of me?”

“Of how you would take it. She loves you, and I’m sure she was worried about you flying off in a rage or becoming self-destructive or—”

“I get it, I get it.” Victor waved a hand, then laid back in the sand, staring up at the brilliant expanse of stars. “You were right.”

“About?” Tes, too, laid back in the sand, cushioning her head with an arm.

“About the world becoming beautiful again after the spell faded a bit.”

“That’s not the world!” She chased the words with trilling laughter, and Victor groaned.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do. So? Are you done with new spells for the night? Shall we return to your home and see what dear Governor ap’Dommic has had the staff prepare?”

“Um, yeah, I suppose. We can do some more in the morning before we fly over to the Shadeni encampment.”

“Encampment? Don’t they build permanent structures?” Tes hopped to her feet and held out a hand. Victor took it, and she grunted, hoisting him up. “You’re like a sack of lead bones!”

“Oh, please! You could throw me halfway across that sea if you wanted. As for the Shadeni, that’s a good point. They used to be nomadic, but, yeah, I bet they’ve built up quite a little town by now.”

“Shall we fly back to the house?” Tes arched an eyebrow.

“Let’s walk through town. I want to see what’s been built and maybe say hi to a few more folks. That okay?”

“It’s perfect!” Tes took his elbow and leaned against him as they strolled up from the beach, and Victor did his best to simply enjoy the moment without fixating on his desires for the future. Things were going well, and one thing he knew about life and people was that if you gave it or them an excuse, things could go from good to shit in the blink of an eye. So, he savored Tes’s closeness, the beautiful weather, and the breathtaking field of stars overhead. With a warm heart and a smile, he waved at the people lingering around the front deck of the tavern on the edge of the village—The Ninth’s Rest.

Book 10: Chapter 6: Letters and Flight

6 – Letters, Light, and Flight

Victor sat alone in his suite on a couch he was acutely aware Valla had chosen, purchased, and placed there. Tes had gone to bed, seemingly quite satisfied with the meal they’d been served, but Victor, despite his busy day, couldn’t muster enough sleepiness to force a yawn. His mind was alive with a thousand different thoughts, but most of all, he kept thinking about the revelation he and Tes had experienced under the influence of his inspiration domain. That was why he was sitting on the couch, staring at a painting of a forest at sunset that Valla had hung. That was why the Farscribe book he shared with her was on his lap.

With trepidatious fingers, he pulled back the leather-bound cover and leafed through the pages until he came to the last entry he’d read. Before he let his eyes drift past it, he reviewed the meat of what she’d written:

...I’m leaving for a new world tomorrow—an ocean world populated by aquatic people who live on islands and swim and breathe freely under the water. It’s called Crydagh, and there are rumored to be creatures living in those waters that rival dragons! Fantastic beasts called Booraghi roam the oceans, unafraid of anything—even your mentor, Ranish Dar, would think twice about crossing one of them. If treated with respect, they’re peaceful, though, and will sometimes speak to lesser beings who visit them. I’m going to seek one out; rumors have it that they’ll grant boons to visitors they take a fancy to. Even if they refuse to speak to me, which I’m told happens often, I believe the trip will be worthwhile. Wouldn’t seeing such a creature be a reward in itself?

He wondered if she’d seen the great sea creatures that had so intrigued her. He supposed that was a good place to start, assuming she hadn’t already written to him about her experience—he hadn’t looked. The thought brought his mind around to the words he’d used in the last letter he’d written. He scanned over them, groaning as he read.

...I don't know if I'll ever get over you and the missing piece of my heart that you took with you, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try to remember that no matter what, I love you, and I don't want you to be gone from my life. So, yeah, I'll try to be better about writing, but I can't do it every day, every week, or even every month. I have to give myself room to breathe, to experience life without you, 'cause that's what you wanted, and it's too hard to let you go if I'm constantly reminding myself about how much I miss you...

He hadn't written to her since, and it had been a lot longer than a month—closer to six. With something like dread in his heart, he turned the page to see if she'd written any sort of response. His feelings were a mixture of relief and guilt when he saw two new letters from her. One was short and quick to read:

Victor,

I'm so sorry for the pain I've caused you. I hope you know that my heart is heavy, too, but, as you said, it will be good for you to find room to breathe. There's so much in the many worlds available to us; I want you to experience the peaks that I'm not ready to climb. Don't you see that it was a burden on me, too, when I saw you being held back? Don't you see that I, too, must "find room to breathe?" I love you, and I will write again. I look forward to hearing from you when you're ready.

Love always,

Valla

Victor couldn't help a smile from creeping onto his lips as he read. It was just like Valla to use his words against him. She was right, he supposed; if anyone in their relationship had made it hard for the other to "breathe," it was Victor. He let his eyes drift down to the next, lengthier message:

Victor! I have amazing, wonderful news! My journey to Crydagh has proven fruitful beyond my wildest dreams. Oh, I have so much to tell you, but I doubt you want to read a book-long entry, and besides, I don't want to use up all of our pages, not until we can meet again and exchange a new Farscribe journal. Let me just say that this world is truly a wonder.

As I told you, the natives breathe freely in air or water, and the chamber where the System Stone deposited me was like a great, inverted fishbowl at the bottom of a shallow sea. I stood in wonder, watching the colorful fish, beautiful people, and strange, moving plants for hours before seeking out a guide.

I'll get to the good part: I joined an expedition to seek out the Booraghi, and we found one of their caravans—that's what the people here call their nomadic family groups. They're simply breathtaking creatures! Bigger than a house—no, half as big as one of the crystal spires at the center of Sojourn! They're not scaled like a fish but have beautiful, colorful flesh—yellow, orange, pink, blue, and purple. And their many fins flow through the water like colorful wings, though I dare say they aren't feathered. Rather, they're like gigantic, elegant fronds—almost plant-like.

I'd purchased an apparatus to allow me to breathe underwater, and, with the rest of my tour group, I swam out with the desperate hope that one of the creatures would speak to me; they don't use words, but project a surprisingly beautiful song. To most, it sounds like meaningless music, but if they direct it at an individual, it can be understood. So, as the water filled with the trilling music, everyone grew hopeful. I waited and listened, swimming desperately to keep up with the tremendous leisurely creatures, and then, to my delight, one of them spoke to me.

His name is Oomah, but he tells me it's much longer and more beautiful in song form. To make a very long conversation short, he saw something in me, Victor. A potential he described as "remarkable." He's offered to take me on as a student, something so rare, that only a handful of such cases have been recorded in all of the Crydaghian's history. To my great wonder and delight, he invited me to join his clan on their migration—to perch upon his enormous back as a passenger. You wouldn't believe the envy of the others in the tour group!

When we arrived in the Booraghi's summer waters, Oomah taught me how to create a dwelling for myself, though there are other structures here; it's apparent that I am not the first or only land-born person to live among them here. Still, for now, Oomah keeps me apart from any others, aside from the Booraghi; he's teaching me a new way of living and thinking, and it's been a truly inspirational few months for me.

I catch my own fish and cook it with spices and herbs I've harvested from the sea bed. Oh, goodness! You wouldn't believe the many elaborate steps I went through to come up with something that tasted like pepper. I'm getting lost in anecdotes again! I'll end up writing a novel, after all, if I'm not careful.

The point I'm working up to, Victor, is that Oomah has an interesting way of teaching and philosophies about life that I've never seen before. He's not entirely selfless, either; his tutelage comes with strings attached. There are worlds where the Booraghi cannot easily travel, and he has...quests for me in such places. He says they'll all contribute to my development, but I can't help but be reminded of Ranish Dar and his strange way of "teaching" you. I hope things are going well in that regard, by the way.

Victor, I know you're taking a break from the Farscribe journal, and I will respect that. Still, Oomah doesn't mind me communicating with you, and though I have many new Booraghi friends here, sometimes I feel a little lonely. They're all so vast and they send their words to me from distances that sometimes make it hard even to see to whom I'm speaking. So, when you feel up to it, please send me a note to let me know how you're doing.

Missing you,

Valla

The whole while Victor read the letter, his smile strained the muscles in his cheeks, and he found himself picturing Valla in a beautiful, colorful, underwater landscape, living in a bubble and swimming in the shadows of colossal creatures that—in his head—looked like gigantic whales. He was proud of her for earning the attention of one of them and being singled out to be a student, though he had to admit some worry entered his mind. Regardless, he was no one to talk; his current circumstances on Ruhn were tenuous at best. Still smiling, he picked up his pen and wrote a response:

Valla,

I can't tell you how happy I was to open this book and find such a wondrous tale to read. I'm so proud of you! The Booraghi sound like amazing creatures, and I hope your new mentor has a lot to teach you. I got a strange feeling, though, when you said he's teaching you a new way to think; don't let him change you too much, okay? There's a reason people love you. There's a reason you stood out to Oomah; don't ever lose the things that make you...Valla. Yeah, yeah, I know: who am I to give advice like that?

Anyway, I'm happy for you. I wish I were there to see what they look like. On my homeworld, there are creatures called whales that live in the oceans, and they, too, communicate with strange songs. That's kind of what I picture when you describe the Booraghi.

As for me, I think I'm over my sulking. The sting of our parting has begun to fade, though I won't lie; I think about you all the time. That's part of the reason I'm writing. I had a chance to take a small break, and I'm currently visiting Fanwath. Everywhere I look in my—our—rooms, I see your touch. It makes me a little melancholy and sharpens feelings that had grown dull, but it's also nice to see these reminders of you. I know we're very far apart right now, but as you and so many others have said, a lot can change in the course of years and decades and centuries.

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Do you note a difference in my writing? I've taken the Warlord Class, and while I've only gained a single level in it, I swear it's been affecting my thinking. It doesn't hurt that I've made some bloodline advancements and gained some new feats, either. I suppose being forced to deal with some politics has affected me more than anything. Using that less-than-elegant segue, I'll just say that things are progressing well on Ruhn. They could be worse, but an unexpected visitor and her tutelage are, in my opinion, turning the tide in my favor.

Speaking of inartful segues—Tes is the unexpected visitor. She came to see me on Ruhn because of some...waves I stirred up. She's very worried about you, and I know she'll be delighted to hear about your experiences on Crydagh. I don't suppose Oomah will allow you to visit Fanwath? I'll be here three more days. I don't even know how long it'll take for my message in this book to find its way to yours.

Victor paused, wondering how much he should say about Tes. Should he reassure Valla that nothing had happened between them? He felt like broaching the topic unprompted would be crass. He and Valla were just coming to terms with their new status; why should he bring up romance involving anyone else, even if it were simply to deny it was happening? More than that, a denial felt dishonest; he might not have made anything happen with Tes, but he wanted to. Clicking his tongue with faint frustration, he finished his letter:

I'm going to let Tes read your last message as I think it'll make her very happy, and I hope you don't mind, but I'll give her the opportunity to write a note to you in this book. In the meantime, please write again whenever you like; I'll be checking this book far more frequently.

Love always,

Victor

Victor closed the book and leaned back with a sigh. He felt lighter, like he'd shed a burden he hadn't known he was carrying. It was good to have all that off his chest. It was good to know Valla was doing well. A sudden yawn gripped him, and he arched his back, wringing forth several pops. Grinning, he got ready for bed and climbed into the soft sheets, letting the enchanted feather mattress engulf him. In moments, he was asleep, his chest rising and falling with slow, steady breaths as his untroubled mind drifted into oblivion.

When Victor woke and went downstairs to find some breakfast, he found Tes in the kitchen, teaching the cook, an elderly Ardeni woman named Grissa, how to make what she claimed was the “flakiest, tastiest, tart crust in seven universes.” Victor was no tart expert, but when the timer dinged, and the little pastries came out of the oven, he couldn’t stop eating until he’d consumed seven sweet fruit tarts and three savory sausage ones.

When Grissa tried to hand him another, he laughed and shook his head. “I could eat twenty but save some for the rest of the household.”

“But, milord, they’re all away!”

“No, Grissa, I meant you and the others working today. Enjoy yourselves!” As she blushed, curtsied, and thanked him, Victor turned to Tes. “Care to join me outside? I figure I’ll try another one of our patterns before we fly off to visit the Shadeni.”

“T’would be my pleasure.” She stood, smiling in that confounding, “I know something no one else does” way of hers, and followed him to the gardens where they strolled down the trail to the beach. After they’d put a bit of distance between the garden wall and themselves, she looked up at him. “You seem different this morning. Lighter. What happened?”

“Seriously?” Victor looked at her, shaking his head. “Is that a dragon thing or a Tes thing?”

“What? Being able to read someone close to me?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, maybe a bit of both. So? Out with it!”

“I read Valla’s latest letter and wrote back to her.” He smiled, nudging Tes with his elbow. “I’ll show you if you like. I told her I would.”

“I’d like that! Nothing too personal?”

“Nah, nothing you don’t already know.” They were both quiet for the rest of the walk to the beach, but when they arrived, Victor looked at Tes, clasping his hands behind his back. “You pick the spell I do this morning.”

“I was hoping you’d ask! Let’s see how your new light spell works.”

Victor smiled and nodded; he was eager to try it, also. If it worked the way they hoped, his new spell would replace several others: Enraging Orb, Globe of Insight, Dauntless Radiance, and Harsh Light of Justice—all his light spells. They all had almost identical patterns, only slightly altered by the System when Victor channeled different Energy affinities into his Globe of Insight pattern. This new spell took that pattern, added to it, perfected it, and, just like his new Core Domain spell, contained a matrix for altering and modifying the spell based on what Energy Victor channeled into it.

In other words, if things went right, the new pattern would be a more powerful utility spell that would work with any Energy type; he wouldn’t have to build four subtly different patterns to effect different outcomes. Those thoughts idly passed through Victor’s mind as he reviewed the spell’s pattern. Despite only being a “light” spell, it wasn’t exactly simple, consisting of three pages of densely packed designs. “No, that’s not right…”

“Hmm? Found a mistake?”

“No, a mistake in my thinking. It’s not just a light spell anymore.”

“No, each of your affinities should provide different benefits. Will you start with inspiration?”

“Yeah, I actually really like my Globe of Insight spell, so I’m nervous about losing it. I’ll feel better when I see the new one isn’t any worse.”

Tes chuckled and plopped down on the sand. “It won’t be.”

Victor knew she was right—in theory. They’d built the pattern together, after all. He knew the matrix would take the spell’s attuned Energy and run it through a refinement algorithm—a construct in some elder spell patterns that would alter the spell’s final effects to maximize the potential of the Energy running through it. “Here,” he summoned the Farscribe journal he shared with Valla and handed it to Tes. “Write her a note if you want.”

Tes took it, her eyes bright, and suddenly, a fancy, sapphire-studded onyx calligraphy pen appeared between her fingers. Victor turned back to his pattern, slowly building it in his pathway as he worked his way through it. It wasn’t easy, but not nearly as hard as the Core Domain spell. The

funny thing was that it was a similar spell—just a much cheaper, watered-down version. Like the domain spell, this light spell would affect him, his allies, and his enemies, though the effects would be less significant and wouldn't affect the environment beyond the obvious—light.

When he stood, Tes looked up from her writing and watched as Victor finished the last flourish of the pattern in his pathway. The spell flashed, began to fill with Energy, and then, to no one's surprise, the System stepped in:

Warning! The spell being cast incorporates and alters other System-granted spells. If you complete this casting, your System-granted spells will be removed.

Warning! The spell being cast does not follow System-designed iterations and may be too powerful for you. Proceed at your own risk.

Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

With a resigned sigh, Victor quickly selected “NO.” The spell finished populating with Energy, and then, to his delight, a blazing orb of white-gold light appeared in the air before him. It almost looked like the old iteration of Globe of Insight when he overcharged it with Energy. He noticed a difference in the effects, however. As always, the world seemed brighter, and everything he focused on was sharper and more detailed, somehow made bigger and clearer without actually being any bigger.

He turned in a slow circle, staring at the waves as they crashed, wondering what it would take to build a pier. Could he do it himself? He started imagining where he'd put the piles and what type of wood or stone he'd use, and then he thought about how he'd place the beams and joists. “Man, some teak planks would go nicely for decking. Imagine! We could walk out there and fish; how relaxing would that be?”

“Hmm?” Tes asked, her voice a little dreamy.

“I was thinking about building a fishing pier out there.”

“Funny, I was just thinking about your armor. We've put off evaluating your new pieces too long. You have to fight soon! Old gods! When was the last time you checked on Lifedrinker?”

“Hah! Not long ago. She’s almost done, I think. We can both look in on her after our visit to the Shadeni. How’s that sound?” Lifedrinker had taken a lot longer to consume her latest bit of magical metal—the second of the two he’d gotten in the Iron Mountain dungeon. Tes thought it was mostly Victor’s fault; the axe had barely finished incorporating the silvanite when he’d given her the ferrithium to process. Tes had been annoyed to hear about it, saying he should have spent some time with her, learning what had changed with the silvanite, but the damage had been done; he couldn’t interrupt the process half-done.

“It sounds good—Victor! This light is quite impressive; I’ve felt your old orb, and this one is certainly a great deal stronger as far as the inspiration influence goes. Was the System pleased with your work?”

Victor chuckled and looked at the messages awaiting him:

You have discovered a new spell: Prismatic Illumination – Epic.

Your new spell renders System-granted spells obsolete. Removing.

You have lost the spell: Harsh Light of Justice – Improved.

You have lost the spell: Dauntless Radiance – Basic.

You have lost the spell: Globe of Insight – Improved.

You have lost the spell: Enraging Orb – Basic.

Prismatic Illumination – Epic: You wield the power of light itself. This spell will conjure a multi-faceted aura of illumination, capable of banishing darkness, revealing hidden truths and insights, or striking fear or blind rage into the hearts of foes. Depending on the Energy channeled, the light shifts in nature, offering a spectrum of boons to allies and banes to enemies. Whether bolstering resilience, confounding senses, or unleashing destructive brilliance, Prismatic Illumination adapts to the given affinity. Its intensity and duration scale with the Energy invested. Energy Cost: Variable.

Warning! This spell is not System-designed! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!

Victor read the spell description to Tes, and she clapped her hands. “As we anticipated! Well done, Victor! Your second epic-tier design!” She wasn’t counting Core Domain, as it was complete in the book he’d found.

“Well, I had your help.” She didn’t reply, and he added, “I’m interested to see how the new Alter Self works.” She’d helped him make nearly a hundred adjustments to his first elder magic spell. When he’d created the pattern so long ago, struggling simply to comprehend the notes Tes had given him, he’d made a few mistakes, and Tes had admitted that she’d left out a few components to simplify it.

“Now? Let’s fly! You can do it later! You’ve only three more spells to try out, and we still have three days of vacation!”

“Vacation? Is that what this is?”

“For me, yes! You wouldn’t believe the nonsense I’ve been putting up with since Coloss.”

Victor folded his arms over his chest. “I might believe it, you know, if you told me about it.”

Tes nodded, sighing as she reached out to rest a hand on his folded forearms. “Fair. I’ll try to communicate better. But, seriously, can we please fly?” Victor answered by summoning his fiery wings, but Tes grabbed his wrist, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t make me take my natural form to show you what true speed is! Let’s make it a fun flight, not a race! I want to see some of the sights.”

Victor nodded, gently extracting himself from her grip. He turned his gaze to the north along the beach. “Want to see where I killed Karl the Crimson?”

Book 10: Chapter 6: Letters and Flight

6 – Letters, Light, and Flight

Victor sat alone in his suite on a couch he was acutely aware Valla had chosen, purchased, and placed there. Tes had gone to bed, seemingly quite satisfied with the meal they’d been served, but Victor, despite his busy day, couldn’t muster enough sleepiness to force a yawn. His mind was alive with a thousand different thoughts, but most of all, he kept thinking about the revelation he and Tes had experienced under the influence of his inspiration domain. That was why he was sitting on the

couch, staring at a painting of a forest at sunset that Valla had hung. That was why the Farscribe book he shared with her was on his lap.

With trepidatious fingers, he pulled back the leather-bound cover and leafed through the pages until he came to the last entry he'd read. Before he let his eyes drift past it, he reviewed the meat of what she'd written:

...I'm leaving for a new world tomorrow—an ocean world populated by aquatic people who live on islands and swim and breathe freely under the water. It's called Crydagh, and there are rumored to be creatures living in those waters that rival dragons! Fantastic beasts called Booraghi roam the oceans, unafraid of anything—even your mentor, Ranish Dar, would think twice about crossing one of them. If treated with respect, they're peaceful, though, and will sometimes speak to lesser beings who visit them. I'm going to seek one out; rumors have it that they'll grant boons to visitors they take a fancy to. Even if they refuse to speak to me, which I'm told happens often, I believe the trip will be worthwhile. Wouldn't seeing such a creature be a reward in itself?

He wondered if she'd seen the great sea creatures that had so intrigued her. He supposed that was a good place to start, assuming she hadn't already written to him about her experience—he hadn't looked. The thought brought his mind around to the words he'd used in the last letter he'd written. He scanned over them, groaning as he read.

...I don't know if I'll ever get over you and the missing piece of my heart that you took with you, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try to remember that no matter what, I love you, and I don't want you to be gone from my life. So, yeah, I'll try to be better about writing, but I can't do it every day, every week, or even every month. I have to give myself room to breathe, to experience life without you, 'cause that's what you wanted, and it's too hard to let you go if I'm constantly reminding myself about how much I miss you...

He hadn't written to her since, and it had been a lot longer than a month—closer to six. With something like dread in his heart, he turned the page to see if she'd written any sort of response. His feelings were a mixture of relief and guilt when he saw two new letters from her. One was short and quick to read:

Victor,

I'm so sorry for the pain I've caused you. I hope you know that my heart is heavy, too, but, as you said, it will be good for you to find room to breathe. There's so much in the many worlds available to us; I want you to experience the peaks that I'm not ready to climb. Don't you see that it was a

burden on me, too, when I saw you being held back? Don't you see that I, too, must "find room to breathe?" I love you, and I will write again. I look forward to hearing from you when you're ready.

Love always,

Valla

Victor couldn't help a smile from creeping onto his lips as he read. It was just like Valla to use his words against him. She was right, he supposed; if anyone in their relationship had made it hard for the other to "breathe," it was Victor. He let his eyes drift down to the next, lengthier message:

Victor! I have amazing, wonderful news! My journey to Crydagh has proven fruitful beyond my wildest dreams. Oh, I have so much to tell you, but I doubt you want to read a book-long entry, and besides, I don't want to use up all of our pages, not until we can meet again and exchange a new Farscribe journal. Let me just say that this world is truly a wonder.

As I told you, the natives breathe freely in air or water, and the chamber where the System Stone deposited me was like a great, inverted fishbowl at the bottom of a shallow sea. I stood in wonder, watching the colorful fish, beautiful people, and strange, moving plants for hours before seeking out a guide.

I'll get to the good part: I joined an expedition to seek out the Booraghi, and we found one of their caravans—that's what the people here call their nomadic family groups. They're simply breathtaking creatures! Bigger than a house—no, half as big as one of the crystal spires at the center of Sojourn! They're not scaled like a fish but have beautiful, colorful flesh—yellow, orange, pink, blue, and purple. And their many fins flow through the water like colorful wings, though I dare say they aren't feathered. Rather, they're like gigantic, elegant fronds—almost plant-like.

I'd purchased an apparatus to allow me to breathe underwater, and, with the rest of my tour group, I swam out with the desperate hope that one of the creatures would speak to me; they don't use words, but project a surprisingly beautiful song. To most, it sounds like meaningless music, but if they direct it at an individual, it can be understood. So, as the water filled with the trilling music, everyone grew hopeful. I waited and listened, swimming desperately to keep up with the tremendous leisurely creatures, and then, to my delight, one of them spoke to me.

His name is Oomah, but he tells me it's much longer and more beautiful in song form. To make a very long conversation short, he saw something in me, Victor. A potential he described as "remarkable." He's offered to take me on as a student, something so rare, that only a handful of such cases have been recorded in all of the Crydaghian's history. To my great wonder and delight,

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Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

With a resigned sigh, Victor quickly selected “NO.” The spell finished populating with Energy, and then, to his delight, a blazing orb of white-gold light appeared in the air before him. It almost

looked like the old iteration of Globe of Insight when he overcharged it with Energy. He noticed a difference in the effects, however. As always, the world seemed brighter, and everything he focused on was sharper and more detailed, somehow made bigger and clearer without actually being any bigger.

He turned in a slow circle, staring at the waves as they crashed, wondering what it would take to build a pier. Could he do it himself? He started imagining where he'd put the piles and what type of wood or stone he'd use, and then he thought about how he'd place the beams and joists. "Man, some teak planks would go nicely for decking. Imagine! We could walk out there and fish; how relaxing would that be?"

"Hmm?" Tes asked, her voice a little dreamy.

"I was thinking about building a fishing pier out there."

"Funny, I was just thinking about your armor. We've put off evaluating your new pieces too long. You have to fight soon! Old gods! When was the last time you checked on Lifedrinker?"

"Hah! Not long ago. She's almost done, I think. We can both look in on her after our visit to the Shadeni. How's that sound?" Lifedrinker had taken a lot longer to consume her latest bit of magical metal—the second of the two he'd gotten in the Iron Mountain dungeon. Tes thought it was mostly Victor's fault; the axe had barely finished incorporating the silvanite when he'd given her the ferrithium to process. Tes had been annoyed to hear about it, saying he should have spent some time with her, learning what had changed with the silvanite, but the damage had been done; he couldn't interrupt the process half-done.

"It sounds good—Victor! This light is quite impressive; I've felt your old orb, and this one is certainly a great deal stronger as far as the inspiration influence goes. Was the System pleased with your work?"

Victor chuckled and looked at the messages awaiting him:

You have discovered a new spell: Prismatic Illumination – Epic.

Your new spell renders System-granted spells obsolete. Removing.

You have lost the spell: Harsh Light of Justice – Improved.

You have lost the spell: Dauntless Radiance – Basic.

You have lost the spell: Globe of Insight – Improved.

You have lost the spell: Enraging Orb – Basic.

Prismatic Illumination – Epic: You wield the power of light itself. This spell will conjure a multi-faceted aura of illumination, capable of banishing darkness, revealing hidden truths and insights, or striking fear or blind rage into the hearts of foes. Depending on the Energy channeled, the light shifts in nature, offering a spectrum of boons to allies and banes to enemies. Whether bolstering resilience, confounding senses, or unleashing destructive brilliance, Prismatic Illumination adapts to the given affinity. Its intensity and duration scale with the Energy invested. Energy Cost: Variable.

Warning! This spell is not System-designed! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!

Victor read the spell description to Tes, and she clapped her hands. “As we anticipated! Well done, Victor! Your second epic-tier design!” She wasn’t counting Core Domain, as it was complete in the book he’d found.

“Well, I had your help.” She didn’t reply, and he added, “I’m interested to see how the new Alter Self works.” She’d helped him make nearly a hundred adjustments to his first elder magic spell. When he’d created the pattern so long ago, struggling simply to comprehend the notes Tes had given him, he’d made a few mistakes, and Tes had admitted that she’d left out a few components to simplify it.

“Now? Let’s fly! You can do it later! You’ve only three more spells to try out, and we still have three days of vacation!”

“Vacation? Is that what this is?”

“For me, yes! You wouldn’t believe the nonsense I’ve been putting up with since Coloss.”

Victor folded his arms over his chest. “I might believe it, you know, if you told me about it.”

Tes nodded, sighing as she reached out to rest a hand on his folded forearms. “Fair. I’ll try to communicate better. But, seriously, can we please fly?” Victor answered by summoning his fiery wings, but Tes grabbed his wrist, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t make me take my natural form to show you what true speed is! Let’s make it a fun flight, not a race! I want to see some of the sights.”

Victor nodded, gently extracting himself from her grip. He turned his gaze to the north along the beach. “Want to see where I killed Karl the Crimson?”

Book 10: Chapter 8: Good Things

“Like your mentor, Dar?”

“Right. So, anyway, they’re very powerful, and one thing I’ve learned about people with that kind of power is that they can snoop on us little people pretty easily. They’re supposed to be neutral, but even Tes agrees with me that they’re probably not. The ‘great houses’ on Ruhn have been in power for a long, long time, and I think it would be foolish to think none of the veil walkers are related to them one way or another.”

“So you don’t want them to see you working your new magic?”

“Basically, yeah.” He looked at her sideways. “Hey, speaking of magic, how are things going for you? How’s your Core coming along?”

“Do you fear I’ve let your gift go to waste? Fear not! Old Mother taught me a thing or two about cultivating my courage-attuned Energy before she passed, and I’ve been diligent. The band of moonlight-hued Energy that circles my death-attuned Energy has grown thick and vibrant, compressing that cold blue center into a smaller, denser heart. It’s there but never leaks out unless I call upon it. Meanwhile, the courage you gifted me is a boon to all the Shadeni I care for.”

Victor smiled, his heart warmed by the success. He put his arm over her shoulders and squeezed her tight to his side. “I’m happy about that, Thayla. Do you Spirit Walk often?”

“Oh yes. I have duties as the mother of this clan that require it.” She tugged him to the side, and they left the main track on a narrow game trail, weaving between tall, mature trees up into the hills. They walked quietly for a while, and then Thayla stopped, turning to look back the way they’d come, sighing happily at the vista.

The sun was turning the eastern horizon yellow and orange, and the thin, wispy clouds were painted with the same shades. “I haven’t watched a sunrise from this spot yet. Thank you for getting me out so early, Victor.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it—this land we took from the undead?” He moved to a flat spot on the ridge and summoned a chair from his storage ring, setting it down for Thayla and then pulling forth another for himself.

Thayla sat, but her face had gotten serious, her smile fading. “It is beautiful, but we paid dearly.”

Victor nodded. “Yeah, and not just to the undead—to the Ridonne on the way here. Your people paid more than most.”

Thayla shook her head. “Not as much as the Naghelli or the people from Nia’s world.”

“Dark Ember,” Victor growled, the words coming from his lips like a curse. “I want to go there. I want to help the people there, but Tes thinks the ‘great vampire lords’ are probably veil-walkers—steel seekers, at least.”

Thayla nodded, watching him sit beside her. “And you’ve many other commitments. Is it up to you to save everyone?”

“No, not everyone,” Victor sighed, summoning a small camp stove and setting it up before his chair. “I feel like I ought to help those I know about, though. Of course, I promised I’d help the giants of Zaafor deal with Warlord Thoargh, too. I’m actually looking forward to seeing his pinché smug face again.”

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Thayla laughed. “Glad you’re still the same old Victor in there underneath all those layers of power.”

“Layers of power? Do I seem different?”

“I can feel your Spirit Core. It’s like being a little too close to a campfire.”

“Oh, shit.” Victor looked inward and ensured he was holding his aura well in check; he was. “Is it uncomfortable?”

“No!” Thayla laughed and smiled at him, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “It’s not like that; it’s more, well, it’s more that I can tell you’re holding back—like a compressed spring. It’s different with Tes. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was just a normal tier-two or tier-three cultivator. Why is that?”

Victor shrugged. “I think it has to do with her being past the iron ranks. Like, she’s as strong as a veil walker, but she doesn’t use that terminology. I think once you reach that kind of power, it’s easier to hide it somehow. Dar seems perfectly harmless half the time, too—other than his size and pissed-off expressions.” Victor laughed. He leaned forward and summoned a little kettle, setting it on the stove to heat up.

“What are you making?”

“Some coffee. I bought it in Sojourn.” While he spoke, he summoned a little table and set it beside the stove. Then he brought out his coffee pot, strainer, two cups, a bowl of sugar, and a carafe of cream. He loaded some fresh coffee grounds into the metallic strainer and placed it atop the pot. “I think there are better ways to make it, but I never really learned before leaving home. My abuela always made it in an old electric coffee pot.”

“I’m eager to try it!”

“Well, while that’s heating up, wanna help me try out one of my new spells?”

“Of course I do.”

Victor stood and held out a hand, pulling Thayla to her feet. Then, he pointed to a spot a bit further away, near a large fallen tree. “Stand over there by that tree and pretend a bunch of monsters are surrounding you, getting ready to kill you.”

Thayla laughed, shaking her head as she walked over to the tree. “How am I to pretend that?”

“I don’t know. Hold up your hands and cower.”

“Hah! I wouldn’t! I’d die with spear in hand!”

“Okay, fine—do that!” Victor watched as she summoned her spear and began jabbing it at imaginary enemies, then he pulled out his elder magic book, flipping to the spell he had in mind. “Perfect! Keep that up for a few minutes while I review this pattern.”

“What? A few minutes?”

Victor chuckled, nodding as he examined the pattern. It was one of the easier of his new spells, only filling a couple of pages. He started building the pattern in his pathway, using, per usual, his inspiration-attuned Energy. Two minutes later, he turned the page and continued, delicately weaving multiple threads of Energy in and out of the intricate pattern. In the end, it had two complex sections—one that was very familiar to him and part of a System-granted spell meant for shielding and another that was totally new to him, something Tes had guided his hand on.

When the pattern flashed and solidified in his pathway, the System brought forth its now-familiar complaints:

Warning! The spell being cast incorporates and alters another System-granted spell. If you complete this casting, your System-granted spell will be removed.

Warning! The spell being cast does not follow System-designed iterations and may be too powerful for you. Proceed at your own risk.

Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO.

He glanced at Thayla and saw her seemingly frozen in place, fighting her imaginary enemies. “Okay, let’s see how this works.” Victor mentally indicated he wanted to proceed with the spell, and then Energy poured out of his Core, empowering the magic. With a flash like a bomb going off, a brilliant, white-gold ball of Energy enveloped Thayla. At the same time, with a dizzying surge of power, Victor’s stomach fell away as he was ripped through the fabric of reality and, in the space of a single heartbeat, brought back exactly where Thayla had been standing. Meanwhile, she had gone to his previous location, her golden shield still intact.

“What—ack!” Sounds of retching emerged from the shield of inspiration-attuned Energy surrounding Thayla, and Victor understood why; he was dizzy, and his stomach was churning from

the sudden relocation. He leaned forward, hands on knees, as the sensation faded. Blinking away watery eyes, he read the System messages:

You have discovered a new spell: Guardian's Rescue – Epic.

Your new spell renders a System-granted spell obsolete. Removing.

You have lost the spell: Guard Ally – Basic.

Guardian's Rescue – Epic: You have mastered the art of tactical intervention. When cast, Guardian's Rescue encases your chosen ally in a cocoon of Energy. This protective cocoon absorbs incoming damage and rebuffs attackers with damage based on the attunement used to cast it. Simultaneously, the spell triggers a teleportation effect, instantly swapping your position with that of your ally, provided they are within your line of sight. Whether to pull an ally from danger or place yourself at the heart of the fray, Guardian's Rescue grants unparalleled control over battlefield positioning, offering a lifeline in critical moments. Energy Cost: 10,000.

Warning! This spell is not System-designed! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!

“Not bad!” Victor laughed, straightening up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Thayla called from within the blazing shell of Energy, though she sounded a bit put out. “How long will this persist?”

“I don’t know. Hang on.” Victor summoned the fancy broadsword he’d gotten inside the Iron Prison. It was a heavy, wonderfully crafted weapon with a faintly luminescent silver-flecked dark-metal blade that was, if Victor remembered correctly, crafted from sableglow steel. It felt comfortable in his hand, and the balance made him want to swing it, almost like it had its own inertia. He stepped closer to Thayla, and then, careful that his blow would hit the shell of magical Energy but not her, he swung the sword at it.

His blade impacted the barrier and penetrated it, though barely. Meanwhile, a wave of doubt and discouragement washed over Victor, and he gasped, “Shit! Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Thayla narrowed her eyes at him through the haze of Energy. “Why? That sword didn’t even come close to me.”

Victor stepped back, his hand shaking, his mind clouded by confusion. After a minute, he started to laugh. “Holy shit! That’s what my own Energy did to me! It basically did the opposite of inspiration.” He stepped close again. “Hold still.” With a grunt, he lifted the sword and brought it down even harder on the shell. This time, the barrier shattered, but Victor fell back, his mind racing for answers to questions he couldn’t grasp. He stumbled and fell onto his butt, pawing at the ground with his hands as he crab-walked away from Thayla.

She looked at him like he was mad, laughing as she asked, “What are you doing?”

It took a good twenty or thirty seconds before Victor could form a coherent thought and piece together what was happening. “I just blasted myself with confusion or doubt or something. Holy shit, that’s cool.”

“You teleported me and shielded me! If I hadn’t gotten sick, I’d congratulate you.” She stepped close and held out a hand. Victor smiled and took her hand in his, laughing as she grunted and failed to pull him to his feet. “Help me a little, you oaf!”

“All right, all right.” When she tugged again, Victor surged to his feet and smiled. “Sorry about the upset stomach; I didn’t know it would do that.”

“That spell is amazing, Victor. Do you think I could learn it?”

Victor frowned, turning to walk over to the kettle. It was bubbling, so he slowly drizzled its contents onto the coffee grounds, watching as the darkened water dripped into the pot. “I think you could, eventually, but, for starters, it takes ten thousand Energy to cast. Also, the System doesn’t like it.”

“What does that mean?” Thayla moved to sit in her camp chair.

“It’s not a System-granted spell. It’s built using a kind of magic that I’m nervous even mentioning to you because I don’t want you to gain some new enemies—the kind of enemies that can appear out of nowhere and kill you with a snap of their fingers.” He illustrated by holding his hand in front of her eyes and snapping.

She slapped his hand away. “They’d kill me?”

“Well, they might not kill you for learning, but they’d certainly put me on a to-be-killed list for teaching you. I don’t think we’re ready to face that risk yet. Let me get more powerful, and you need to gain some strength, too.” He paused his pouring and looked at her. “Do you think you want to do that? I mean, keep gaining levels? Now that you know what’s out there?”

“I think so, but I’m in no hurry, Victor. I’ll content myself with this quiet life for a decade or two—I’d like to see the children grow up and start their lives. Then, maybe I’ll visit one of the worlds you’ve discovered. Maybe you can give me a suggestion.”

Victor grinned. “Hell yes, I can.”

After a while, when Victor finished the coffee and poured them each a cup, she held it close, savoring the aroma as she looked out over the hillside. “Are they more beautiful?”

Victor poured some cream into his cup and narrowed his eyes. “Who?”

“Not people. I mean those other worlds you’ve seen. Are they more beautiful?”

“Than this?” Victor looked out over the countryside, taking in the blue-green treetops and the great fields of shimmering grass reflecting the morning’s bright rays. “Not a chance, Thayla. Some of the worlds I’ve been to were godawful—wastelands filled with poisonous air or deserts with hardly a thing growing in them. Sojourn is pretty in a way; you can see the stars all day and night like you’re practically in space, and the city is wondrous. Ruhn is pretty, too, but no more than Fanwath, though Iron Mountain is something awesome. You’ve got to see it to know what I mean.”

Thayla smiled at that and took a tiny sip of her coffee. “Oh,” she said, holding it out to peer at the dark liquid. “It smells better than it tastes.”

Victor laughed and took her cup. “You might like it more with some sugar and cream. It takes a little getting used to.”

She smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder. “Like many good things.” He knew what she meant: she hadn’t exactly been fond of him when they’d first met.

He nodded, grinning as he scooped a tablespoon of sugar into her cup. “Yeah, Thayla. Like many good things.”

Book 10: Chapter 9: Glacial Wrath

Spells:

Iron Berserk

Epic

Inspiration of the Quinametzin

Epic

Channel Spirit

Improved

Prismatic Illumination

Epic

Project Spirit

Improved

Heroic Heart

Basic

Spirit Walk

Advanced

Tether Spirit

Basic

The Inevitable Huntsman

Improved

Aspect of Terror

Advanced

Imbue Spirit

Improved

Honor the Spirits

Improved

Alter Self

Improved

Velocity Mantle

Epic

Banner of the Champion

Basic

Wild Totem

Advanced

Impart Nightmare

Improved

Guardian's Rescue

Epic

Volcanic Fury

Improved

Wake the Earth

Basic

Roots of the Angry Mountain

Advanced

Greater Spirit Binding

Advanced

Voice of the Angry Mountain

Basic

Locate Ally

Basic

Core Domain

Epic

Glacial Wrath

Epic

Book 10 Chapter 10 Let Doubt Enter Their Hearts

Strength:

680 (780)

“Shit,” he muttered. “It's giving me a hundred strength!”

“Truly? That's a significant boon for anyone, Victor! It's quite fetching, too. You look regal but not in a foppish princeling sort of way. It will serve as excellent armor, too. I imagine it will be difficult to pry from your head if you don't want it off.”

She reached down to pick up the impossibly heavy gauntlets, smiling as she weighed them in her hands. “Another strength boon, though not a direct boost; you won't see this reflected on your System's status sheet. These gauntlets will make it easier for you to lift, strike, and deflect. They'll boost you beyond your natural means and would do so for anyone, though a person without a suitably robust skeletal structure would likely find themselves crippled by their power.”

“But I'm good? I already put them on once, and it seemed fine, but I wasn't sure I wanted to wear them instead of my Sojourn gauntlet.”

“Oh yes. An epic-tier titan bloodline? You'll be fine. As to your other concern, yes, these are far more potent than that lava whip of yours.” She handed the gauntlets to him, and Victor shrugged, stuffing his hands into them. As with the crown, he felt Energy infuse the bones of his hands and arms, flowing warmly through his shoulders and down his spine. The gauntlets hummed with power, the dark metal plates practically begging to be smashed into something.

Grinning, flexing his hands into fists and relaxing them, he nodded. “The leather under the plates is damn comfortable.”

“See how difficult it is to lift that aegis now!” Tes gestured to the heavy armor, and Victor obliged, reaching down to almost effortlessly hoist it up.

“Hah!”

“It has a seam in the back; it’s designed to be easy to equip. Put your arms through here.” She showed him how the armor could be pulled apart on invisible hinges, and when he slid his arms through and pushed it closed around his torso, the seams magically disappeared, and the armor made itself snug to him; it felt amazing.

“I feel like a walking tank.”

“A tank?” She narrowed her eyes.

Victor tried to shrug, but the armor wouldn’t convey the gesture. “A heavy, armored piece of war equipment.”

“And the boots?” Tes asked, reaching down to pick up the black-scaled footwear. “Oh!” she gasped softly. “That dungeon Core was trying to make a friend of you! These boots are designed for Spirit or Death Casters. You should have an easier time Spirit Walking with them. Victor, you may be able to travel between worlds like your mentor!”

“Well, I’ll definitely give ’em a try, but I don’t think I want to risk getting lost right before my duel.” Victor was half-joking, but he had some serious concerns about trying to find his way between worlds, especially for the first time. He thought it might be wise to have Dar along until he properly understood how to find those pathways.

“Even so, you should wear them. They’re excellent armor, and your Sojourn set is a bust now that you have these other pieces. Perhaps you could gift it to one of your comrades.”

Victor nodded, taking the boots and walking through his chambers to his bedroom, where he could look into a full-length mirror. “You think I should wear this armor in my upcoming duel?” Staring at himself, he had to admit the set was badass. Everything was primarily black with different sorts

of highlights, and the crown and aegis made him look more formidable, and...solid was maybe the right word. He looked like he could shrug off an avalanche.

The various enchantments did more than make him look tough, too. He felt the potential and strength buzzing through his bones and muscles. If he were a heavyweight before, he'd suddenly become a juggernaut. Tes hadn't answered him right away, but she nodded as she came to stand beside him, looking into the mirror with him. "I would wear this armor in your future duels. It's time to stop hiding what you are. It's time to give the champions of the great houses something to think about. Let doubt enter their hearts and fester there."