

## Victor BK7: Ch1

### Book 7: Chapter 1: The State of Things

Leshs enormous two-handed cudgel, Belagog, whistled through the air with enough momentum and weight to pulverize a granite boulder. He wasnt trying to break a boulder, though; he was trying to smash Victors skull. Unlike a boulder, Victor wasnt planning to stand still for the tremendous blow. He stepped forward and to the left, inside Leshs swing, moving much faster than anyone his size had a right to do. Lesh immediately saw his mistake, and his eyes widened as he lifted a clawed foot to rake Victors thigh in a bid to buy himself a fraction of a second and a few inches to recover.

Victors epic axe skill showed as he adjusted his hack. Hed been aiming at Leshs exposed ribs, but he swooped the blade downward, and Lifedrinker screamed, black smoke billowing from her smoldering edge as she took aim at Leshs outstretched knee. Victor wasnt berserk, but he was running Inspiration of the Quinametzin. He had his strength and agility boosted with Sovereign Will, and Lifedrinker was imbued with a shard of his spirit. Lesh saw the blow coming, but he couldnt evade it. Still, he twisted, following the momentum of his two-handed swing, trying to minimize Lifedrinkers impact.

When she cut into Leshs knee, despite the dragonkins potent defensive spells, his dense, scale-covered flesh, and his quick reflexes, Lifedrinker bit deeply, slicing into the meat of his thigh and Lesh grunted and roared, Gods be cursed! Again?

Victor laughed and lifted Lifedrinker. She boiled the blood off her blade, sending it into the air as more black smoke. First blood!

Lesh growled but lifted Belagog to his forehead, bowing to Victor. Well done, Lor . . . Victor. Perhaps another . . .

Thats it for me today, Lesh, sorry. Victor let his Inspiration drop, and as he began to relax and talk, Lifedrinker calmed as well, the smoldering heat of her blade fading. He and Lesh had been sparring almost every day since the colony's founding, and Victor enjoyed it, but he was spending far too much time on the practice field for his taste. Between bouts with Kethelket, Lesh, and Valla, he sometimes found an entire morning slipping between his fingers. There were so many other projects he wanted to work on things like studying the spellcrafting books Valla had gotten from Tes, experimenting with new affinity weaves, and, most importantly, helping the colony to grow so that they could open up world portals.

That one will sting for a while. Lesh rubbed the cut on his leg, but Victor wasnt worried; Lesh was the only opponent he never really tried to pull his attacks on the big dragon-blooded warrior healed almost as fast as he did. Big was an understatement. Lesh stood nearly ten feet tall and was even stockier than Victor. They both enjoyed fighting each other because if Victor didnt enrage himself to titanic proportions, they were pretty closely matched in strength and size; it was the only time Victor could go all out and not reduce himself with the Shape Self spell Tes had given him.

You told me it was fine if Lifedrinker ignited. I didnt complain when Belagog cracked my collar bone . . .

Im not complaining! Lesh shook his head and spat some black, tar-like saliva at a grouping of nearby stones. It sizzled for several seconds. Im paying you a compliment!

Ah, all right. Good, cause you know, its fun for me when we go all out like that, right? I can feel myself improving, too.

Aye, me as well. Lesh looked to the west, toward the Silver Sea. They were atop a hill, not more than a mile from where Victor had planted the colony stone, and they had a good vantage of the various ongoing construction projects. He gestured to the southern edge of the budding colony where Earth Casters were working to erect massive stone pillars in a rectangular pattern. It was the framework for something Rellia called a travel pavilion. I heard theyd set up the first portal to that city many of you hail from. What is it again? Parshi Gables?

Persi Gables. Yeah. I guess we have a connection to Rellias estate there now, which means well see a big influx of new colonists. I think shes planning to get the portal to Gelica up and running today or tomorrow, too.

Lesh nodded, thumping Belagog head-first into the soil. He leaned on the metal haft, and Victor watched the head sink another four inches into the well-packed ground. Which will speed the growth. Perhaps youll soon have access to world travel. You must be pleased.

Ill be pleased as long as we can get Edeya some help before its too late.

She seems stable. I believe you were correct; the witch who snatched her spirit has no immediate plans for it. Either that or she waits for the girls body to die so she can get the last fragment she left behind.

Victor frowned. Thinking about Edeya always put him in a bad mood, largely because it reminded him of his guilt. Lifedrinker had cooled sufficiently, so he held her over his shoulder, and his new harness snatched her, the enchanted leather straps wrapping around her and pulling her snugly against his back. The volcano had destroyed his old harness, and Rellia had commissioned this new one for him. Shed, of course, brought several talented Artificers along on the campaign.

Lesh had seen Victors mood turn sour. I dont mean to pester you with unpleasant thoughts. I only bring up the topic because Im eager to help. Im eager to see your friend made whole.

Ah, yeah. No, I appreciate that, Lesh. Victor had resigned himself to the fact that hed have a small entourage when he traveled to the hub world, as Lesh described it. Naturally, Valla intended to go with him. Lesh insisted that he had to follow Victor no matter the destination, and then there were Edeya and Lam; the self-made noblewoman would hardly let Edeya out of her sight.

In the two weeks since the founding, Victor had gotten to know Lesh pretty well. At first, hed tried to talk the dragonkin into going home. The giant warrior spoke fondly of the many battles hed won, the social standing hed gained, and the wife hed left behind. To Victor, it seemed crazy to throw all that away to follow around a man youd traveled through the universe to kill. To Lesh, it was the only honorable choiceif he couldnt kill Victor, then he had to follow him. He had to learn from him, and he had to make an ally of him. Victor didnt see the logic but chalked it up to cultural differences. The simple truth he couldnt argue with was that Lesh was stronger than anyone else he knew, at least on Fanwath, and Victor figured hed need the help where he was going.

Are you going to study your spells? Lesh was used to Victor using that excuse to end their practice sessions.

Not today. Today, Im going to see the Shadeni clan off. Yesterday, Rellia and Lam finally signed off on their settlement location, and Tellen doesnt want to waste any more time; hes eager to get some structures built before Fall.

Ah, yes. The people with the red skin?

Right, though not everyone with red skin is part of their clan. Victor started walking toward the sea and the bulk of the new construction. He was still living out of his travel home, and it was set up in the courtyard of the keep Rellia had been building around the colony stone. He waved one last time to Lesh, and the mans green, reptilian eyes narrowed as he grinned and nodded.

Ill get you next time!

Victor shook his head and chuckled. Well see. He and the others whod been using the hilltop for sparring had worn a trail in the hillside. As he walked down it toward the little gravel pathway that would take him more directly into the settlement, he took in the view, letting his eyes traverse the various projects Rellia and her engineers had begun. The travel pavilion was impressive on its own, but it seemed insignificant in the shadow of the keep being built atop the central hill.

Magic made everything faster, but it was especially apparent when it came to building large structures. The Earth Casters were pulling massive stones from the quarry the surveyors had found in the mountains to the south and, again using magic, were carving and transporting them to the settlement much more quickly than even modern construction equipment might have done back on Earth. Victor had to admit that he didnt know much about large-scale construction, but hed watched some big buildings go up in Tucson, and hed seen how it took months before the outer shell looked like an actual building. That wasnt the case here.

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The keeps foundations had been dug and filled with stone footings in a single dayhundreds of yards of trenches, dug down twenty feet or more to solid bedrock, then filled with stone footings magically melded together without the need for mortar. Days after that, the outer walls had been built with enormous metal gates fit for an emperors palace put into place. Rellia had commissioned the gates back in Gelica, and theyd been carried in one of the capacious supply wagons.

Victor appreciated her preparedness, especially with regard to how quickly shed built the keep wall around the colony stone. If, for some reason, they were attacked, they were already in a position to defend the stone. The keep itself wasnt going up quite as quickly. It took planning to build the foundation, digging out the basement levels, and ensuring the infrastructure was in place for water and sewage. These were all things that had interested Victor, and theyd eaten away many afternoons as he wandered around observing, asking questions, and, of course, meeting with Rellia and Lam to approve this or that project.

They were still governing the colony as a triumvirate, though Rellia and Lam had plans to change that in the coming month, as the friends and family members of the legion came through the portal in their thousands. Victor didnt know all the details, but he knew thered be a sort of elected republic, but elections wouldnt be open to just any citizens; voting citizens had to hold land in the Free Marches, and those holdings would determine the weight of a persons vote. Naturally, Rellia, Lam, and Victor, being awarded the most land from the conquest, would have the most influence, but it was a commodity that could change hands.

Rellia was sharing a large portion of her claim with Lam, and the three of them, Victor included, were awarding parcels to the veterans of the conquest, including the Naghelli, Shadeni Clan, and all of the support personnel. To Victor, it didn't seem like much; the most significant awards for general troops were only a hundred acres, and some support personnel would only receive a single acre. People like Borrius would receive thousands, and some of the nobility from Rellias family would see more than that, but those were all coming out of her share. Victor was going to have a stretch of land numbering in the tens of millions of acres.

Because Victor had recruited the Naghelli and Shadeni, he'd agreed to award them land from his share. On the one hand, he didn't care because he had plenty, more than he'd ever wanted or could conceive of using. On the other hand, he didn't care because he liked the idea of having them close. He liked Kethelket and his people, and he felt they deserved it; it felt good to give it to them. The same went for the Shadeni, only doubly so.

Victor had lobbied with Lam and Rellia for a large tract of land that ran along most of the southern mountain range and then up the coast of the Silver Sea. There was an old-growth forest near the mountains and plenty of seaside hills where he might build a keep with a view. Grasslands stretched for a hundred miles north of the hills and forests, and Victor liked the idea of having so many different sorts of land to call his own. More importantly, he thought they'd accommodate his friends nicely; the agreement he'd come to with Tellen granted the Shadeni a million square acres of grassland and forest to call their own. Kethelket and his people were eager to claim some territory in the mountains near the forest, and Victor thought that would be fine.

He couldn't take all the credit for choosing his lands. Valla had come up with the idea of building a road and maintaining a garrison at the southern pass. It would put him, or, more likely, whomever he left in charge, in control of further exploration into unclaimed territory. His lands would meet with Rellias, which began near the Sea Keep and encompassed the primary settlement.

When he and Valla had made their proposal, Rellia hadn't been hard to convince. She wanted the northwestern lands, primarily because she wanted to be in control of the colony stone and the pass to Ridonne. Lam, also, had been easy-going; she had her eyes set on vast tracts of farmland that abutted the eastern mountains. All in all, so far Victor had the urge to knock on some wood. The fledgling colony and its triumvirate of leaders had been running smoothly.

As he contemplated the state of things, Victor rounded the last hill before the expansive, cleared area where Rellias engineers were laying out the new town square. With the sea as a backdrop and surrounded by the scaffolding of a dozen new buildings, he saw the Shadeni wagons and the bustling activity of nearly a thousand people as they readied their caravan. Some butterflies began to stir in his belly as Victor thought about meeting with Tellen, Thayla, and their family. He'd hardly spoken to Chandri since she'd recovered, and he might not be a genius when it came to reading women, but he felt like she harbored some severe animosity.

I wish I knew why. Victor had no problem finding fault with himself; he blamed the disastrous final battle and the assault on the Glorious Ninth on himself, but he couldn't find anyone else who'd admit to harboring the same opinion. He wouldn't blame Chandri if she were angry with him about that, but he didn't think that was it. Whatever, he grumbled as he reached into his Core and let some Energy out to cast Shape Self. He shrank down to a more comfortable six and a half feet and hurried his steps toward the front of the caravan, where he saw his old wagon and the two vidanii, Thistle and Starlight. If nothing else, he was eager to see Deyni.

He hadn't made it ten steps before jogging footsteps approached, and he turned to see Nia running his way. The former thrall of Dunstan had come through the battle unscathed, and she'd been working as something of an aide for Victor in the weeks following the colony's founding. It hadn't been his idea; she'd approached him and asked to swear into his household guard, something Valla found very amusing, but also, after she'd relaxed and thought about it for a minute, a good idea. Victor would have to establish some sort of governance and militia for his territory.

Nia was sharp and determined, and there was just something Victor liked about the scar-faced, dark-eyed woman. Her personal tale was tragic, but she never seemed down or tired or less than enthusiastic about any hard work. Lord Victor! She held up a thin leatherbound volume. You've received a response!

Ah! Really? She held the Farscribe book Victor shared with his cousin, Olivia. He'd written to her about their victory and about their plans for the Free Marches, but he hadn't received an immediate response. Afraid he'd put the book into a ring and forget about it, he'd given Nia the task of checking for a response twice daily. He slowed his pace to a stop and waited for her to catch up, then took the book. Did you read it?

Her eyes flew wide with shock, and her tone bordered on outrage, I would never!

Victor laughed. Relax! I'm not accusing you, and I never said you couldn't. Still, I guess it's good you didn't. Thanks for your discretion.

Of course!

Well, let me check it quickly before I get tied up with the Shadeni. Victor flipped the pages to the last written-in one and began to read:

Victor,

*Well done with the Free Marches! Congratulations! I'm sorry it's been a few days since I received your message, but I was rather busy with a challenge of my own. Something we can talk about next time we're together. My response was further delayed by my having to communicate with First Landing via another Farscribe book. It took a few days to relay the significance of your victory and for the Council Parliament to come up with a proper response to your good news. Forgive the cross out. I'm still getting used to the new system.*

*Along with the new government, First Landing has expanded. It seems we've unlocked the option to purchase town stones from the colony stone, so two new settlements are being developed out there in the frontier. As much as I was against it, some of the low-affinity species we rescued from another world—this is a very long story I'll share with you sometime—have decided to found their own town half a day's journey north of First Landing. Thanks to the colony stone providing the town stone for them, they'll be a member of our budding, as-yet-unnamed, and unofficial more on this in a moment new country.*

*Similarly, we've purchased another stone to make the mining community south of us official; the people have decided to name it Clearwater because of a lovely little stream that flows through the canyon. You can imagine the Ridonne Empire won't be pleased if they catch wind of our steady growth. You know that my friend, the aptly named champion of our people, Morgan Hall, traveled to the capital, Tharcray, to treat with them, right? Well, that's another very long story, and it's not resolved yet, but Morgan's last message to us was something along the lines of, The Ridonne have*

*their hands full. Still, he cautioned us to stay in the frontier and to keep a low profile as we continue to expand.*

*You know humanity, Victor. Were working to replicate much of the tech we lost to the System with Energy-based versions, and frankly, if Morgans right and the Ridonne are too busy to bother with us for much longer, I feel well be in a position to demand our place in this world when they finally get around to us. Thats without considering you and your allies in the Free Marches. What a great name for a country, by the way!*

*So, on to the business at hand. Im going to be tied up with some academy work, a special project for my sponsoring professor, for another month before I can take a break. The Coun Parliament has appointed a very good man, Alec Green, a dear friend of mine, to visit you as an ambassador. You mentioned that your friend, Lady Rellia, will be opening portals from Gelica and Persi Gables to your new settlement. I was going to send Alec to you with one of Morgans tower portal stones, but we, too, have some artificers whove finally reached the skill level required to create them.*

*Would it be possible for Alec to travel through Persi Gables to you? If so, hell bring a portal stone, and we can set up a direct connection to First Landing. If we did that, you could visit! Wouldnt that be great?*

*Ive rambled on enough for now. Ill await your response about Alec and directions for how he might access the portal in Persi Gables before I get lost on another tangent.*

*Ill look forward to your reply.*

*With affection,*

*Olivia Bennet*

Jeez. Victor snapped the book shut. I thought I was already busy.

## Book 7: Chapter 2: A Short Goodbye

Victor squatted down to better look into Deynis dark turquoise eyes. He remembered the first time he saw her; hed been behind bars, waiting for his big duel with Rellia. Hed noticed how her skin was more purple than red and how her hair and eyes were different from the Shadeni hed metmost of them had red-toned eyes from pink or magenta to deep crimson. He reached toward her, picked up one of her long, greenish-blue braids, and held it between his fingers. He knew now that her coloring had much to do with her father, an Ardeni man shed never met. You know what?

What, Victor? She always grinned when she spoke to him, like she was anticipating him teasing her or, at the very least, saying something silly.

I never put two and two together, but have you noticed how your hair and eyes are similar to Vallas?

Lady apYensha? Deynis eyes opened in wonder, and Victor knew she was picturing Valla as she looked now with her glorious wings and silver highlights.

Yeah. I wonder if maybe you two share a common ancestor. Im trying to remember, but I dont think Ive ever met another Ardeni with such a pretty color in their eyes.

Deynis skin was far too dark to show her blush, but her eyes squinted in a bashful smile as she looked away. Stop teasing me, Victor!

Im not, silly! They were outside of Victors old wagon, and he was waiting for Tellin and Thayla to come to see him. Challa had run to fetch them when Victor approached. He gave Deynis braid a little tug and laughed. Sorry if I embarrassed you. Ive been thinking a lot about bloodlines lately, thats all.

I wish I could have your bloodline! Deyni puffed out her chest and began to stomp around, arms out to her sides, her hands balled up in fists. Id smash my enemies and throw the Ridonne off the nearest mountain!

Victor laughed and, tired of squatting, fell back onto the grass, folding his legs in front of himself. Youre still angry about the Ridonne?

Of course! They killed my friends!

Well, the ones who did that have been punished. Its not healthy to hold onto a grudge, but its probably smart to keep a wary eye on the North. We dont want them to surprise us someday.

Thats right! Ill help to guard the Free Marches!

Victor plucked a long blade of blue-green grass and stuck the stem in his mouth. When he chewed the juicy end, it was almost sweet. Mm! I can see why Thistle likes this stuff.

A new voice spoke up behind him, Ive seen you eat! You couldnt live off grass.

Victor turned toward the voice, squinting into the bright sun. Chandri stood there, the sunlight like a halo around her short, spiky hair. For the first time in quite a while, shed washed the warpaint from her face, but she bore some new tattoosa fanged skull on her throat and, along her jawline, a series of crossed bones. She had other, older tattoos to commemorate her hunts, but these were the first shed added since Victor had known her. Hi, Chandri.

Milord. She mock curtsied, and Deyni broke into a giggle.

Well, Im glad to see you smiling. I like your new tattoos. Victor pulled up the sleeve of his comfortable gray shirt, or tunic, as the people in this world kept calling it, and displayed the tattoo shed given him. You do good work; this ones lasted through quite a few racial advancements.

Deyni stepped closer and leaned in to look at the markings. What does it mean?

Chandri squatted beside her and pointed to the blade-tipped hand. This is the hand of the monster Victor slew. Her finger traced upward to the spears. These are the six hunters whose lives he saved. She touched the bright orange sun. This is the dawn that came, though wed all thought wed die before we saw it. Her voice was soft and her touch very gentle, and Victor was suddenly hit with a deep, gut-wrenching sense of wistful melancholy. Though it felt absurd, he couldnt help wondering what his life would be like if hed embraced his feelings for Chandri and never returned to Persi Gables. For the first time, he thought he understood the emotion that lurked behind Chandris outwardly smiling eyes.

I wonder if Ill earn a tattoo someday. Deynis innocent remark broke the spell, saving him from further contemplation.

Chandri sat down at his side and closed her eyes, lifting her face to soak in the sunlight. Without opening them, she said, Youll have to be choosy about what tattoos to put on yourself; otherwise, youll run out of room. Youll be a famous beast tamer and adventurer, right?

Thats right!

Victor laughed, reaching out to pluck another blade of grass. And you, Chandri? Do you still dream of exploring beyond the Silver Sea?

More than ever. I think my brush with death has only deepened my desire to see more of the world.

I get that.

I hate it! I want you to stay with us. Deyni stepped behind Chandri and began to pull her fingers through her hair. Id braid it for you, but its not long enough yet.

Chandri smiled and replied, Im not going to leave right away, and when I do, you can bet Ill be back often. She leaned back, clearly enjoying Deynis attentions, and narrowed her eyes at Victor. I wonder if Victor can say the same.

Well, Victor? Deyni continued to stroke Chandris hair as she locked eyes with him.

The only thing I can promise is that I want to visit you. I want to spend time with you. Of course, Ill try. My first priority is helping Edeya, and I dont know what that will take. I bet I can visit after shes better, though.

Just visit? Chandri asked, relentless in her desire to keep him on the spot.

Come on, Chandri. You know Ive got other things calling me. Challenges I need to pursue, people Ive made commitments to.

People? Commitments? I only hear rumors; you havent told us much. Now Victor heard a touch of bitterness in her tone, and he began to sense a clue to her recent distance.

Is that what youve been bothered about? I thought you were mad at me about the attack . . .

Stolen novel; please report.

What? Im not mad at you! Chandri scrunched her eyes shut and leaned back toward Deyni, who was listening and watching Victors face while she massaged Chandris scalp. I would like to know more about you, though. Id like to be more than an afterthought . . .

Come on, Chandri! Weve been over this, havent we? Youre important to me! Im sorry Ive been so preoccupied, and I know I should spend more time with you, Victor paused, looking at Deyni and winking, and other people.

Its not just spending time; I know youre busy. I just think it would be nice if we spoke about more meaningful things more often. Like, just whom do you have commitments to out there? She waved a hand toward the sky, and Victor figured she meant out in the world or perhaps beyond it.

Yeah! Deyni nodded and winked at Victor, and he almost laughed, wondering if she had any idea what hed meant by his earlier wink.



Ill give you an example. I mean, you already know about Edeya. I visited another world where an evil Warlord has dominated society for a thousand years or more. Hes almost destroyed a species of titan there, and I befriended some of them. I sort of promised to return and try to restore them to their former strength. Its a big job because they had an artifact called an Ancestor Stone where theyd somehow preserved their titanic bloodline and the powers that come with it. The Warlord shattered it, and finding all the pieces will take a lot of work. Look! Victor held up his wrist with his silver bracer and the single pink fragment of the ancestor stone. I have one piece, but I have to find sixteen more.

And it has to be you? Deyni pressed, apparently taking over the questioning for Chandri, whod leaned further back, soaking in the sun while Deyni played with her hair.

Right now, Im the only titan-blood whos been to their world and offered to help. He shifted and looked past the wagon to the bustling activity of the Shadeni clan as they hurried to finish their travel preparations. He wondered what was taking Tellen and Thayla so long. Anyway, he said, trying to wrap up the topic neatly, you both should know this feels like home to me here on Fanwath. Especially with you and other people I care about here. Im going to build a house or . . . something near to where you all settle, and, of course, Ill visit when I can.

A house? Chandri opened her eyes. I thought that keep to the south was on your lands. The one guarding the pass.

Yeah, but I havent laid eyes on it, and I want to be near the sea, anyway; Im not sure I want to move into a castle up there in the mountains. Besides, the lands I granted to your clan arent far from the sea. According to Rellia, theres an easy ride over some grasslands and low hills, and then, there you are.

Victor! Thayla called out, breaking into a jog over the patchy grass. Tellen wasnt with her, but her smile was bright, and she seemed untroubled.

Mom! Deyna gave Chandri a quick kiss on the forehead, then let go of her hair and ran to greet her mom.

Shes so sweet, Chandri said, sitting up to watch Deyni run. Im truly happy that Thayla and Tellen found love.

Yeah. Victor nodded, suddenly a little choked up. Im glad that Deyni has you, Chandri. I hope you realize how much she looks up to you.

Huh. Seems like you dont realize that everyone looks up to me! Her tone was bright, and Victor had to give her a double-take.

Hey! Theres the old Chandri I knew. His words made her smile, and though it looked like she might want to reply, Thayla and Deyni arrived and plopped down in the grass.

Sorry it took me so long! Weve been drawing plans for our new settlement, and some of the families are arguing about . . . things. Its not easy for a community used to a nomadic lifestyle to trust that they have nothing to fear, no reason to believe an army will try to take their homes or property. Many want to keep to the old ways, and were trying to find a compromise.

Oh, dont worry about me. I just wanted to say goodbye; I thought you were heading out today.

We are! Well likely continue the debate on the trail. She paused, looked around for a few seconds, and then looked him right in the eyes. Victor, how long do you think youll stay here? Dont you need to establish your home? Set up some land grants to build up your income? You need to have a garrison or something in your keep . . .

Victor held up his hands and groaned. Thayla! You sound like Rellia and Borrius. I guess its safe to say that Im going to be terrible at this governing business, at least for right now. Im probably going to appoint a governor. Someone to run the place and set up just the sorts of things youre asking me about, at least for now.

And youre certain this person will respect your wishes and the promises youve made to us and the Naghelli?

Of course, Ill be certain about that! More importantly, Rellia knows what Ive given you, and she supports it completely, Lam, too! He gestured to the wagons. The land grant Ive written for you is legally binding and endorsed by all the stakeholders in the Free Marches. Your lands are completely yours. Once the landholder republic is established, youll only have to pay taxes for services that benefit the whole of the Free Marchesgame wardens, roads, a standing military to protect the border, etcetera. Victor laughed and shook his head. I wouldnt know any of that if I hadnt had a dozen lectures from Rellia over the last couple of weeks. Anyway, the governor I put in place will have to abide by the rules. Your lands are yours. Ive relinquished all claims.

And if you dont return? Thayla frowned and leaned forward to grasp Victors hand. Im not trying to be a problem, but this is the sort of argument were hearing from our people, the ones reluctant to build a permanent settlement.

Thayla, you have your deed, in writing, sealed by me, Rellia, and Lam. No matter how land is split down the road, your deed was written and approved by one hundred percent of the landholders in the Free Marches. I know youre worried that something will happen, but if, for some reason, I die or get captured, your rights wont go away. Valla says I should set up a trust or something so that, even if I never returned, my share of the Free Marches will continue to be governed the way I would like.

Thank you, Victor. Thayla nodded. That will help with our arguments, to know that even if you disappear, things will continue as youve promised. I know our deed entitles us to the lands, but well be surrounded by yours. Regardless, I pray that you wont disappear. Do you think we could share a Farscribe book?

Yeah, definitely! Well do that, and Ill also give one to my governor. Well make sure things continue smoothly here whenever Im away. Victor was glad to see the conversation moving along; he felt like they were going in circles, but he supposed it made sense considering the history of the Shadeni Clan with the Ridonne. Theyd been displaced many times and often despite promises to the contrary. He offered Thayla another smile and looked past her to the largest cluster of Shadeni, imagining Tellen at the center, busily trying to calm peoples worries. Do you think hell be able to break free?

Tellen? Hell say goodbye before we roll out, but hes going to be with those elders for a while. Im sorry, Victor.

Nah, its no problem. Id offer to speak with them, but I doubt it would help. Would it?

No, they trust you. Its just a general distrust of circumstances that has everyone worried. Its no secret that you plan to leave soon. Hows Edeya, by the way?

The same. I wish I could do something for her. As Im sure you know, its frustrating not having someone here whos more knowledgeable about the subject. I mean, as little as I know, Im finding that I know more than most when it comes to spirits and spirit Cores.

Believe me, I know. Old Mother used to talk about how she wished she could offer you more guidance, but its an affinity type thats been greatly maligned in this world. Most of what she knew, she taught herself. I hope that youll be able to learn more when you travel, and ancestors willing, bring that knowledge home to us.

Please, Victor! Deyni said, scooting closer to Thayla so her mother could wrap an arm over her shoulders.

You better believe I will, Deyni. Well give you everything you need to grow your Core into something special. He glanced at the sky, judged the sun to be just a bit past its midpoint, and said, Since Tellens tied up, I think Ill run a different errand. I left an artifact in Sea Keep and want to pick it up. If I cant figure it out here, Ill bring it with me when we travel.

Chandri perked up at Victors words, sitting up straight and blinking her eyes against the sun's glare. What sort of artifact?

Its a crown made of dark stone with weird runes all over it. Dunstan, the wampyr lord, was wearing it when I killed him. I didnt want to put it in my storage ring because it felt powerful and, Im not sure why, but I had a feeling that it might be, you know, conscious.

Thayla nodded, distracted while she worked on fixing one of Deynis braids. So you hid it in the keep before you left?

Yeah.

Chandri jumped up. Ill go with you!

Thayla frowned and opened her mouth, but Victor could almost see the second thought cross her mind as she reconsidered what shed been about to say. Thats up to Victor. We can spare you for now.

Yeah, sure. Victor clambered to his feet as Deyni also jumped up.

What about me?

Oh no, sweetie! I need your help with Starlight and Thistle. We must brush and feed them before we harness them to the wagon for days and days. Thayla snatched Deynis hand and pulled on her to help herself stand.

Victor squatted down and held out his arms. Give me a hug, you little huntress. Ill surely see you again before you leave, but I can never get too many hugs.

Deyni didnt need to be asked twice she crashed into him and wrapped her arms around his neck. While he squeezed her, she whispered in his ear, Promise this isnt a forever goodbye.

Victor felt that familiar lump in his throat and the sting in his eyes as tears tried to fight free. He wasnt sad or upset; he was just happy to have such an innocent,

sweet person giving him her love. He hadn't been lying when he said he felt like his home was there with the people he cared about. No, mija, it's not forever. I promise. This is just a short goodbye. He didn't hesitate at all to break his earlier commitment about making promises.

As he realized how much he wanted to return, how much he cared about Deyni and so many others, another realization hit him—the reason he hadn't been very excited about the news from Olivia that an ambassador and a portal stone to First Landing would be on the way, was because, to him, they were just strangers, regardless of their origin. He was more eager to see how the Naghelli made out than he was with First Landings prospects. He supposed that would change as he came to know them. He hoped he might make friends there and figured he ought to work to build a relationship with Olivia.

Sighing, he gave Deyni one last squeeze, then stood up and pulled some Energy out of his Core to summon Guapo. As the Mustang burst out of the pool of sparkling glory-attuned Energy, he turned to Chandri and grinned. Ready to see how fast this guy can run? Guapo interrupted her answer by rearing onto his hind legs and whinnying mightily. Victor laughed and slapped his rump. You big showoff!

#### Book 7: Chapter 3: Ambassador

Victor sat in the grass beside Edeya, watching Valla, Pollo Vosh, Kethelket, Lam, and Lesh have a wild practice melee a short way down the slope. He'd already been in half a dozen brawls that morning, and it was his turn to sit out with the incapacitated young woman. It had been Polos idea—having last one standing contests once a week. There were rules, of course. Victor wasn't allowed to go berserk; two hits from any source meant you were out, and, because of the wild nature of a free-for-all, no blows to the head or neck were permitted. That was just for starters; others also had limitations on their powers. For instance, Kethelket couldn't use his full shadow speed, and Lesh couldn't belch acid.

Victor snorted a quick laugh, gently squeezing Edeya's tiny, limp hand in his. He hates it when I say that, chica. Belch. That's what it looks like, though! He doesn't breathe acid out in a spray. It's more like he coughs up a big glob of the stuff. Victor had spoken a lot to Lesh over the last few weeks, and he'd come to understand that Lesh's decision to reject the Systems quest to kill him had been primarily because he'd witnessed Victor breathing his ancestors' fire. Breath Cores were a big deal among Lesh's people—they weren't born with them and had to evolve to gain one. Once done, the stronger a dragonkin's breath, the more respect he or she might earn. Apparently, Lesh had never seen anything like what Victor had done to Eric's army of reavers.

Victor laughed as Polo roared in frustration, stomping off the field with his great axe hung over his shoulder. Too many fast ones in there. I'd gain more with a long fight against that dragon friend of yours.

This was your idea. Victor chuckled and patted the grass beside him. Take a load off.

Polo glanced at the sun, saw it was nearly midday, and shook his head. I would, Victor, but I'm already pushing it. Rellias finally going to sit down with me and talk about my land grant. I've got family arriving in a day or two through the new portal, and we'll be surveying for a suitable building site.

Oh? That's exciting, isn't it? I don't remember you talking about your family, Polo. Will I get a chance to meet them?

Aye! Of course! Perhaps I'll invite you to see the building site, or, he paused, eyeing Edeyas motionless form, if you need to leave soon, maybe when you return, I'll have a proper dining hall and kitchen constructed.

Okay. Whichever works out, you know we'd love to come by. You're right about Edeya, however. I'm hoping we'll have world portals accessible sooner rather than later. As people come through from the cities and claim their citizenship, the advancement options on the stone are opening up quicker than ever.

Aye. I heard as much from Rellia when I was pestering her about my lands. Polo squinted toward the sun again and raised his voice to be heard over the clash of weapons, shouts, and curses as the nearby fight escalated. Tell me, Victor, what have you decided to do about your holdings? Borrius mentioned you approached him about governing for you, but he's going to be busy with his own claim.

Yeah. I'd hoped he'd be interested, but he wanted farmland, and I guess Rellia put him further north, near Old Keep. He doesn't want to split his time visiting my properties. Victor shrugged. He told me he'd speak to some qualified people he knew.

Aye, that's why he brought it up with me. Polo laughed, shaking his head. Not because he thought I should do it, mind you, but because he knows I am good friends with a man named Gorro apDommiches currently acting as the steward for my estate near Tharcray. Well, he was until I put him in charge of its sale. He should be arriving through the Gelica portal in a few days.

Oh yeah? Borrius thinks he's the man for the job? Victor shifted, leaning back to look up at the big furry Vodkin more easily.

Yes, and I won't need his services on these new lands; my family and I will have things well in hand. Polo turned toward the melee and laughed as Lam threw her hammer to the ground in frustration, stomping toward them. Gorro is a very experienced steward. I hired him right after Lam and I cleared the Dolondric Ruins. I was flush with treasure, and he'd just left the service of a Ridonne who'd granted the estate he was managing to a cousin. He's been at it for decades. Got his start in the Legion, of course; that's how Borrius knows him.

Kethelket cheats! Lam announced, flopping onto the grass beside Edeya.

Hah! Polo laughed, and Victor just grinned, plucking a blade of grass to chew on. In any case, Victor, shall I send him to see you when he arrives?

That'd be great. Thanks, Polo.

A pleasure. The Vodkin bowed at the waist toward Lam, a comical maneuver for a man as bulky as he, and then waved. I'm off to see Rellia, then. As he turned to leave, he hollered at the three

combatants left on the field, Good luck! Then, he strolled down the grassy slope toward the ever-growing settlement.

What was that all about?

Hes recommending someone to be my governor. Is that the right word? He said the guy was a steward. Maybe I should be calling him that.

No. Not with lands as extensive as yours. The person you hire will need to manage settlements, attend political meetings, and maintain your militia. Governor is the right term. Lam leaned forward and shouted, Thats it, Valla! Keep his flank!

You want her to win? Victor grinned around the blade of grass.

Of course! She eliminated me, so if she wins, that makes me look better. Lam sighed, turning to examine Edeya and lifting a handkerchief to wipe at the corners of her eyes. This breeze is making her eyes water. That damn circlet doesnt make her blink often enough.

Shit. Does it control that much? I thought her blinks would be automatic.

No. Shed be unconscious without it. Even her breathing is shallow and barely enough to keep her alive without it. Lam tucked her handkerchief away and gestured toward the slope leading down to the settlement. The stones level eight, and you know Rellias literature says we should start seeing world travel options at level ten. Will you be ready to leave as soon as it opens up?

Yeah, Ill be ready. It could be sooner, you know; were only a few steps away on the advancement tree. Rellias been steering the colony's development toward our goal. By the way, Ive been corresponding with my cousin, and she says the human colony stone is almost level twenty, but they dont have any options for world travel yet. I guess theyve been very general about their advancement, not focusing the way we have. It had been a week since Victors first message from Olivia, and since then, theyd written back and forth several times.

That makes sense. Were missing many System-developed infrastructure itemswere building our own walls, our own plumbing and sewage system, our own roads, and so much more. We could have spent advancement points on all of those things, had them done instantly and, probably, a lot more seamlessly integrated with the landscape.

Yeah, but were getting all sorts of intangible benefits going down the tree toward world travelEnergy storage, mapping, trade beacons, communication relays, the astral observatory. Victor pointed to the enormous white tower jutting up from the seas edge. It looked very out of place among all the half-constructed structures, but it was undeniably awesome. Victor liked how the top was made of some kind of crystal, and he knew that the more prominent facets were lenses. Hed been in it a few times, peering through the weird brass and crystal scopes that could be aligned and moved to face the different external lenses. It was fun and interesting, but, in the end, to him, it was just like looking through a telescope, and hed never been into that sort of thing.

Lam nodded. That one took much of our savings, but it ranked the stone up from five to seven. Perhaps the next . . . Lam was cut off as Lesh jogged over to them and flopped onto his back, shaking the ground enough to jostle Edeya and send her toppling backward. Lam caught her, scowling at Lesh. Have some care, you thunderak!

Lesh looked at Victor and narrowed his green, reptilian eyes. Thunderak?

Uh, giant lizards they use to pull heavy loads. Victor grinned, finding the moniker rather apt.

Pardon my bulk, Lady Lam.

Victor nudged the giant mans shoulder with his boot. Who got you?

One from Kethelket and one from the angel.

Victor chuckled at Leshs nickname for Valla. Victor had started it, calling her an angel. When hed described what he meant by the word, some of the others had taken it up. Valla certainly fit the bill with her big silvery wings and beautiful countenance. Shed paid one of the better armor artisans whod come through the Gelica portal to adjust the enchantment on her wyrm-scale armor, giving it the ability to open holes to accommodate the wings sprouting from her back. With that armor, her shiny silver helm, and, well, everything else about her, she either looked like an avenging Valkyrie or, yeah, some kind of angel.

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Anyway, Lam said, pointedly looking over Leshs thick body toward Victor, We just need the travel beacons, the astral cartography crystal, and the portal enclosure. Whether we need rank ten or not, I think well be there soon.

Yeah. As more citizens arrive and we continue to collect Energy, our advancement credits build up pretty fast. Still, another Energy bead infusion might not go amiss. Im still holding my million from the conquest . . .

Youll need that, Lesh said, rolling to his side and lifting his head on an elbow as he watched Kethelket and Valla weave their lightning-quick dance. Theres no telling what things will cost in the world hub, and you know, the System wont let you travel for free just because you rule these lands.

Yeah. Victor sighed, shaking his head. Nothing was ever easy. Right. Well . . . Oho! Good job, Valla! Shed done some sort of rolling maneuver using her wings, curved before her like a moving shield, and come around behind Kethelket, giving him a swift gash on his left calf. Is that the match? he asked Lesh.

Aye! They each had one mark already.

Victor stood up and reached down to take Edeyas hand. As he gently tugged it, she stood up the artificed circlet she wore made her very compliant, moving with gentle prompts from her caretakers. Lam also stood and took the young Ghellis hand from him as Valla strutted over the grass, her sword, Midnight, resting on her armored shoulder and a very self-satisfied smile on her face. I heard you grousing! she laughed, pointing at Lesh, still lying like a small hillock on the grass. He didnt respond, just grumbled and yawned.

Nicely done, Valla. Victor looked past her to Kethelket and nodded when their eyes locked. Not bad for your farewell match.

Oh, thats right! Lam looked up from where shed been straightening Edeyas coat collar. Your people will fly tonight?

Aye! Weve resupplied and rested and are eager to begin the construction of Nighthome. Weve three Ghelli families already committed to joining us, Lamveterans from the conquest eager to help mend old rifts. I hope you and Edeya will visit when youre back.

Im sure we will, Kethelket. Im just as eager to bandage over old wounds.

Whos this? Lesh rumbled, and Victor turned to follow his gaze. An Ardeni man wearing Rellias house livery was running up the well-worn path from the settlement.

Hmm. Victor frowned. Rellia should be meeting with Polo. The whole group grew quiet as the man made his final approach, his breath huffing heavily as he came to a stop twenty paces away.

Lord Victor! A man is requesting you! Hes just come through the portal from Persi Gables.

Oh yeah? Victor looked at the others, all staring, waiting to hear more. See you all a bit later. If we dont speak before you leave, Kethelket, you know how to get ahold of me. The two of them had exchanged Farscribe books. He shook his hand, and Kethelket stared into his face, suddenly serious.

Of course. Thank you again for letting us select such a fine location for the new town.

Are you kidding me? Your people earned it. Itll be nice having such good neighbors, anyway.

Before he and Kethelket could go further down their mutually congratulatory path, Lam called out to the messenger, Who is it?

Oh, um, its a man from the human colony in the Ridonne frontier. Alec Green. The messenger looked at Victor almost apologetically.

Thatll be our ambassador from the humans, Valla explained when she saw Lams blank expression.

Victor let go of Kethelkets hand and turned to the messenger. Lets go, Valla; you can make sure I dont say something too stupid.

You think she can save you from that? Lam chuckled, and Lesh snorted, shifting his bulk to wink at her more easily.

All right, all right. Dont make me drag you both out there for a quick thrashing. Victor grabbed Vallas hand and started walking down the slope. He gestured to the messenger. Lead the way.

Farewell! Kethelket called.

Dont make promises you dont intend to keep! Lesh rumbled.

Lam didnt say anything more, but Victor could feel her smiling eyes following him and Valla as they walked down the slope. Theyve lost all their respect now that the wars over.

Oh, dont begrudge them their laughs. They only tease you because they know they cant compete with you in other ways. Valla tightened the grip on his hand and lifted it to her chest, pulling it close as she cupped it with her other hand.

Like neither will ever have someone like you? Howd I get so lucky? Have I mentioned I love you? Victor almost laughed when he saw the messengers hurried but stiff, awkward gait. He was clearly embarrassed to hear their conversation. Victor decided to spare the poor guy and change the subject, Youve really gotten good at dealing with Kethelkets two-weapon style.



I know! Hes a difficult opponent, but Ive made some good gains over the last weeks. It helps to have your inspiration active while we spar. Well, and lets not forget hes only using a fraction of his full speed.

Even so. Your grace with those wings is really something. I notice youre using Midnight one-handed more and more; have you ever thought about a second blade or maybe a shield?

Perhaps someday. I enjoy having the option to grip her hilt with both hands for more powerful swings.

Well, I dont know jack about sword fighting, so Ill leave that to you.

Jack? Valla laughed as they stepped off their gravel path onto the new cobbled roadway that led east out of town.

Uh, its short for jack-shit, and no, I have no idea where it comes from.

Colorful.

Victor, currently only a little taller than she, looked into her smiling eyes above her flushed, pale blue cheeks and paused to lean down and kiss her on the lips. As always, she reciprocated, and Victor marveled at his luck for the second time in just a few minutes. When he straightened up, he said, Does my word choice embarrass you?

No! I love how you can sound stiff and formal as though youre channeling Borrius one minute and then break into a string of curses that would drain the color from a soldiers face the next. Theyd stopped, and the messenger had taken a few steps before realizing it. Victor could feel him turn to observe them. When Valla refused to look away, Victor stared into her silver and teal irises and wondered if it was true about eyescould he see her spirit in there? He almost thought he could, which made him want to try harder, but her smile widened, and she gave him a playful shove. Come on, Lord Victor! The ambassador is waiting.

Fair enough. Messenger! Whered you leave the ambassador?

In the new gardens adjacent to the travel pavilion, Lord.

Ah, good choice. Near my travel home?

Aye. He gestured to the road. Shall we continue?

Proceed. Victor laughed at his formality. He was fairly sure of the answer but asked, Were you part of the campaign?

No, Lord. Im a member of Lady apYenshas household staff. I came through the portal from Gelica.

Ah. Well, welcome to the Free Marches.

The man paused, turned, and performed a short but slow, deliberate bow. Im eternally grateful for the opportunity to make a life here, Lord.

When the young man turned and continued walking, Victor followed, suddenly sobered by his show of respect. Hed been about to judge the messenger, almost mocking him mentally for calling him

lord when any of the men and women who'd fought in the campaign would have been addressing him as sir. He chastised himself not every man or woman was cut out for war, and those who'd come through the portals to join the colony were just as valuable right now as anyone else; without their numbers, their contributions, the growth would have been much, much slower. It would have taken years to open the deeper advancement options on the colony stone.

Something on your mind? Valla asked, still holding his hand with both of hers.

Nah. I just have a lot to learn, Valla. Every time I think I'm getting a grip on things, I realize how much I don't know, how much of what I think I know is wrong.

She smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder, speaking softly, And that makes you a good leader. The worst kinds of leaders are those who think they know everything and refuse to admit when they're mistaken.

When they arrived at the gardens, the messenger bowed and took his leave, and Victor led the way through the curved pathways, his boots crunching on the deep bed of round, rust-colored pebbles the herbalists, Nature Casters, and engineers assigned to them had imported. Beds of new flora herbs, flowers, and plants of a thousand different varieties lined the walkways, and a fountain bubbled at each junction of paths. It wasn't pristine yet; dirt and mud marred the marble steppingstones and benches, the beds were only about half planted with their future occupants, and trellises were still under construction. Still, it was a good deal more done than when Victor had decided to move his travel home in, placing it at the end of one of the far-flung paths.

They found Alec Green sitting on a bench, admiring a little fountain shaped like a bulbous flower with long thorny stems adorned with tiny, delicate songbirds. The water trickled out of the pale-yellow stone flower petals and dribbled pleasantly into the basin. Alec was a slender, average-looking fellow, but his sandy brown hair was neatly combed, his short beard well-manicured, and his soft brown eyes were full of wonder as he took in the sight of Victor and Valla as they rounded a bend in the path. He jumped to his feet, straightening the lapels on his plush, velvety gray jacket. Victor? He stepped toward them, holding out a hand. I'm Alec Green from First Landing.

Victor grinned and reached out to wrap the man's slender hand in his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. Nice to meet you, Alec. This is Valla apYensha. As soon as he released the man's hand, Valla took it.

Alec smiled and stared, perhaps a little dumbstruck, into Valla's eyes. Nice to meet you! Still shaking Valla's hand, he forcefully turned back to Victor. I've heard a lot about you from Olivia Bennet and also people in Persi Gables. Hah! From the tales, I'd expected you to be twenty feet tall!

Oh, Valla laughed, sometimes he's nearly that tall. When she winked, Victor had to laugh poor Alec's face said he didn't know whether or not he was being teased.

He decided to bail him out and change the subject. I'm glad you've come to represent the other humans, Alec. I want to build a relationship with your colony, but if we can advance the stone enough, I'll be leaving soon. It's good that I'll get a chance to introduce you to everyone around here before I go.

Alec took a step back and looked Victor up and down. You're leaving?

I have a friend who needs to travel to a more advanced world, one with more world portals open.

Ah! Olivia said something like that in her messages, something about you all focusing on advancing your colony to open world travel.

Yep.

You couldnt travel from one of the other cities?

Victor sighed. He didnt want to get into a lengthy explanation, so he tried to summarize things quickly and with some finality, The Ridonne havent opened much world travel for their subordinate cities, and if I went to Tharcray and asked to use their colony stone . . . Well, lets just say the journey is long, and Id as likely as not start a war I dont think we have the stomach for right now.

I see. Well, perhaps my proposal will be of interest.

You come with a proposal? Valla asked, wrapping her fingers around Victors elbow, leaning into him a little while she smiled at Alec.

Alec nodded, grinning. Wed be willing to kick in a substantial sum of Energy beads toward your stones development if you could do us a little favor.

#### Book 7: Chapter 4: - The Proposal

Victor felt a sudden urge to direct Alec toward Sea Keep, where Rellia was currently managing her operations. Hed been speaking to the guy for less than a minute, and he was already talking about favors. Victor knew relationships between towns, countries, and political factions were built on mutual benefits, but hed hoped to just talk to the guy and show him around, not start wheeling and dealing immediately. His scowl must have been more evident than hed intended because Alec held up his hands and, after a quick, shaky laugh, said, Let me stress, its not a big favor. I mean, its not for you, but for us, it might mean the difference between continued existence and destructionOlivias words, not mine.

Valla squeezed Victors arm, her cool fingers pressing into his biceps. Dont worry about him, Alec. Hes always frowning like that. Why dont we show you to Victors home, and you can tell us about this favor over a cup of tea and a crumble cake one of Victors admirers gave us?

Victor chuckled at Vallas description of the cake one of Dunstans former thralls had baked for him. Actually, thats a good idea. I bet youll be interested to hear about the woman who baked it. Shes a human from a world other than Earth.

Oh? Alecs eyebrows rose, his surprise evident.

Victor nodded, gesturing toward the path that would lead to his travel home. Yeah. Im not sure if its a coincidence or . . . Victor laughed at himself, shaking his head. No, never mind that. Its definitely not a coincidence. The System chose vampires and their undead minions to invade these lands. The world they came from was settled by Death Casters whod fled Earth when the Energy stopped flowing there.

Ah, seriously? So, your conquest was against invaders from another world? Alec turned when Victor gestured to his left. Straight ahead, down a long, flower-lined gravel lane, sat Victors jade travel home. Oh, what an interesting dwelling!

Its Victors travel home. Hell build something more substantial eventually. Valla led the way up the steps, and Victor stood back, holding the door as she and Alec stepped inside.

Ah! Dimensional magic. We have a few structures employing it back in First Landing, but not so heavily as this one! Well, other than Morgans tower, I suppose.

Morgan . . . Victor frowned, scratching his chin. Thats the one who went to Tharcray, yeah? Olivia told me about him.

Right.

Howd that go? Valla asked, taking the lead down the hallway toward the dining area.

Um, he hasnt brokered any sort of lasting deal, but he did manage to get some assurances that the Ridonne dont care too much about us at the moment. Theyre dealing with some inner strife and political issues concerning their presence in other worlds. In fact, Morgans gone off-world, which threw our little community for a bit of a loop . . . Alec trailed off as he stepped into the dining hall and the adjacent kitchen area, his eyes taking in the big table, the bright daylight streaming through the kitchen windows, and the vaulted ceiling with the skylight. What a space! Id never have guessed looking at the exterior.

Take a seat there with Victor, and Ill put together a snack. Valla didnt wait for any objections, walking past the table and into the kitchen.

Victor rapped his knuckles on the tables smooth surface. Anywhere you like, Alec.

Thanks. Alec sat down in the chair closest to the head of the table on the near side, so Victor moved around to sit across from him. As soon as hed taken his seat, Alec hit him with some questions, Youre saying you had to fight invaders from another world to win these lands? I thought the conquest would just involve fighting monsters or, well, natives, is the right word, I guess.

Id have a hard time justifying something like that, but yes, the System made that part easy by filling these lands with undead monstrosities. Victor shook his head, grinning wryly. Dont you think its interesting to learn that there used to be Energy users on Earth powerful enough to flee through portals they created?

Its more than interesting. It conflicts with what we thought we knew of the System. Morgan was the first human to wake here on Fanwath, and, according to him, the System didnt recognize humanity right away. It makes you wonder how broad the System is and how often each part of it communicates with the others. Does it send out updates once a month, once a century? Does it need to do that, or does it just know everything thats happening everywhere all the time? Sounds more like God than a system, if so.

Yeah. Im pretty damn sure the System isnt God. Victor chuckled and looked over his shoulder to check on Valla. He hated being responsible for entertaining strangers.

What makes you say that?

Uh, the fact that there are plenty of species that existed and worked with Energy long before the System came around. My ancestors, for instance.

Ah! Thats one of the things you might be able to help us with. How about I go over my little proposal? Is it too soon? I hope Im not overstepping . . .

Nah, its fine. Victor was annoyed, but he also was happy to let Alec talk for a while. It would give Valla time to rejoin the conversation.

Well, Olivia indicated in our communications that when shes brought up the idea of you coming to First Landing, youve been less than enthusiastic. Shes a bit of an outlier among our citizenry, what with her unusually high affinity with multiple attunements and her unnatural proclivity for mastering new magic. Alec held up a hand and laughed. Dont get me wrong from what weve gathered, dealing with some unpleasant nobility and the locals in our neck of the woods, it seems humans generally have high Energy affinity, but Olivias a standout. Im bringing this up because shes often banging the drum about how important advancing in levels and gaining power is when she comes to town, and her words are often less than enthusiastically received.

Yeah? Victor was having a hard time figuring out why he should care.

Yeah. I mean, there are some who are pretty gung-ho about leveling and exploring, but oftentimes, their abilities and enthusiasm dont exactly match up. Take me, for instance. I was pretty happy just running a business in town; I opened the first tavern and made a killing. I expanded the business, and now Ive got a full-blown hotel; well, inn is probably more accurate. Im a level eighteen Tavernkeeper. Alec smiled, shaking his head at a pleasant memory. When I first told Olivia that was my Class, she laughed and laughed. Shed already been at Fainhallow, you see, and was studying about Classes with a great deal more . . . gravitas, shall we say?

Uh-huh. Victor nodded, glancing again for Valla and sighing with relief when he saw her approaching with a tray. Here we go. Youre going to love this cake, Alec.

Oh, Im certain youre right. He paused his discourse to watch Valla set down the tray with three steaming mugs, a crock of whipped butter, and the sweet, nut-and-fruit-loaded crumble cake.

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Help yourself. Valla smiled and sat at the head of the table between the two men.

Dont mind if I do. Alec grinned, took one of the mugs, and then slathered a slice of the cake with some of the soft, creamy butter. Once his little plate was before him, he sipped the tea, smiled and sighed, then took a bite of the cake. Mm! His eyes glazed over as he chewed. Valla helped herself, and Victor, of course, carved off a generous slice. The conversation was put on hold for a few minutes once they were all working on their snack, and Alec continued to exclaim about how good it was.

So, Valla said, pushing her plate away. You were telling Victor that there are some ambitious folks among you, but theyre a minority? Is that the right way to explain things?

Ah, no, not exactly. I was about to use myself as an example of how most of us are ambitious but not in the way that makes us personally powerful. Im very interested in seeing my business grow, gaining wealth, and buying properties. Back on Earth, such success would eventually have made me a powerful person. Here, according to Olivia and our few run-ins with less-than-savory folks, Ive learned that that kind of success can be very fleeting. Everything I have can be taken away in a snap. To illustrate, Alec snapped his fingers. I believe it, Olivia believes it, but many of the people in our settlement think that our government will protect them and that they can continue to focus on finding success as theyd always done.

Well, theyre not exactly wrong. Victor shrugged, not seeing the problem. Its the same in native cities; not everyone is out challenging dungeons or going to war. Plenty of people build businesses or lead small service-oriented lives.

Right, but according to what Ive learned from Morgans correspondence and Olivias studies, this world has been rather sheltered. Havent the Ridonne limited travel beyond this world? Havent they, themselves, grown powerful beyond even the heroes who make their living facing dungeons and whatnot? Isnt it only a matter of time before a more dangerous world connects to this one? What if a true powerhouse comes through and makes some real trouble for us? If I can read between the lines well enough, thats whats happening in Tharcray. I think the Ridonne have stunted the growth of this world to their own detriment. I believe theyve encountered something theyre struggling with and, due to their imposed limitations, the rest of the populace isnt in a position to help them.

I mean, I dont know what youve heard, but the trouble the Ridonne have been having might just be me . . .

Oh, I heard about your encounter with their Legion. Talk of it was all over Persi Gables when I passed through. Thats not it, however. Morgan contacted us about the Ridonnes troubles a good four months prior.

Why so cryptic? Cant he just tell you whats up?

I would think so, but hes . . . incommunicado.

Valla set her steaming cup down and cleared her throat. Okay, Alec, were losing sight of what you actually want.

Right! I was hoping that Victor and you, of course, he nodded at Valla, would speak to our populace. I was hoping youd sit down and have a sort of town hall where you speak about what youve seen on other worlds, or from other worlds, and why its important to . . . Whats the word they use, um, cultivate power? Thats it, cultivate. Why its important to build up a Core, to gain levels, and advance your bloodline.

Victor grunted, shaking his head. It seems pretty damn obvious to me, Alec. You really need me to tell people why power is important?

Our people are stubborn, Victor. Weve got a hundred engineers working on reinventing automobiles and airplanes using Energy-driven engines. Weve got people making repeating cannons, landmines, and machine guns. I mean, its great, but Olivia says one elder being could wipe them all out, that someone whod achieved tier ten or, hell, even tier five could probably ignore most of the war machines we can come up with. Whats worse is that our Artisan Class citizens are far outstripping the cultivatorsweve learned to build portal stones, for instance. Whats going to happen when we open a connection to a high-tier world, and someone truly powerful sees our potential as, well, as slaves?

So you want me to come there and scare them?

Alec laughed, shaking his head. I mean, that might work, but Olivia had the idea that you could just talk about your time in, um, I have it in my notes, but what was the name of the world where . . .

Zaafor? Valla supplied.

Thats it! She says you met many powerful beings and that you had to flee because of a villainous warlord or some such. Is that right?

Victor sighed and nodded. Sure, Alec. Youre right that opening yourselves up to advanced worlds and powerful people before youre ready is a real risk. In fact, I wouldnt be surprised if the Ridonnes tight control over world travel has a lot to do with that, but that wont stop travel in the other direction. The System can be a real bitch, but it wont send a challenge here thats much beyond you. That doesnt mean a powerful individual or, yeah, warlord couldnt find their way here. If they did, if they opened their own gateway without the Systems help, then they could easily dominate this planet.

So, just a town hall? Valla pressed, trying to pin down the commitment Alec was looking for.

And perhaps a demonstration. Our Artificers have been building war machinesEnergy-driven automatons. Think of a tank crossed with a robot. Theres a faction in our government who think were already strong enough to take on the Ridonne, that theyre just backward, medieval tyrants whom we can steamroll like Patton taking on a Roman legion.

Patton? Valla frowned, slowly turning her cup between her palms.

Hes talking about people from Earth.

Oh, Im sorry, Lady apYensha! I was trying to draw a comparison between a modern military with guns and heavy artillery versus an army using spears and swords. When Valla continued to frown, her eyes betraying her confusion, he added, I mean, Im sure Victor has described our world to you a little, yes? We didnt have Energy or magic, but we had technology far beyond what you see on Fanwath. We had weapons that could strike a person down instantly from great distances. We had bombs and missiles that could destroy entire cities. Olivia worries well go down that road again, become too sure of our capabilities, and then run into someone with deific powers. Victor, here, might be able to give our populace a taste of that. Thats all Im saying.

Valla nodded and, to Victors delight, continued leading the conversation. If you want Victor to do battle with your automatons, youll need to tell us what youll put on the table.

Alec nodded. I understand you want to advance your colony stone.

Thats right. We need to advance at least two more ranks before we can open world travel.

Thats what we can help you with. Weve stockpiled a lot of Energy beads through our own development and from trade with neighboring towns and villages. I have it on good authority from our development committee that a million beads will go a long way in the early colony stone ranks.

Is that what youre offering? A million beads? Valla didnt betray much, but Victor knew her well enough to hear the excitement in her voice. A million beads would probably get them where they needed to be.

Thats right. What do you say? To Alecs credit, he didnt break eye contact with Valla to gauge Victors response. It was probably a good thing because Victor was sold and didnt have a good poker face.

Victor and I will visit your town, answer your questions, and Victor will destroy your automatons for one and a half million beads.

Victor almost laughed, surprised to hear Valla being so cutthroat. However, Alec didnt laugh and didnt even look surprised. He smiled, nodded, and said, Its a deal, but youve reached the limit of my negotiation authority, so please dont push it any harder.

Okay, Victor? Valla looked at him for the final word.

Hmm, I guess. I dont mind beating the shit out of some robots, but Im not really excited to be on the spot answering questions on a stage. Ill do it for Edeya, though.

Edeya? Alec was smiling ear-to-ear like hed just made the deal of the century.

Valla began gathering the empty plates, stacking them on the tray. Our friend. Shes the reason we need to open world travel as soon as possible. That said, Ambassador, when shall we depart for your town?

I left the portal stone with the steward of your, um, travel pavilion. Im ready to go whenever youd like, though Id hoped to meet the other leaders here and perhaps establish a residenceI intend to participate in the community youre building.

Victor pushed his chair back and stood up. Its early still. Lets take him around. Rellia and Borrius will want to meet him. Well get him a room in the inn, and then, Victor paused for breath and to lock eyes with Alec, if youre feeling up to it, we can go to First Landing in the morning. Im sorry to rush things, but I feel like Ive put my friends welfare on hold long enough. She needs help, and if youre offering the Energy to advance the stone, Id like to do my part as soon as possible.

Alec, too, stood, slowly nodding his head. The inn, hmm? Well, itll do for now. Will I be permitted to build an official embassy eventually?

Definitely. If Rellia wont allow you one here, then you can build it on my lands.

Your lands? Theyre separate from these? Alec looked confused, and Valla chuckled. She stood and moved beside him, taking his elbow and steering him toward the front of the house.

Theres much you need to understand, Ambassador. I dont know how much Victor told Olivia, but these lands, the Free Marches, are more vast than the entirety of the Ridonne frontier. Even after gifting deeds to his allies, Victors share of the conquered lands numbers nearly thirty million acres. Thats assuming we dont continue to expand, pushing into the untamed lands further south. Victor listened to her as she and Alec walked ahead, his mind struggling to stay focused as he thought about everything Alec had told him.

The idea that humans had come to this world and were immediately trying to recapture the way of life theyd left behind didnt surprise him, but it certainly bothered him. Of course, theyd try to make planes and tanks and machine guns. Of course, theyd see Energy as just another fuel source, a way to power their tech. He hoped they werent all focused on such things. They couldnt be, could they? Some among them had to have awoken spirit Cores. Surely, some of them had learned to see their inner selves and auras. There was so much more to Energy than, well, energy. It was the essential, vital force of everything and the connection every cultivator had to the universe. If a person didnt see that, didnt internalize and process the gifts Energy could grant, theyd never understand. Victor would have to show them. Hed have to give them a glimpse of the power of a sleeping god.



## Book 7: Chapter 5: First Landing

Victor sat on the stone bench in the new travel pavilion and watched Valla speak to Alec Green about the structure. They were waiting for the other members of their delegation to First Landing, and he was trying to relax, trying not to think about having to answer questions in front of hundreds or maybe thousands of strangers. Hed opted not to wear his armor, at least not at first, and he felt comfortable in his silky gray button-up shirt and soft, slim-fitting black trousers. Valla had gotten them for him from a tailor she knew a man who'd come through the portal from Gelica. He appreciated that they weren't overly fancy but simply very well made from materials that were clearly a cut above what hed been wearing for most of his time on Fanwath.

His new silver-toed black boots were polished to a glossy sheen, and Lifedrinker rested comfortably behind his shoulder, held snugly by the new magical harness that matched his belt and boots. All-in-all, he felt good because he knew he looked good. Valla said that was important when you were speaking in public to look and feel good about yourself. In all honesty, Victor knew he shouldn't be worried; he was Quinametzin, and all he had to do was relax his hold on his alter ego a little, and hed have no trouble speaking on just about any topic in front of just about anyone.

We've built a similar structure ourselves, though we've been calling it a portal hall so far, we've only set up a portal to Persi Gables and, now, to your settlement. Olivia will undoubtedly pick up a portal stone to bring to Fainhallow next time she visits home. Alec was nodding, rubbing his chin, staring at something across the open-air structure. Victor followed his gaze and saw that he was looking at the shimmering, mirror-like portal to Gelica on the other side of the pavilion. It wasn't usually open, and Victor watched as what looked like a large family began to come through, gathering on the stone dais on this side of the portal.

Looks like more new citizens, he grunted.

Ah, yes. Alec nodded, watching as one of the yellow-robed concierge staff Rellias people had appointed hurried forward to greet the new family and guide them to the settlement registration center.

Here comes your aide, Victor. Valla pointed as Nia strode through the big archway that led toward the center of town. The former vampire thrall had changed quite a lot in the weeks since the end of the campaign, and Victor could see shed made an effort to look nice for their visit to First Landing.

Nia had exchanged her black clothing and leather for a knee-length, flowing blue dress with long sleeves trimmed in lacy blue gauze. She still wore high leather boots, which Victor thought was kind of cool, but he wondered what the locals thought of her style. Shed washed out the black oil or grease or whatever shed used to slick her hair back but still styled it in braids adorned with polished ivory charms and jewels. Victor could see shed recently scrubbed her face from the rosy, pink hue of her cheeks and the somewhat inflamed nature of her many scars.

When she approached, Nia bowed quickly and nervously, her eyes darting from Valla to Alec and then settling on Victor, reclining on the bench. Lords, Lady. Victor found it strange to see her standing beside Valla. In the old days, when hed been an average human back on Earth, he would have thought Nia was tall, imposing, and, despite her scars, quite beautiful. Beside her, though, Valla looked like a demigod coming to walk among mortals. She towered over the woman, her silvery, pale blue skin glistening in the diffuse sunlight that filtered through the trellised roof of the pavilion.

Vallas hair was delicately styled, held in tight, elegant curls with jeweled combs. She wore the silver choker Victor had given her with its carved sapphire runes. And, as if to highlight her Ordeni skin tone, she was dressed in flowing, silky, silver and blue robes that, as far as Victor was concerned, clung to her in all the right ways. He shook his head, forcing himself to quit staring at Valla, and stood up. He nodded at Nia and smiled. You look nice, Nia. Thanks for agreeing to come with us.

Of course, milord.

I know its a habit, but you dont have to address us as lords and ladies, Nia, Valla said, saving Victor from having to say the same thing for probably the twentieth time. If you take a permanent position in Victors household, you can use that honorific, but for now, were all members of a delegation to First Landing, and theres no need for such deference. Victor thought Valla was being nice, and he was sure that was her intent, but Nias face paled, and her eyes widened as she looked toward Victor.

I thought my position was permanent! She stepped past Alec, looking up to lock eyes with Victor.

Oh, I didnt . . . Valla started to say, but Victor waved his hand, chuckling.

Its just a miscommunication, Valla. Nia, of course, as long as you want to work for me and help me manage things here, Ill have plenty to keep you busy. I think Valla simply means we havent established any formal agreements.

Then, as the lord of the lands on which I serve, I will address you as such. Again, she bowed at the waist, and Victor saw a smile behind her blue eyes. He looked at Valla and shrugged slightly. She arched an eyebrow, perhaps amused by Nias persistence.

Where the hell is Borrius? Victor turned in a circle, looking at all of the entrances to the pavilion, wondering if the old general was coming from a different direction. Hed asked him to come along primarily because the man loved to hear himself talk, and Victor figured hed take some of the pressure off him in the town hall.

Im sure hell be along. Relax, Victor. Were still early. Valla moved to stand beside him, clasping his hand. Her wing brushed his shoulder, the feathers twitching and shivering against him as she shifted. Her feathers were incredible things; they almost tinkled metallically as she moved. Hed spent many a long evening with her, feeling those wings, playing with her feathers, and he knew they were incredibly resilient, though they were light as air. Valla had gotten very comfortable with her new appendages and moved so gracefully that it was hard to remember how awkward shed been at first.

Alec shook him from his reflections by asking, Is he the last member of your party? Borrius, um, what was his surname?

Valla answered him, Borrius apGandrohes a former commander of the Imperial Legion, a legate, and now a landholder and nobleman in the Free Marches. We feel hell be invaluable when it comes to explaining the dangers of having a populace controlled by more powerful Energy users.

Whatever you know of the Ridonne, I can assure you, Borrius knows more. Valla pointed over Alecs shoulder. Here he comes with his aide, Lieutenant Darro. Victor exhaled a pent-up breath as he watched Borrius and Darro stride into the pavilion. Of course, they wore their military uniforms.

Well met all, the old commander said, striding up the marble path. Am I tardy?

Not at all, sir! Alec smiled and strode forward, offering his hand. Im Alec Green from First Landing, and Ill be serving as an ambassador to your fine settlement here. Id hoped to meet you yesterday, but Lady apYensha indicated you were busy with other matters.

Ah, yes, quite. Its a pleasure, young man. Borrius took Alecs hand in his and gave it a firm shake. Handshakes werent as common on Fanwath as on Earth, but Borrius was a well-traveled man and wasnt put off by the custom. Well? Shall we? Are we waiting for any others, Victor?

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Nope. Were all here. Alec?

Im ready if you folks are. He stepped onto the nearby dais where the travel pavilion attendants had set up his portal stone and approached the big marble archway. Victor could see the portal stone at the center of the arch darker than the surrounding stones and adorned with silver-inlaid runes. Lets see, I think Im just supposed to put my hand here. Alec placed his hand on a cluster of runes on the side of the arch. Then, I, what? Do I just feed it some of my Energy?

Thats right. Valla stepped up beside him. Just as you would use any magical item, for instance, a glow lamp.

Right, right. Alec closed his eyes momentarily, and then Victor felt the surge of Energy as the portal stone activated and a shimmering blue sheet of Energy filled the archway. It rippled and crackled almost like electricity. It didnt look like any of the other portals hed stepped through, and he wondered at that was a portals appearance dependent on the person whod created it? Was it affected by the destination?

Interesting, Borrius said, perhaps thinking along the same lines. That Energy feels like a mix of air and water attunements. Do you know the Artificer who crafted that stone?

I do! Boris Saltzki hes our highest-level artificer. Alec jerked his thumb at the shimmering electric doorway and grinned. I suppose I should be the one to demonstrate its safe, huh? Ill see you all on the other side! With that, he stepped through in a sizzling shower of blue sparks.

Huh. Victor chuckled and stepped up to the archway. Well, I didnt expect to be nervous about the portal.

Im sure its fine. Valla smiled encouragingly.

Right. Victor took a deep breath and stepped through. He felt the magic tickling his flesh as he passed through. When his foot set down on springy wood and he walked into a brightly lit hall the size of a high school gym, he looked around, taking in the scene. Hed been right about the floor; polished, pale wooden planks covered the expansive space, running to white-plaster walls that rose to a high vaulted ceiling held up by beams of the same pale wood. It was a lovely building, but very empty. The only adornments were the massive Energy-powered chandeliers that hung from the rafters.

This is our new portal hall, Alec said, taking Victors shoulder and directing him away from the portal. Dont want your friends to bump into you when they come through.

Right. Victor turned and watched as Nia and then Valla came through the portal, blinking in the bright lights and looking around the space.

Sorry, there isn't much to see in here. It's brand new, and we figured we should keep lots of space open for delegations or trade materials going through the portals. As he finished speaking, Darro and Borrius came through with a shimmer of blue, electric sparks. That's all of us! Just a moment while I close the portal. Alec held his hand to the side of the archway, and then, with a sizzling pop, the blue gateway disappeared. There we go! Well, I know it was early morning in your settlement, but it's the middle of the night here. How about I show you to my inn, get you settled, and then we can go over your schedule? I've been communicating with the committee responsible for setting up your town hall and the military demonstration, as they're calling it, and a representative will meet us at the inn.

Sounds good to me. Victor shrugged and took Valla's hand. He'd, as usual, altered his size to be close to hers, which was still quite tall by human standards. He'd been anticipating a lot of strange looks as they walked through town and was almost relieved to find that there was a significant time change. When they followed Alec outside through the big, double doors of their portal hall, he was surprised. He'd been picturing First Landing as a quaint little village, but from the raised ground on which the portal hall sat, he had a rather expansive view of a sprawling, busy-looking town. He almost wanted to revise that and consider the place a city, but he could see it wasn't as extensive or populous as Persi Gables or Gelica. Still, it was a good deal more than he'd expected.

Impressive! Valla said. I thought you'd only been here a few years.

Oh, we have, but we've been hard at work, and our open policy with new citizens has helped us to proliferate. Alec pointed down the cobbled road toward a distant cluster of tall buildings. That's the center of town we built outward from the colony stone, which is on a hill you can't see thanks to that big rectangular building. That's my inn. He gestured past that to a distant row of lights that encircled the town. Those lights are on the top of the wall. We've outgrown that wall but kept it as a second line of defense. We have a bigger one about a mile out and have begun expanding the residential areas into that outer circle.

How many people . . . Victor started to ask.

Well, Alec chuckled, we started with about five thousand humans. The first year was kind of harsh we had a conflict with some local, um, low-affinity types and lost a few hundred. The children have more than made up for that, however. We're prospering. Um, he glanced at Valla and smiled, I'm not sure if you wanted this much information, but we've found that humanity is quite compatible with Ardeni, Shadeni, and Ghelli as far as, well, children go. We've had quite a few people from neighboring towns and villages settle here, and we took in a large number of refugees . . . Alec groaned and rubbed a hand through his short, brown hair. Oh, brother, I'm rambling. The point I'm trying to make is that upwards of twenty-thousand people live in First Landing.

Very interesting, Borrius said, stroking his chin. I can see the lights of airships if I'm not mistaken.

Oh, yes! We've got three cargo ships and seven warships.

No planes yet? Victor asked, remembering Alec's words from the day before.

There are some, but they're still inferior to the airships when it comes to cargo capacity and durability. The engineers are excited about their progress, though. He started down the cobbled road. Come on, I'll show you to the inn. By the way, I'm sorry we don't have a big welcoming committee here for you. Issa didn't think you'd appreciate that.

Issa?

Oh, Issa apRoald; she's the member of parliament who's heading up the committee that organized my appointment as ambassador to the Free Marches and your visit here. He started walking as he spoke, and they all fell in around him. They were the only people on the narrow, slightly winding road leading down from the portal hall. However, Victor could see hundreds of lights in the buildings around them and, further down the road, some sparse pedestrian traffic.

You have an Ardeni on your ruling council? Valla asked.

Ah, yes. Issa's been a part of this community since near the beginning. She's engaged to Morgan Hall; would be married, certainly, if not for his prolonged absence. Still, the people here generally love her, and she didn't have any trouble getting elected to one of the parliament seats. She's also an impressive crafter. She'll meet you all in the inn when the suns come up.

If you don't mind me asking, Alec, and please don't take this the wrong way, but why do you think Issa thought we wouldn't like a welcoming committee? Valla wrapped her fingers around Victor's elbow, walking in step with him as she spoke.

Alec looked over his shoulder and smiled, nodding toward Victor. Hmm, well, I suppose it's due to Olivia's correspondence. She sort of indicated that Victor, here, was reticent to visit and wouldn't enjoy a bunch of fanfare. Was she wrong?

Not at all, Victor grunted.

Excuse me, dear boy, Borrius said, quickening his stride to walk beside Alec. I've only had a cursory briefing about why we're coming here aside from meeting a community similarly in poor favor with the Ridonne, but I do have a bit of a concern itching the back of my brain.

Oh?

Yes, well, you see, Victor seemed to think that we're meant to speak to a large gathering about the dangers of allowing oneself to fall behind on Energy cultivation, about the dangers of growing complacent in a universe full of powerful beings who could make their presence known on our little backwater world.

Alec nodded. Um, that's accurate, I suppose.

Well, what sort of opposition should we expect? It stands to reason that if the people here need convincing, there must be others working to shore up the opposing argument, namely that your current trajectory is the way to go. There must be some profit involved, I'd think.

Ah, yeah. Alec nodded enthusiastically. I see your point, Lord Borrius. It wasn't lost on Victor that Alec was buttering the old commander up. It's not exactly profit in riches that they're after, but there is a faction here trying to profit politically by arguing against Olivia's frequent warnings and trying to marginalize those on Parliament who side with Issa.

As I thought, Borrius said, turning to Victor and winking at him in an utterly uncharacteristic move. Were being used as pawns for someones political gain. I hope the rewards will be adequate.

Ah . . . Alec seemed a little lost for words, and he glanced at Victor and Valla, then turned back to Borrius. I dont know if its exactly like that, but I wont deny that theres a faction of very good people in this settlement who will definitely benefit if you can shut some of the louder know-it-alls up.

Well, Alec, Valla chuckled, breathing in through her nose and twitching her wings as a cool breeze passed over them, You can rest assured that if theres one thing Victors good at, its shutting up know-it-alls.

## Book 7: Chapter 6: Factions

Greens Inn and Suites was much more like a hotel on Earth than the inns Victor had seen in the cities of Fanwath and Zaafor. It had a lobby separate from a bar and restaurant and, in a show of Earthling ingenuity, an Energy-powered elevator. It was a five-story building, and Alec put everyone in suites on the top floorit was evident that hed built the hotel with growth in mind because it felt relatively empty. Victor and Valla had a corner suite with lots of windows, and they both enjoyed looking through the crystal-clear glass as the town woke up around them.

Im surprised at how diverse the populace is, Valla said, looking down at the busy central hub of retail businesses. They were built around a lovely red-brick street that surrounded a hill at the center of the community. Steps led up the sides of the hill to a garden-like plaza that surrounded the colony stone. People were opening shops, sweeping sidewalks, and bustling to and fro, getting ready for what looked to be a busy day of commerce. Victor could see what Valla meantfewer than half the people walking around down there were humans.

Victor nodded. I guess, with only five thousand original settlers, they had to open their doors to the natives of Fanwath if they wanted the community to grow quickly.

Isnt that strange? I understand they all came on one ship and that it was likely crowded, but youd think theyd send more people to settle a new world.

Yeah, I dont know anything about that. Victor shrugged. They werent expecting to run into the System or arrive on a world full of other people. Maybe if theyd actually been allowed to land their ship and if theyd been alone . . . Victor trailed off, acutely feeling his lack of knowledge on the subject. Shit, I should ask Olivia more about this stuff. I should be more interested in her. Shes always asking for details about me and my experiences, and I havent been good about showing an equal interest in her. He gestured out the window. In them.

Well, something tells me youll learn a lot about these people today.

Yeah. Victor looked to the horizon at the pink, yellow, and orange-hued sunrise and said, I thought that lady was coming to meet us at dawn.

Thats not an exact time, though, is it? Is dawn when you first see the sun? Is it now, when the sun is halfway visible? Is it the hour or so after its just risen?

Victor didnt take the bait. Lets go down to the lobby. I want to be ready. He walked to the door, crossing a plush, intricately woven rug featuring multicolored flowers on an olive-green background. The hotel suite was nicely appointed and much more familiar in style than some of the

furnishings he'd seen on Fanwath. The difference was especially evident in the art; their suite was adorned with paintings of objects and landscapes, but not a single person, a stark contrast to what was common on Fanwath. Rellias villa, for instance, had walls covered with portraits of family or historical figures. The bathroom was another big change; somehow, the humans were making porcelain. Victor hadn't realized how much he'd gotten used to seeing brass and copper tubs and toilets.

In the hallway, he paused to knock on doors, alerting the rest of their party that they were heading down to the lobby, and, a few minutes later, they rode down in the weirdly smooth, silent elevator. I don't think this thing is on a cable, Victor said, stepping out and turning to regard the elevator as the polished brass doors slid shut.

A cable? Valla frowned.

Never mind. Let's sit over by the fire while we wait. Victor led the party to the grouping of couches near the big stone fireplace across the lobby from the reception desk.

On the way, Borrius stepped over to the young Ardeni man who staffed the desk. Ahem, young fellow. Please let Ambassador Green know that we're sitting together there by the fire.

Of course, sir.

Victor smiled at the exchange, glad he'd brought the old commander along; he was perfect for this sort of thing. The couches were comfortable, the room was cozy despite its vaulted ceilings, and they all sat, making small talk for several minutes. Victor enjoyed the lull in activity, though it felt like he was wasting time, and part of him wanted to stand up and seek out the people he was supposed to speak to and get it over with. Still, he sat back and tried to be present, listening to Valla as she attempted to bring Nia out of her shell a little.

I know it's not a pleasant memory, but can you tell us about your home a little? Your people originated from the same world as those who've settled here. Does anything seem familiar?

Aside from them being human, not much. I suppose . . . She looked around, frowning, I suppose the aesthetic is a little familiar. I grew up in a village without an inn, but I know the cities of the great lords have hotels and restaurants. I haven't seen enough of the town to say more.

Have you thought about what you'll say today? About the great lords as you name them?

I didn't name them that. Nia scowled, but then she seemed to remember whom she was speaking to, and her eyes widened as she stammered an apology, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to snap; my bitterness found its way off my tongue. The great lords of Dark Ember are called that by decree, and if those such as myself were to name them otherwise, we could be killed or worse for the offense.

Don't apologize. Valla leaned forward so she could reach over to take Nia's wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze. You're rightfully bitter about what they've done to you. Still, my question stands.

Oh, um, Nia paused and licked her lips. They were dry and cracked, and Victor realized that if he was nervous about speaking in front of a bunch of strangers, Nia was probably feeling a thousand times worse. I suppose I'll talk about how it felt when they passed through town. How . . . Her description was cut short as a cheerful voice called out from the front of the lobby.

Folks from the Free Marches! I see youre eager to get started. This is Issa apRoald, a member of our parliament and the head of the committee responsible for your visit today.

Victor turned toward the hotel doors and saw Alec striding toward them, accompanied by a stunningly beautiful Ardeni woman with gleaming yellow eyes and hair that hung like spun threads of gold. She was impressively tall for an Ardeni and moved with a grace that spoke of many racial advancements. Where Alec was dressed in a nicely tailored brown and cream suit, Issa wore a silky blue, kimono-style dress with a tight, high collar and sleeves that covered her arms down to the backs of her hands. It hugged her figure, and the single smooth garment from neck to ankles accentuated her height.

Victor stood up, as did the rest of his party, and he stepped forward, extending a hand. Its nice to meet you.

Issa took his hand warmly between both of hers, and the smile she offered him was reflected in her bright eyes. Its so nice to meet you finally, Victor. Ive heard much about you from Olivia, and Ive been hoping for your success in the Marches.

Um, thank you. Victor felt lost for words, annoyed with himself again for not asking Olivia more about the people of First Landing. He felt like he should know more about this woman. Valla cleared her throat gently, saving him from standing there like an idiot. He let go of Issas hand and gestured to Valla and the others. This is Valla apYensha. She represents the most influential family in the Free Marches.

Lady apYensha, its my pleasure to make your acquaintance. Issa took Vallas hand, and it was obvious that she wanted to ask more as her eyes locked onto Vallas silvery-turquoise wings.

My pleasure. Valla smiled, and the two women clasped hands for several seconds before they let go and turned back to Victor.

This, Victor reached behind Valla to grasp Borriuss shoulder, is Borrius apGandro. His military leadership is renowned on Fanwath, and he's here to share his experience and knowledge with your people.

Well met, madame. Borrius shocked Victor by taking Issas hand and kissing it, bowing with a flourish.

You honor me, sir! Issa chuckled a little nervously if Victor were any judge. Perhaps to save further embarrassment, she looked at Darro and Nia. And these two? Are they also landholders from the Free Marches?

Victor knew Alec must have already told her who was in their party, so her question, while polite, bothered him a little. Was she playing politics already? Thats Lieutenant Darro; hes Borriuss aide, and this is Nia, daughter of Efa, a woman from Dark Ember. She has much to share about the dangers of allowing a single faction to gain too much power in a world.

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Wonderful! Thank you both for coming! Issa surprised Victor by taking Darros hand and then earnestly shaking Nias. I know youve traveled far, though with the portals, it doesnt seem so. Theres still time for you to eat or rest for an hour or two before the town hall; weve scheduled it for mid-



morning. I just wanted to meet you before the big event so I could answer any questions you might have.

Victor wont ask, so I will, Valla said, smiling as she glanced sideways at him. What sort of demonstration do they expect from him? I mean against your automatons?

Well, Issa looked at Victor, and her smile seemed almost nervous, I have to say, we can cancel that if youd like. Olivias description of you and your exploits left a different impression than Im getting right now. With what she told them and the, perhaps misguided, desire to prove that theyre ready for anything, the Defense Department has arrayed quite a force on the parade grounds. She looked at Alec and frowned slightly as she continued, It might be better for our cause to await Morgans return to highlight their mistakes.

And how would that affect our payment? Borrius asked, demonstrating his priorities.

Oh, well . . . Issa started, but Victor held up a hand and cleared his throat, interrupting her.

Dont sweat it, Lady Issa. Im reducing myself significantly right now.

Hmm? She looked at him with a cocked eyebrow.

Victor learned magic to make himself more comfortable in the quaint dwellings of we small folk. Valla hid her smile behind her hand as she explained.

Victor couldnt help hamming it up a little as he put an arm around Vallas shoulders, wings and all, Well, its not just so I can fit through doors more easily; I also can hug you better like this, yeah?

Yes, she nodded, no longer hiding her smile, theres that, too.

Well, in that case, Ill let you be the judge of your readiness. Issa spoke with her hands, gesturing to illustrate her words as she continued, Theyve arrayed something like twenty of the tank automatons on the field. Ive also heard rumors of two juggernauts. Theyre like giant, person-shaped constructs built of wood and metal and highly charged with Energy. Ive seen them demonstrated before, and . . . Im not sure Id like to do battle with one. She paused and looked around. They were all still standing in the lobby, and though the hotel was quiet, it seemed she was feeling a little self-conscious about standing there. Would you all join me for breakfast? I know its not breakfast time for you, but . . .

Ill excuse myself, Lady. Borrius bowed and turned to Darro. We have some work to do for my estate back in the Marches, and we can make good use of this time.

Ill go to my room until you need me, if you dont mind, Nia said to Victor.

He nodded. Youre welcome, you know . . .

No, thank you, Lord Victor. Ill use this time to meditate.

Well, Victor and I will join you, Lady apRoald, Valla said, taking the lead.

Just Issa, please. She smiled and gestured to the arched opening of the hotels restaurant. Are your kitchens open, Alec?

Always! He led the way, and Issa and Valla followed.

See you guys soon, Victor said, nodding to Borrius and Nia. A few minutes later, he was sitting at a small table near a window with Valla and Issa; Alec had begged off, saying he had hotel business to manage before the big meeting. A waiter had brought over steaming cups of coffee with a tiny pitcher of thick cream, and Victor was savoring the drink, watching Issa eat pancakes and listening to the two women talk.

I hope you dont find it rude, but Im very curious about your bloodline, Lady apYensha, Issa said between bites.

Please, if Im going to call you Issa, you must call me Valla. Hmm, my bloodline stems from an ancient ancestor, a Rihven. Have you heard of them?

Rihven . . . Issas eyes unfocused, and Victor could see she was searching through her memory. Im afraid I havent.

Youre well versed in the Ridonne, though, Ill wager.

Oh yes. Obviously. Issa snickered as though the two women were sharing a joke.

You know about the Vessi, yes?

All but gone, no thanks to the Ridonne. Issa nodded and took another bite. Are you sure you two arent hungry?

Im always hungry, Victor laughed, But I dont want to eat so soon before the meeting. Id probably spill syrup on my shirt.

Victor! Valla sighed. Your shirt is enchanted to clean . . .

I know, I know. Victor sipped his coffee. Ill eat when Im done beating up all these pinch robots Issas people have set up for me.

That sounds like something Morgan would say, Issa laughed.

Valla gave Victor a knowing look and continued speaking, Well, back on the topic of the Rihven, you know that there were three species of people that came from our homeworld, yes?

From Alurath?

Yes. Before the joiningthe Ardeni, the Shadeni, and the Ordeni.

Oh, yes! The Ordeni were almost gone before the joining; the Ridonne were at war with them. Didnt the Yovashi finish them off?

Right, the Yovashi were from Kthellathe homeworld of the Ghelli. You could say that when the System merged the worlds, they didnt exactly get along with the new species they were confronted with. The Ordeni especially threatened them, being at least equally gifted with Energy usage. Valla stopped, sipped her coffee, then chuckled, shaking her head. Im sorry for the history lesson; I promise I have a point.

No, please go on!

Well, as you no doubt know, we people from Alurath are quite compatible physically; if a Shadeni loves an Ardeni, they have no trouble bearing children.

Of course. Issa nodded.

Before I found my bloodline, I was, as far as I knew, Ardeni. I discovered, though, a distant ancestor who was Ordeni. Through her, I brought forth this Rihven bloodline. Its the equivalent of the Ridonne and the Vessi bloodlines.

Ah! I love this sort of discussion! Wouldnt you say, then, that the Ordeni arent really gone? Im sure millions of Shadeni and Ardeni have Ordeni ancestors!

Thats right! Valla smiled and leaned back, sipping her coffee. Id like to go to Tharcray and liberate the texts in the Imperial Archives. Id like to learn more about the Ordeni, to learn more about everything the Ridonne have tried to bury or erase from the public record.

We should . . . Victor started, but Valla sighed and shook her head.

Someday, maybe. We have other priorities.

Issa nodded at Vallas words, setting her fork down. Do I understand correctly that youre seeking to open world travel so you can get to places the Ridonne have blocked?

Yes! Were hoping to open up a hub world where we can learn more and, perhaps, travel further.

A pity the timing is off, but thats just the sort of thing my Morgan is working on.

Hes off-world?

Yes. He bargained with the Ridonne, and, for a favor, hes been granted passage. This was before we learned of your troubles with them, before we realized the extent of their corruption. She frowned and shook her head, I hate to make excuses for my ignorance, but Im from Tarns Crossing, a frontier village, and my knowledge of world affairs was sorely lacking. Sadly, thats the case for most of us who arent living in the bigger cities. The Ridonne have done well in spreading their version of history.

Issas face betrayed some worry or tension, and Valla leaned closer, her voice soft and sympathetic, Have you had contact with him? Morgan, I mean.

Oh, goodness! Does my worry show so much? Morgan is very resourceful, and when he contacted me, asked for my blessing to undertake the journey, he set the appropriate expectations. Dont trouble yourself a second longer worrying about me. Ill be fine. Now, she turned to Victor, Victor, I dont normally speak bluntly about political motives, but I want you to know that my reasons for lobbying for your visit werent wholly altruistic.

I figured. Victor shrugged.

Its true that these people need to understand what a powerful cultivator can accomplish, but just as importantly, for me, theres a faction here in First Landing who must be taken down a notch. If they lost some political face, it would benefit Olivia, me, and others who think like us. I want that to be clear before you go into that town hall. I wont have you thinking me duplicitous.

Well, if thats the case, maybe you should tell me about this other faction. What sorts of beliefs do they have that you think are problematic?

For one, most of them think I should have been excluded from the election. Im the only non-human in Parliament. For another, they believe in recapturing the technology they left behind on Earth as a priority that supersedes all othersgaining levels, cultivating, trade agreements, exploration, nothing

matters to them more than their lost tech. They advocate for human expansion and supremacy, and, though I think it isn't such a terrible idea, they are actively working to build a vessel that can travel into orbit where they believe their ark ship still flies. There are a hundred thousand human embryos on that vessel.

Victor snorted, You think that's not terrible?

Well, not the recovery of the embryos, no, not in and of itself. Everything will depend on which faction wins control. Things are very divided here. There's a reason the low-affinity species Morgan and his friends rescued have left First Landing to found their own Village a day's travel from here. Publicly, people say it's because they wanted their own homes, their own farms, and their own traditional buildings, but there were many people here who made them uncomfortable. I think it had more to do with that.

Victor looked from Issa's earnest face to Valla frowning, contemplative expression and growled, Wherever people gather, you'll find assholes. There are assholes among the Ardeni and the Shadeni, and, yeah, of course, there are going to be some assholes among this many humans. I like you, Issa, but I don't really know you, do I? I won't promise that I'll be on your side right away, but if anyone at that townhall says something as stupid as what you just described, if any of them try to tell me that humans are better for some reason or another, I'll be glad to set them straight. Olivia tells me humans have a high average affinity, but that's nothing compared to dragons or, Victor shuddered as he involuntarily remembered his encounter with Fox and Three on the Spirit Plane, some of the scarier individuals I've run into.

That's all I ask, Victor. I just hope it wasn't a mistake to advertise your demonstration. There's a faction led by a man named Norton Holmes who's very influential with the Defense Department here, and, well, I'm worried about what he's going to throw at you. There are rumors about a special project.

Oh? Are they playing for keeps, then? Like, no holds barred? As he spoke, Valla shifted and grimaced, reaching under the table to put a hand on his wrist, almost like she thought she had to restrain him.

I . . . Issa tilted her head, contemplating. I believe they're going to try to convince you to sign some sort of contract indicating that they'll not be held responsible for your death.

Hah! Victor shook his head as his burgeoning rage subsided, replaced by amusement. I guess it's only fair. I was going to make you, or them, I guess, sign something saying I won't be responsible for the damage I do.

Book 7: Chapter 7: Town Hall

Victor stood on the stone, stage-like dais and looked up at the rows of benches made from the same material. They rose in ranks up the slope of a kind of natural depression. The people of First Landing had built an outdoor amphitheater on the outskirts of their town near the foothills of a small range of mountains that helped to form the valley in which the settlement had been founded. High granite cliffs formed the stage's backdrop and helped redirect sound to the audience. However, the runes inscribed in the magical devices at their feet pulsing with Energy made it clear that more than natural acoustics were at work.

The tiered seating wasn't as bad as he'd feared—he figured maybe five hundred people could fit comfortably in the little amphitheater, and, upon their arrival, about a third of the benches were empty. He supposed he wasn't too surprised. It wasn't like he and his companions were celebrities. They were people from another community coming to answer questions and talk about things that, to him, seemed pretty mundane. He doubted he'd come to watch something similar if he were in their shoes. Their seats, comfortable wooden chairs, were arranged in a loose semi-circle in the middle of the stage, and as they sat down, Alec stood before them, back to the audience, nodding and smiling.

Everything all right? As I explained earlier, we've arranged for people to ask questions and for you all to answer. If a question isn't directed at an individual, we'll leave it to you to decide who answers. If there's something you don't want to respond to, there shouldn't be, but we can't vet every person—feel free to pass and ask for the next question.

Am I to understand, Borrius said, leaning forward, clearing his throat, that we aren't to deliver a prepared speech? I believe I was misinformed. He turned to glare at Victor.

I never said you had to prepare a speech!

Uh, Alec smiled and lifted his hands, tamping down at the air as though to cool hot tempers, I don't see how it wouldn't be helpful to be prepared! I'm sure many questions will touch on the topics you wrote about, Commander apGandro. He looked at a wristwatch, the first Victor had seen anyone in this world wearing, and added, We're actually a bit behind schedule. Will it be all right if I introduce you? Just stand up as I say your name, and when we're done, you can all sit together. We have speaking stones embedded in the aisles, so only someone standing on one will be heard clearly—it will keep people from shouting out questions haphazardly.

Victor nodded. It's fine. Go ahead. He looked to his left, smiling at Valla, and then leaned forward a little so he could see Nia beyond her. You'll be great, Nia. Don't worry.

Thank you, Lord Victor. She clasped her hands together and tried to smile, but her nerves made the expression look more like a grimace. Victor wasn't worried about being overheard as they spoke—just as the audience had speaking stones to use, identical devices were on the stage before each of their chairs. Alec had explained that they had two modes, blue and yellow. If they weren't glowing yellow, the audience wouldn't hear their voices. Apparently, they worked to dampen sounds as much as project them. The speaking stones were about ten inches in diameter and relatively flat. To Victor, they looked more like dinner plates than stones. If he'd understood Alec correctly, all they had to do to change the stone from blue to yellow was to rest a foot upon it.

His contemplation of the sound-projecting artifacts was cut short as Alec began to speak, his voice stridently rising off the stage to cut through the murmur of the crowd, Good people of First Landing, I welcome you all to this town hall, the first of, hopefully, many as we seek to increase our knowledge and understanding of the System-controlled universe—a universe we are new to, despite the centuries of study we and other scientists have conducted back on Earth. When we embarked on our incredibly long voyage to Tau Ceti, we couldn't have imagined what we'd find. Every day, we learn something new about our environment, and each tidbit of precious knowledge reveals ten more mysteries.

Some of you are frustrated with our current situation, while others are enthralled by this vast expanse of new frontiers, this great void in understanding waiting to be filled. To that end, members

of the Concordia Forum have worked to bring some fascinating guest speakers before you today. They've given up precious time to travel here to answer your questions, and I hope you'll all join me in welcoming them with warm hearts and open arms to First Landing. Please, before I introduce them individually, join me in giving them all a round of applause.

Victor smiled and nodded as the audience began to clap. He looked at his companions. Nia blushed and looked down. Valla was impassive, and the old commander smiled, nodded, and soaked up the adulation. Darro had been spared the stage; he sat in the front row beside Issa, along with some other members of parliament. They'd introduced themselves when Victor's party first arrived in the amphitheater, but he'd already forgotten their names. As the clapping died down, Alec continued to speak, As you know, these guests come to us from the newly formed republic of The Free Marches, where they battled the undead invaders from the world of Dark Ember to win lands free from the Ridonne Empire's influence.

Now, as I've told our guests, most of the people of First Landing, especially you all who've shown an interest in this town hall, are well versed in the details of that conquest and invasion, so I won't bore you by rehashing it. I'm sure there are those among you who've prepared questions for our guests on that topic, so there's no sense repeating everything now. As I introduce each of them, I'll keep things brief; we'll have plenty of time to get to know these people over the next couple of hours.

First, allow me to introduce Borrius apGandro, a former commander in the Ridonnian Imperial Legion. As Borrius stood and performed a half bow, Victor wondered at Alec's use of the term Ridonnian—was that the correct phrasing? He'd never heard anyone from the Ridonne Empire label themselves as such. Borrius sat down, and Victor braced himself, but he apparently wasn't going in order of seating. Next, please welcome Nia, a young woman, a survivor and freedom fighter from the world of Dark Ember! Nia hesitantly stood, glancing at Victor with a puzzled expression as the audience clapped more enthusiastically for her than Borrius.

Victor frowned, slightly annoyed by Alec's very liberal interpretation of Nia's situation. Freedom fighter? Clearly, he was trying to sway the public opinion about the speakers he'd gathered for them. Nia sat down, and Alec said, Beside Nia is Lady Valla apYensha, a powerful person in her own right, but also the heiress to the most influential family in the Free Marches.

Valla stood up and, surprising Victor, stepped onto the speaking stone, clearing her throat. The audience had already grown hushed as she stood to her full stature, towering over Alec. She spread her wings slightly, and their lustrous metallic sheen as they rustled in the morning breeze was probably the source of the audience's stupefaction. Pardon me, Mr. Green, but I'd like to clarify one thing: Victor Sandoval is the most influential landholder in the Free Marches, not my family. She smiled radiantly, bowed with a flourish, and sat back down, removing her foot from her speaking stone.

Ah, thank you, Lady apYensha. Your timely correction brings me to our final guest, a man many of you have already heard spoken about in parliamentary sessions—Victor Sandoval. Victor stood up and nodded to Alec, his eyes focusing on him as he continued to speak, Victor is a new citizen to Fanwath, just as we are a traveler from Earth! Despite Alec's assurance that many of the audience members already knew about his origins, there was quite a hubbub at his proclamation. Victor could hear the murmur of conversations, could see people speaking openly to their neighbors, but the magic of the amphitheater kept the noise from impacting Alec's introduction as he continued, Victor

was summoned to this world; he didnt travel via spacecraft. His welcome to Fanwath was a good deal harsher than ours, even considering our troubles with the Urghat.

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Despite that, or perhaps because of it, Victor has grown in power and prestige beyond anything weve accomplished here in First Landing. He laughed at the faint sounds of outrage or disagreement coming from the muted audience. You dont have to take my word for it! Ill elaborate with some facts about the man: Hes reached levels of personal power that none of us here can begin to comprehend. Hes conquered armies led by the Ridonne and traveled to another world where he rose to fame in a matter of weeks, besting champions in their arena and battling creatures larger than the shuttles you all took to board the ark ship.

Victor Sandoval helped to lead the army that drove the invaders from Dark Ember from this world, and, as Lady apYensha just assured you all, hes now the most influential landholder in those liberated lands. Even saying all that, you dont have to believe me! Believe the man himself, standing here ready to answer your questions about the true nature of power in this, our new reality. Alec turned and, with the audience, began to applaud Victor. Victor might have protested if someone asked whether he enjoyed the adulation, but the truth was that he ate it up. He stood tall, teetering on the brink of canceling his Alter Self spell but managing to keep it together until Alec stopped clapping and turned back to the audience.

Now, Ill yield the floor to you, citizens of First Landing. You know the procedure. Form lines at the speaking stones, and well allow our guests to answer you one at a time.

Victor sat down, noticing the sour expression on Borriuss face as he did so. Something wrong, Borrius?

Oh, nothing. Id hoped to have a chance to take the stage without you. Ill forever be clouded by your shadow while we share it.

Hah, Victor chuckled, amazed, as usual, by the mans conceit. Try to keep your chin up, old man. Ill make sure you get to answer plenty of questions.

Old man? Hah! You know I purchased a racial upgrade from the campaign store. Ill eat that, and the next time we meet, youll see what a handsome fellow I am. Victor couldnt tell if Borrius was being droll or serious, so he just snorted, amused either way.

Ahem, a womans voice rang out over the audience, and Victor realized the first citizen had stepped up to the speaking stone. She was a tall, thin woman with long brown braids, wearing peach-colored overalls and a long-sleeved white shirt. I was wondering if you consider the Free Marches to be at war with the Ridonne Empire.

Victor grinned at Borrius. Nows your chance!

Borrius stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and stepped onto the speaking stone. An excellent question! Are we at war? Not openly, no. The Ridonne, who led their legions against us as we made our way to the Untamed Marches, acted without Imperial sanction. Their armies were destroyed, and Victor, here, meted out justice most severe to the perpetrators. He nodded, stroked his jawline, and added, I would say that our relations are cool and that we keep a watchful eye to the north, but we are not at war.

As Borrius bowed and took his seat, a portly, bald man stepped up to the stone. Victor, er, Mr. Sandoval, is it true that youre the highest-level person on Fanwath?

Victor barked a short laugh at the mans bluntness. He stood up and stepped a foot onto the speaking stone. As it turned yellow, he said, Thats an interesting question. First, Ill offer a little advice: Be careful with such a blunt question about a persons level. In some circles, that could get you in trouble. Most people would think its rude, but there are those, for instance, many of the people on Zaafor, who would thrash you or, at the very least, challenge you to a duel.

My, uh, my apologies . . . he began to stammer, but Victor held up a hand and continued.

Ill answer you, in any case. I might be the highest-level human, but Im not sure. As for the highest-level person, I can definitively say no. Theres at least one person on this stage whos my level. Ive never been to Tharcray, so there might be many people there who are higher level. I hear thats where all the old masters go to live, primarily because the colony stone there allows them to visit other, more powerful worlds. Considering some of those folks are more than four hundred years old, yeah, they might be higher level. Victor shrugged, stepped off the stone, and sat down.

Pardon me, sir, but if you arent the . . .

Thats your question, Gerald. Give the next person a chance, Alec interrupted. Gerald, a bit red in the face, stepped off the stone and moved back to his seat while a thin, dark-skinned woman wearing a tie-dye blouse and pants that looked very much like blue jeans stepped forward.

Hello, Mr. Sandoval. Since youre standing, I have another question for you. When Victor nodded, she continued, Im Andrea Belgrade, and Ive been studying and trying to compile a list of Core types. I saw from Gerald's question that you find invasive questions rude, but would you mind if I asked a little about your Core? I believe it will be enlightening to this assembly.

Victor tapped his toes onto the stone and responded, I dont mind.

Thank you! From Olivia Bennets briefings, many of us who've had an interest have learned a bit about you. As Gerald indicated, one thing we learned is that youre higher level than most or all of us here. Another is that you spoke to her in your correspondence about cultivating Energy for the advancement of your Core. Would you feel offended if I asked what type of Core you have? Your affinities?

Heh, Victor didnt have to raise his voice; the speaking stone carried his softly spoken reaction perfectly to every ear in the amphitheater. He shook his head, amused and dismayed, unsure how to proceed. Here he was, confronted with hundreds of people, and they wanted to know things that were rather intimate, things that could lead to him being harmed by his enemies. He supposed the best way to handle it was to explain. First, I can see you all have been a little sheltered out here in the frontier. Im surprised Olivia, at least, hasnt spoken to you about etiquette when it comes to sharing things like affinities, levels, skills, etcetera. If she has tried to explain and you all havent taken her seriously, let me say that you should listen. You dont want people in the wider world or beyond to know about your affinities.

He wanted to pace about as he spoke, but he had to keep his foot on the stone, so he settled for stretching his neck while he gathered his thoughts. For example, during our war against the invaders from Dark Ember, one of my enemies learned too much about my affinities and managed to entrap me. That action led to the deaths of hundreds of good people, people who were counting on me. You



have to believe that there are those who will use you in any way possible to advance their agenda, whatever it might be. You should have learned something like that from your experience with apGravin. Olivia told me he almost kidnapped half your population!

The woman didnt back down. She only nodded, holding up a hand to forestall Alecs objection, I understand that, Victor, but this town hall is about learning, and I think we could learn much from you. Without telling me your affinities, then, will you talk about your Core type? According to Olivia, that cats out of the bag, yes? This is a relevant topic, and Ill illustrate that with a quick follow-up. Victor suddenly realized what she was getting at. She knew his Core type and wanted to make a point about it, but sought his permission to speak openly.

Ah, I understand. I appreciate your consideration. I have a spirit Core. He looked around at the people sitting on the stone benches and tried to gauge their reaction. The murmuring buzz of conversation had increased, and he saw some blatantly dismissive expressions from quite a number of people. A couple of men near the upper exit actually stood and began to leave.

Do you see the ignorant reaction some of my fellow citizens are having to your statement, Mr. Sandoval? Not a single human in First Landing has a Spirit Core, yet they were rather abundant with the so-called low-affinity species, which, until recently, were living among us. Despite the novelty of Cores in general, our great dearth of understanding, there are those among us who believe they know enough to dismiss an entire category as inferior and less evolved. What say you?

Victor frowned and rubbed his chin. His Quinametzin pride was annoyed, and he was toying with the idea of casting Iron Berserk and demonstrating his inferiority to those pitiful people, especially the men whod stood and begun to leave. He thought about canceling his Shape Self spell and letting his full aura roll out over them, crushing them into submission with his Aura of Command. Instead, he shrugged and smiled, speaking more calmly than ever, letting his deep voice rumble smoothly out to the audience, Plenty of people have underestimated me. Plenty have thought to punish or kill me with their superior affinities, only to be ground to dust, forgotten as a footnote in the history of my conquests.

## Book 7: Chapter 8: The Opposition

At the crowd's reaction to his words, Victor immediately began questioning his decision not to put some weight behind his statement. Maybe he should have let his aura loose and allowed the people in the audience to understand that his words werent empty. Hed struggled with his Quinametzin pride, though, and won, and now he wouldnt change course. Many people had shot to their feet, crowding toward the speaking stones. There were four of them, with four different queues, but orderly patience had been cast aside as some of the audience members apparently took Victors words about grinding his enemies to dust as a threat.

Despite the noise-dampening magic in the amphitheater, the buzz of the crowd was loud enough to make the people at the front of the lines feel they had to shout. The stones amplified those shouts, so they felt they had to contend with each other, creating a chaotic din in which Victor began to revel. It almost sounded like a battlefield to him, and something of a mad grin spread on his lips as he stood tall on the stage and watched the chaos unfold. Alec wasnt so content to let his town hall fall apart. He stood and, red-faced, began to shout. Whatever magic the amphitheater employed allowed his voice to cut through the clamor.

Quiet! Order! Keep your seats! We have a process here, and you all know it. Victor will be happy to answer follow-up questions, and, as you can see, he means no harm with his words. Alec gestured to Victor as he stood calmly atop his speaking stone, arms loose by his sides, a perhaps disturbing smile on his face. Order! Quiet! One at a time! Alec continued to admonish the crowd until, after four or five repeated requests for order, the buzz finally began to die down. Alec pointed to the man at the front of the centermost line of waiting townsfolk. Richard, you were about to leave, and now you're at the front of the line. I see the people behind you are content to allow you to hold that spot, so why don't you ask your question.

Victor could see what Alec was doing. It was evident that more than half the audience hadn't liked his response. It was also apparent that they had some ring leaders among them, and this guy, Richard, was one of them. If Alec let Victor deal with his questions, he probably figured the town hall could move on to more productive topics. As Richard, a thin man with very broad shoulders wearing clothing that wouldn't have been out of place in an Ancient Rome revival, cleared his throat, Victor stared down his nose at him and folded his arms. Ahem, yes, Victor, is it? Right, well, would you mind clarifying what you just said? Was that meant as a threat to First Landing?

Victor looked around the audience and saw that most of them had settled down, and the queues had returned to orderly lines near the speaking stones. He looked down to the front row where Issa and other high-ranking guests sat. She was impassive, though he thought he saw something of a smile in her eyes as she watched him. However, her neighbor, an older man with swarthy skin and hard eyes wearing a very Earth-style suit, looked more than disturbed. Victor figured he'd try to turn the tables on the guy asking him questions. I was talking about people who sought to do me harm. Did you take that to mean you? As he spoke, he unfolded his arms and tried to look relaxed and reasonable.

Perhaps you could enlighten us. Whom have you been grinding to dust during your time away from Earth? Why should we be entertaining a violent warmonger?

Are you entertaining me? Victor's smile faded, and his eyes began to glower, his restraint on his pride fading far more quickly than he'd anticipated. So far, I'm unamused. To answer your question, I was brought into this world as a slave, and I killed most of those who wanted to keep me that way. Victor was, of course, simplifying things, but he wasn't feeling charitable with his words just then.

Alec had seen enough, and it was clear he was starting to worry that the town hall would devolve into a shouting match again. Do you have a question for our guest, or are you going to badger him? The topic at hand, I believe, is spirit Cores.

Certainly. The man adjusted the sash-like belt around his waist and straightened up, clearing his throat. We've learned through our study that the use of spirit Cores is relegated to the low-affinity species of this world because they are directly tied to emotion. As anyone who's studied history can tell you, emotion isn't what successful nations are built upon. Why should we take advice from you, a man who is, admittedly, a slave to his emotions?

Victor chuckled, shaking his head and rubbing his chin as he tried to unpack the loaded question. Again, he felt frustrated being tied to the speaking stone; he was a man who liked to move and especially so when he was trying to think. Finally, after several long seconds during which he could hear the faint buzz of the audience growing impatient, he replied, First, I'd say that you need to revisit your studies. Spirit Cores aren't tied to emotions, but our emotions connect us to our spirits. Notice I said *our*. All of you have spirits, but those of us gifted with a spirit Core are able to harness that Energy. I'll say one final word on this matter publicly: A person with a spirit Core isn't a slave to

their emotions but rather one who must learn to master them. If not for my many hours of torturous introspection, I would have lost myself to one emotion or another during this town hall, for instance. Victor nodded as though confirming his words to himself, and then he sat down.

But thats not . . . the man started to say, only to be cut off from Alec.

Lets keep things moving, folks. He pointed to another queue and said, Raif, what's your question?

Ahem, yes. I was wondering if we might hear some more about this invasion that took place. How did an army arrive on Fanwath from another world? How many soldiers were there? Why was it imperative that you do battle? Rumors Im hearing are that mere thousands of people were fighting over millions of acres. Couldnt negotiations have taken place?

Valla stood up. Ill take this one. She stepped onto her speaking stone and, with a clear, unemotional voice, said, Thats an interesting question, and I can see why youd ask it, being that you and your people are from a world untouched by the System. Those of us whove lived our lives under the System, though, know that while it may seem like a deity at times, it does not, in fact, care about us, or, if it does, it cares in the way a mother boyii hound cares about her youngsurvival is the only important goal. If theres only food for three pups and she has four, she will abandon the weakest one.

Think of the System as that harsh mother hound. It sees growth as the most important thing, and to foster that growth, it will pit its pups against each other. In the case of the invasion from Dark Ember, the System chose invaders who were fundamentally incompatible with us, opened a portal, and allowed them to funnel tens of thousands of their people into the land we were marching to settle. To foster the competition, the System offered rewards for conquest along with the high stakes of knowing that if one side failed, it would spell doom for their kind on this world.

Valla clearly wasnt done speaking, but the man interjected, How can that be? What sort of doom? Weve not seen any evidence of world-ending weapons on this planet. No nuclear technology or plague or . . .

Sir, if youd allow me to finish, the answer to your question may become clear. Valla paused, but the man nodded, waiting, so she continued, Firstly, if youve not seen any world-ending magic or plagues, youve not been here long enough. They exist. Secondly, these invaders were just such a thinga plague given sapience. They were undead, and not only did they seek to subjugate all the peoples of Fanwath, but they sought to turn the very land into a haven for their kind. As they spread . . .

Valla continued to expound on the dangers of the undead, answering many follow-up questions about the System, about conquests, about portals, and her evidence for the Systems harsh nature. It seemed that the people who wanted to press for more and more detail were never satisfied, and Victor began to remember how frustrating it could be to argue with those whod already made their minds up about something. The entire town hall was a bit of a sham in his mind. Issas people thought a certain way, her competition thought another, and they both sought to make the other look stupid. It felt like Issa was the more rational, correct one, but Victor couldnt help feeling used.

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While Valla spoke, he wondered if they were just wasting time. Looking around the audience, the same people looked incredulous as when he'd first riled them up by talking about how he'd crushed his enemies. He was beginning to understand why Issa had talked her opposition into setting up a demonstration of their war machines. It was going to take the slap of harsh reality to make them see reason. . . . perhaps Nia, here, will better be able to illustrate that point. Victor snapped his mind back to reality as Nia, nervously clenching her hands together, stood up to speak.

Hello, she said, flinching as her voice echoed through the amphitheater.

Ah, hello, Miss Nia, Alec said, trying to smooth the transition. Allow me to repeat the question would you say the, um, great undead lords, as Lady apYensha called them, are equivalent to the Ridonne faction of the Empire?

I . . . Nia paused and licked her lips, glancing at Victor. He nodded at her, and he could almost see the determination take shape in her eyes as she steeled herself and kept speaking, I haven't met your Ridonne, but I've heard tales. The soldiers I've fought with, they told me about the Ridonne Lords Victor fought, and they sounded fierce, indeed. Still, those soldiers said Prince Hector was worse, that his bone dragon alone was enough to send a Ridonne lord running. Well, Prince Hector was a lickboot on Dark Ember, a princeling, the great lords called him. So, to answer your question, aye, the great lords are like your Ridonne, but only cause they rule over a world. If they were to come here, the Ridonne would be on bent knee within a day.

Victor grinned as he watched the crowd's reaction. The suppressed hum of conversation rose in volume, and several people tried to speak using the stones at once. Alec calmed them down, and then Victor listened as the following ten questions seemed to be aimed at getting Nia to admit she was exaggerating. She wouldn't budge. The town hall went on like that, and Victor tried to stay seated as much as possible, giving his companions plenty of opportunity to speak. Borrius did an excellent job dragging out the responses to questions about the Ridonne Empire, its ruling practices, and its military capabilities.

Valla spoke at length about Zaafor and Coloss, but she grew frustrated at one point trying to describe the disparity in strength between the Warlord and his war captains, so she asked Victor to help explain things. He stood up and talked about how the Warlord kept his colony stone under tight control, issuing tokens for its use and keeping the best rewards for himself. The real lesson wasn't there, though; it was in how the Warlord himself was stagnating, so Victor tried to explain, What you all need to understand is that the Warlord, despite spending more than a thousand years working to improve his Core and gain levels, was kind of stuck. He'd reached the limit of what he could do in his world. I believe that's a good lesson for you if I understand Lady apRoald's concern.

Pardon me? the man at the speaking stone asked. Victor didn't remember his name, but he was a member of the First Landing parliament. He looked fit, and if Victor were guessing, he'd say the guy had eaten a racial advancement or two. Is that the concern Lady Issa has? What nonsense. How can staying in one world stagnate a person? Innovation doesn't cease because you've not ventured forth. Rather than support Issa's stance, I believe you've undermined it. This man, the Warlord you speak of, exemplifies how trying to gain power through Energy cultivation is a fool's errand. Rather, we need to demonstrate to these

backward peoples what technology is capable of. If someone like this Warlord presented a threat to us, how would he fare versus a missile strike?

Victor snorted and shook his head. You aren't listening. The Warlord worked for millennia to improve himself. He grew powerful enough to rule his world, and, if he came here, he could conquer this one easily. You can't stop a guy like that with guns or bombs; you'd never see him coming! Forget him, though; he was nothing next to a dragon I met . . .

A dragon? What's next? Are you going to join in on the hysterics of Doctor Bennet about fairies and . . .

Ah, Alec said, speaking over the man, his master speaking stone making his voice impossible to ignore. That's just about the end of our time, and I feel it's a good note to end on. Lester, you speak about the superiority of human technology and, as you know, Victor has agreed to participate in your party's demonstration. By his own admission, Victor has a long way to go before he's at the Warlord of Colossus level, so it should be a good indication of how ready our defenses are when it comes to powerful invaders. Several people tried to speak using the stones, but Alec did something to turn them off, fiddling with a device he held.

Victor noticed the stone he stood on was also no longer glowing, and he turned to Valla. What a bunch of assholes.

Oh, I don't know, Borrius said, I sat in many sessions of the Imperial Senate, and this was far less contentious. Politics is an ugly business, Victor.

Was I all right? Nia asked before Valla could formulate a response to Victor's declaration of assholery.

You were great. Victor held out his hand, and Valla took it, standing up beside him. As the audience began to file out, men and women wearing blue and gray uniforms and carrying bulky musket-like guns walked in from the stage's wings. They stood at the aisles, ensuring everyone left and that Victor and his companions weren't accosted by people wanting to get some one-on-one questions in. These people really have already made guns, he sighed as Alec walked over to them with Issa.

I'm so sorry, Issa said before Alec could get a word in.

Nonsense, Valla said, smiling. As Borrius just said, politics are ugly.

I'd so hoped to have something more academic in this town hall! When Olivia proposed it, she'd thought you'd have time to detail your experiences and, through them, convince people of the need for cooperation and mutual edification. I didn't think we'd have to talk in circles again and again while the P and Ds tried to discredit you. Alec, how did they get so many representatives in the queues?

I don't know. I'm sorry, Issa. We interviewed everyone, but they must have lied.

P and Ds? Valla raised an eyebrow.

Issa sighed, shaking her head. They're the opposition party to everything we try to accomplish. Progress and Dominion: a platform for recapturing their Earth technologies and expansion through, as the name implies, dominion. It's ugly!

Excuse me, a deep-voiced man said from off to the left. Victor looked to see a familiar figure the guy in the business suit. He had two men walking behind him, and they both carried weapons that looked very much like fancy, hand-crafted machine guns. He wasn't very tall, but he looked reasonably fit beneath his suit. He had a full head of wavy, dark hair, and his equally dark eyes twinkled with amusement as he chuckled, approaching them all. Oh, dear, that wasn't anything like we'd hoped, was it, Issa? I had so many questions we never got round to. I hope we might sit down together before you all leave.

This is Darren Whitehorse, a member of our parliament and the leader of the P and D party.

Right, right, he nodded, extending his hand to Borrius, My apologies, I should have introduced myself. Borrius shook his hand, and Victor regarded him. The man looked smug and very secure in his position, likely due to the large men with guns standing behind him. Maybe it was Victor's rank in intelligence, maybe it was his gut, or maybe it was just more obvious than it should have been, but he connected some dots.

As he shook the man's hand, purposefully barely squeezing, he said, I think I can see why a political party would want to push an agenda like yours.

Oh? What an interesting greeting. What agenda do you mean?

Isn't it obvious? When people learn about the strength they can unlock through Core, level, and racial advancement, when they learn there's competition for resources to improve those things, they'll do what they can to suppress the interest of others.

Ah, hmm. Darren frowned, then shrugged. An interesting take, sir. In any case, a crowd is gathering on the northern wall, and the demonstration is ready. Are you still willing to put yourself on display? My people are eager to show everyone what we've accomplished.

Mhmm. After that town hall, I've got the urge to break something. Victor smiled, put an arm over Vallas's shoulders, and gestured toward the stairs leading out of the amphitheater. Shall we?

Of course, of course. There is just one small matter we need to discuss on the topic of liability. Were rather worried that your allies and, he glanced at Nia and narrowed his eyes, followers will seek retribution should something untoward happen to you during the demonstration. He held out his hand, and one of the machine-gun-toting soldiers handed him a rolled parchment. Would you mind agreeing to an Energy contract indemnifying us?

Hmm? Oh, that shouldn't be a problem. I believe Borrius has one for you as well. He'll review your contract while we walk. Victor looked at the solemn-faced old commander. That's right, isn't Borrius?

Indeed. We wouldn't want First Landing to grow angry if you destroy their war machines.

Right, right. Again, Victor gestured to the stairs. Shall we?

Yes, right this way, Issa said, leading their small procession off the stage and up through the now-empty amphitheater.

Oh, but . . . Darren Whitehorse hurried to walk beside Victor as he took the steps two at a time. Wouldn't you want to read the contract?

Borrius will read it. Hes written and signed hundreds of them. Victor looked at the man, offered him a sly wink, and added, Wouldnt want to strain my primitive mind on all those words, you know? He would have said more, would have maybe tried to pick a fight with the guy, but Valla squeezed his biceps where she held his arm as they walked, and he convinced his inner titan to hold back it was almost time to break some shit.

#### Book 7: Chapter 9: A Prelude to Violence

I dont get how an Energy contract is going to help here, Victor said, looking at the document in Borriuss hands. If I die, how is a bargain I struck going to keep my allies and followers, as he put it, from seeking revenge?

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

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

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

The roads were the first thing Victor noticedthey were straight, flat, and orderly, laid out in a pattern that made him realize just how different the cities of Fanwath were from those hed known on Earth, an admittedly small sample. In Persi Gables, for instance, the streets were narrow, winding, and very difficult to navigate if you werent a native. In First Landing, once Victor had learned that the tall, metallic tower was on the southern side of town, he never had any trouble figuring out where he was. It also helped that the center of town was on higher ground, with streets leading away from it like spokes on a wheel. Avenues circled Bronwyns Hill, every one of them crossing the two central boulevards. No matter where a person was, they could walk along one of those gently curving roads, and eventually, theyd come to Broadway or Main.

Victor wasnt impressed with the creativity in their street names, but he couldnt argue with the practicality of the layout. As theyd walked, Issa pointed out the streetlights powered by Energy, which wasnt a big deal to Victor, but when she pointed to weird copper posts on every corner and said they were communication hubs, allowing nearby homes and businesses to connect to a telephone system, Victor had to give props to the artisan-engineers whod come from Earth.

The other standout was the cars. Victor had seen vehicles powered by Energy in other cities, especially Coloss, but the humans had gone a long way to recapturing the look of modern automobiles from Earth. They had metallic bodies and glass windshields and were painted in bright colors. More than that, they were aerodynamic, had some kind of rubbery material for tires, and

were equipped with brake lights and turn signals. Nothing like them existed in the other cities of Fanwath.

Standing atop the gigantic, white-washed outer wall, Victor could look back toward the town, across a large expanse of mostly empty land where residences were being constructed, to the older, earthen wall that surrounded the central built-up part of First Landing. Jutting above it, on the gently sloping ground, was the gleaming brass tower that Issa said was her home. It was tall and imposing, considering it was made of metal, and it made for a good landmark. Issa had explained that the System had awarded it to Morgan Hall for completing some kind of dungeon.

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

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

Theyre large and made of thick, enchanted metal. Are you sure you can damage them? What if you injure Lifedrinker?

If I were a normal person, or, well, even a low-level cultivator, Id be worried. Id say they have to weigh ten or twenty tons each, and I bet the Energy weapons these guys have cooked up are impressive. They figure they can blast some airships out of the sky and steamroll some little soldiers, but theyve never seen a titan. Anyway, dont worry about Lifedrinker. I have another axe Ive been holding onto, one I got from Karl the Crimson while you were sleeping the days away back at Sea Keep.

She darted out her hand, pinching him on the side of his pectoral. Sleeping the days away? He winced and laughed, and she relented, chuckling along with him. Well, you never showed me an axe.

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

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

Victor turned and smiled at the dour-faced old commander. Whats the verdict?

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

Not a chance . . .

Ill do it. When does it expire?

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

Victor frowned at Valla and shook his head. I dont want you getting tied up in this BS.



Its nothing, Victor. We need the quick supply of Energy beads if we want to help Edeya soon. If you were to lose, I wouldnt blame them anyway. Youve agreed to this with open eyes. It bothers me a bit that they dont trust our honor, but Ill sign the stupid document.

Victor stared at her for a long moment, then turned to Borrius. Youre sure nothing sneaky is in the language?

Nothing at all, and that Darren Whitehorse fellow will be signing my contract, the language of which explicitly states that he is not being duplicitous. He paused, shook his head, then added, I suppose I should state that they insist on a single line in the contract that gives me some doubt.

Yeah? Victor raised an eyebrow.

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

Huh? Victor looked out at the twenty shiny tanks, squinting as he scanned the field for anything else. Something invisible? A thought occurred to him, and he summoned his little magical spyglass from his ring. Scanning through it at the tanks, he saw they had no halo at all. Either the magic of the spyglass thought he was right, and they wouldnt be a problem, or it didnt work on non-living machines. He figured it was the latter.

Or hidden inside the machines? Valla speculated.

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

Nah. Victor put his spyglass away.

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

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

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Amused? Whitehorse asked as they approached.

Yeah, I guess so. Victor shrugged.

Victor, you dont have to do this, Issa said, stepping around Whitehorse to get closer.

Like I said earlier, Im looking forward to it. I havent had any exercise in a couple of days. Victor heard muttering and incredulity from the crowd behind them. Hed met a lot of the members of parliament and some other government officials, but if he were being honest, Victor didnt feel like memorizing all of their names. Maybe if he came back after helping Edeya and stuck around for a while, hed make more of an effort, but right now, they were just a bunch of politicians to him. Issa

and Alec were friendly faces, Whitehorse was kind of a prick, and that was about the extent of his desire to get to know these people.

Excellent. Whitehorse smiled, and to Victor, he looked like a cat getting his ears rubbed. Why was the guy so damn happy? Lets sign these documents, and you can use the lift there to descend to the gate. He pointed to the large freight elevator theyd built into their wall. Victor stepped back and let Borrius and Valla handle the paperwork. He leaned against the wall and stared out at the field, wondering what Whitehorse was hiding. He supposed the tanks could be full of robots. Maybe they really didnt understand the difference between a tier three or four human and a tier six Quinametzin. Did they think they could overwhelm him with numbers? He smiled in anticipation.

Thats a very hungry grin on your face, Victor. Issa had quietly come to stand beside him.

He looked into her bright, golden-yellow eyes and saw concern. Hey, relax. Itll be fine.

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

Victor shrugged. Okay, well, I dont intend to make them look good. I mean, it cant have been cheap to make those things. I almost feel a little guilty.

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

This axe? Victor pulled Lifedrinker from her harness and held her toward Issa. Id never abuse this beauty by making her smash up some dumb machines. No, shes too good for this sort of thing. Lifedrinker buzzed in his grip, pleased by his attention. Her heart-silver blade gleamed in the sunlight, but she was coolnot a hint of heat or smoke drifted out of her. Smiling, he slung her back over his shoulder, and her harness snatched her up, pulling her tight to his back. Dont worry, Lady Issa.

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

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

Us?

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

Little, hmm? Well, dont you worry, Mr. Sandoval. Thats not an eventuality that were concerned with.

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

Of course, of course. Whitehorse had the nerve to squint slightly in amusement and wink at Victor. Victor felt a little heat start to leak out of his Core into his pathways; if he hadnt been ready before, now he really wanted to smash some shit.

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

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

Id like your assurance that youll stop the machines if I ask you to as well. What if Victor cant break free?

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

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

Victor sighed but decided to let it drop; if it made Valla feel better, he was fine with the condition. Since he wasnt arguing, he hopped atop the white-washed crenelation and, amid the gasps and startled exclamations of the crowd, said, Ill head down. Dont start til I wave. He didnt wait for a response; he simply stepped into the air and let himself fall nearly a hundred feet to the hard-packed gravel ground. As the wind whistled past his ears, he severed his connection to his Shape Self spell, expanding from something near seven feet tall to nearly ten.

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

As he caught himself enjoying the reaction, he felt a little guilty, a little childish. He hadnt even hugged Valla or said goodbye, so intent had he been on catching the First Landing folk by surprise. Ah fuck it. Ill see her soon enough. With that, he started forward, striding out of the slight depression hed created and onto the field. At ground level, the tanks were bigger than theyd seemed from the ramparts. Shit, he muttered, looking at the twenty gleaming, colossal vehicles. They were probably ten feet high at the tops of their turrets, maybe just as wide and twice that in length. These things are going to take a pounding. Victor scanned through his storage ring, looking for Karls axe. Dont be upset, chica; Im just going to use this other axe for a little while, just to smash some big tin cans.

#

Issa watched the young human drop from the ramparts and smiled as most of the people around her responded with alarm. She knew better; even she could survive that fall, and shed yet to reach tier three. Undoubtedly, someone who was, if the rumors were to be believed, higher than tier five wouldnt be overly harmed by such a drop. The fact that Valla didnt so much as flinch was a good signal that nothing was amiss. Still, it illustrated how much the people of First Landing had to learn. Many of them clearly thought hed just leaped to his death. When he impacted the ground, and the sound traveled up to their lofty position like a brief rumble of thunder, that was another matter.

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

Hes heavier than he looks. Valla smiled at her reassuringly. Hes fine. She looked over her shoulder at the startled, even panicked, faces of the governmental delegation. Hes fine, everyone. Dont worry.

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

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

You truly love him. Issas face flushed, and she quickly added, Im sorry, thats none of my business. Its anyones business who wants to know. I love Victor Sandoval with all my heart.

Yet youre not worried?

Hes worried me before. I was worried when he faced off against a thousand undead reavers. I was worried when he chased a mad Death Caster up the slopes of an active volcano. This doesnt worry me much.

Well, Darren said, speaking up from Vallas other side, Im very sorry for any harm that may come to him. You heard me warn him. Please be ready to throw in the towel for him. Issa hadnt heard the expression before, but she could figure out what he meant. She was sure Valla did as well. He cleared his throat, and Issa could tell he was getting ready to signal the start of the demonstration, but then he coughed and started to laugh. God! Look at the foolish man. That axe is larger than he is! Can he even swing it?

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

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

## Book 7: Chapter 10: Timing is Everything

Victor hefted the handle of the giant axe, grinning at the way he had to strain just to lift it onto his shoulder. The massive axe head was still resting on the ground behind him. He figured if the axe were made of steel, it would weigh a couple thousand pounds. The blade stood up from the ground more than a yard, and the spike on the backside was buried in the soft soil another foot, sunk there by gravity when Victor summoned it from his ring. The fact of the matter, though, was that the axe wasn't made of steel. It wasn't iron. It was some alloy or magical metal that neither he nor any of the men and women of the ninth could identify. It was far heavier and denser than an iron-based alloy, but it wasn't soft like lead or gold they'd ruined hammers trying to test the edge.

Without his Iron Berserk, Victor could lift the axe and swing it, but it was unwieldy, and the momentum of the great weapon would throw him off balance. No, he'd found that to use it effectively, he needed the size his Berserk granted him and the strength from his Titanic Rage feat. He twisted his hands on the metal axe haft, grinning at how his fingers could barely wrap around the dark metal. He wondered what the silly bastards up on the wall were thinking. Did they think he was insane? Did they wonder how he'd swing such a massive implement? He was having a good time keeping them wondering.

When he'd released his Alter Self spell, he'd done it as he fell away from the crowds, far beneath them. His hope was that they wouldn't be able to discern the fact that he'd suddenly grown. No other people were on the field, and the axe was enormous, so he figured they thought he was still the same size he'd been. He loved the idea of pounding those tanks into scrap without revealing his full titanic form. He loved it so much that he was going to try to fight them without berserking, just to see if he could pull it off. Yep, chica, he said, looking at his shoulder where Lifedrinker's haft jutted up, I'll just start off slow. It's better I don't get too pissed off, anyway, right? Wouldn't want me to lose my shit and smash through that wall. He chuckled, shaking his head, starting to daydream, but then he realized they were probably waiting for him to signal that he was ready.

Victor smiled and muttered, Timing is everything, then lifted his right arm in the air, waving it back and forth. Almost immediately, an answering boom sounded from the far corner of the wall, and a sparkling red flare flew into the air, arcing over the field. Victor had good reflexes when it came to starting a contest. From the ancient-seeming days when he'd been a wrestler and waited for the whistle or beep to the death battles in the pits, arenas, and colosseums, he'd always been quick to jump into combat. This was no different, and he literally leaped into action. He squatted, flexed his powerful thighs, and, gripping the massive axe like he was trying to uproot a streetlamp, he launched into the air toward the centermost tank on the field's eastern edge.

The axe ripped a massive divot out of the ground, trailing dirt and grass as he flew through the air with it hanging behind his shoulder. Soaring through the air, he began to bunch the wire-taut muscles of his shoulders and arms, getting ready to swing the tremendous weapon over his shoulder as he descended. Of course, he was channeling Sovereign Will into his strength and vitality. Of

course, hed pulled that hot, familiar rage-attuned Energy from his Core and into his pathways, casting Channel Spirit to fill his arms and the massive axe with its furious heat. Considering the axes black metal and the trail of dirt, it was hard to see, but if one were discerning, they might catch the hint of a faint red halo limning the weapon.

As he reached the apex of his leap, some thirty yards in the air, and began to descend, Victor saw the automated, Energy-driven tanks had reacted to the signal, or perhaps some remote operator had. He didnt know how smart the things were on their own. Regardless, theyd all rumbled to life, their treads glowing with yellow Energy, their turrets turning to try to track him, but only a few had enough vertical mobility. Victor had no idea what they might fire out of their many differently-shaped barrels, but he didnt find out right away; hed gotten the jump on them. Victor laughed at the pun and before they could react enough to stop him, he fell like a flesh and metal comet on his chosen victim. With a roar loud enough to be heard over the rumble of the many machines, he jerked his gigantic axe over his head. His feet hit the turf with a muffled boom, and he smashed the weapon down on the tank.

Karls axe, focusing thousands of pounds of metal on a wedge-shaped cutting edge, split through the shiny tank like a hatchet hitting an aluminum can. Victor had placed his blow on the front quarter of the machine, just in front of the turret, and the axe tore through the armor, the metal gears, and whatever else was inside, all the way down into the ground. In a spectacular shower of rainbow-hued sparks and flames, the machine began to come apart at the seams. Victor would have loved to watch the show, to see the various liquids spurting forth, to listen to the pop of magical crystals and fuses, but he knew better than to stand around when nineteen other enemies were targeting him.

As the concussive sounds of cannons being fired echoed around him, Victor jerked on the enormous axe and started running toward the machine to his left. The shots werent aimed at where he currently was, thankfully, because the axe didnt want to come free. Victors momentum was brought to a screeching halt as the blade caught up in the smoldering, smoking metal of the ruined tank, and, despite the vast disparity in their relative mass, Victor began to drag the vehicle through the grass. He only made it a few feet before it became too much for him, the treads buried a foot into the soft soil. Still, as it bit into the ground, the axe jerked free, and Victor veritably flew through the grass toward the next tank as it set its sights on him.

#

Jesus Christ! someone off to her right exclaimed, confirming, if Valla had doubted the fact, that these people came from Victors home world. The outburst had come when Victor launched himself into the air and smashed one of the machines before any of the automatons could react. She couldnt help her small smile and slight nod, approving of Victors showmanship. He was holding a lot back, but it was probably wise; Borrius thought these humans had something in reserve, and she agreed.

She watched Victor struggle to pull his axe out of the wreckage of the first machine, saw him actually pull the massive vehicle a short way through the grass, and then sprint toward the next one as the axe broke free. All the while, colorful explosions were bursting in the air as the other war

machines fired, belatedly, at the places Victor had been as he soared toward the first broken construct. Quite a spectacle, Issa said beside her. Reminds me of a harvest celebration back home.

That axe, Darren Whitehorse said from the other side of her, it must weigh thousands of pounds to do that to our tank. How does he move with it like that? He sounded genuinely incredulous. Hadnt he seen the magic people could work in this world? Hadnt he listened to Victors cousin? Was he so dense?

Before she could respond, Issa did, I suppose hes put much of his Energy cultivation into improving his physical attributes.

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But . . . Whitehorse said, wincing as Victor destroyed another machine, this time cleaving the axe in a sideways arc so it broke free with its own momentum. But, weve had citizens put their leveling attributes into strength; the ones whove focused on that exclusively have reached limits, unable to add more past a ceiling. A ceiling, I might add, that is far less than what would allow anyone to do that!

Have you truly refused to listen to what people have tried to explain? Victor has advanced his race to the point where the ceiling for his attributes is far beyond what a normal human, or, she winked at Issa, Ardeni could reach.

Hes large, but it doesnt explain it. Its not logical! How can he swing that weapon without flinging himself off the ground? He winced again as Victor, using his weapons momentum, sprinted across the field toward the advancing row of tanks on the other side. In his wake, the automaton hed just destroyed was further ruined by the explosions of belated friendly fire. The ground erupted in clouds of smoke and soil as the other machines tried to track Victors movement but fell short.

Valla peered down her nose at the man, her regal brows narrowing. Did you not hear him hit the ground when he leaped off this wall? Did you not feel the stones beneath your feet shudder? You underestimate Victor at your own peril.

Hes destroyed two of twenty, and surely hes growing tired. No one can run that fast carrying a weight like that for long. As if he could hear Darrens words, Victor suddenly exploded into the air, performing another impossible leap, the enormous axe hanging behind him as he traversed the second half of the gap between him and the oncoming machines. The ground where hed launched himself exploded in a series of massive concussions. The soil was pockmarked with craters, and colorful smoke rose in small clouds. Had the machines been too slow-witted to realize hed leaped? Theyd all fired on the last spot hed stood as though he were still there.

As another tremendous crash echoed up the wall from the field, Valla jerked her eyes away from the smoking, cratered field to see Victor had buried the axe into the center of his target, crumpling the automaton. Hed hit it squarely on the round, swiveling part with the cannon barrels, and it exploded, sending Victor and his axe flying through the air. He lost his grip on the weapon and smashed into the field, bouncing and flopping while the axe hit the ground with an audible thud and sank into the soil, unmoving. Gasps sounded around her, and

further away, down the wall, where the townspeople had gathered, she heard some cries of alarm and, disturbingly, some applause.

Ah, a pity, Whitehorse said, a smug smile twisting the corner of his mouth. He seems to have underestimated the explosives within the turret housing. Im sorry, Lady apYensha.

Valla will do, sir. Please dont apologize. I doubt Victor is much bothered by that little tumble.

Whitehorse jerked his eyes away from the field, looking at Valla incredulously. He was just exploded! You saw him flopping on the ground. He looked past her to Issa, Lady Issa, perhaps you should counsel our guest. I fear shes in . . .

Hes up! one of the other members of parliament crowed. Valla squinted at him, trying to remember his nameBallad? Bannard? Something like that. She followed his and everyones gaze back to the field where Victor had stood, looking around with a slightly dazed expression. She wondered if now was the time hed cast his Iron Berserk spell or summon his banner. Perhaps hed conjure one of his totems to distract the many machines turning their barrels his way. She saw him moving oddly, his shoulders moving up and down while he rested his hands on his knees. A slow smile crept over her lips as she realized what he was doing.

Is he all right? Shall I cancel the demonstration? Whitehorse sounded hopeful.

Hes trying to breathe! another man said.

No, Valla said, raising her voice to be heard by all nearby. Hes laughing.

#

Hah, what a pendejo I am! Victor laughed, sharing his amusement with Lifedrinker. I should know these things might explode. Before he could say anything more, he heard the deep booms of the tanks firing at him, and he instinctively jumped into the air. He tried to angle his reflexive leap toward his fallen axe, but he wasnt facing quite the right way, and he couldnt turn once he was airborne. Still, he cleared the area in time to avoid getting pelted with whatever projectiles those things were firing, and when he landed, he turned and sprinted for the gigantic weapon.

He was a little battered, his arms cut and scraped, his face and neck raw from the explosion. His entire body was a little sore; when hed crashed into the ground, it hadnt felt great. Still, his armor and helmet kept the brunt of the explosion from really affecting him. His feats and affinities made him almost immune to fire. If I couldnt berserk, Id feel like hell tomorrow. Victor smiled grimly as he grabbed ahold of the tree-like axe handle. When he pulled on it, he realized the blade had buried itself a good six feet into the soft ground. Jerking and tugging, he grew a little annoyed. His shoulder was sore, and he knew those cannons were retargeting him. As they firedthum, thum, thum, thumhis frustration got the better of him, and he released his tight control on his Core and



let his rage flow into his pathways. Without a second thought, he cast Iron Berserk.

#

Hes gotten himself in a pickle now. That axe is too much for him in his battered state! Darren Whitehorse smiled at Felicity, his aide and one of the best engineering experts in the colony. She nodded to him, habitually pressing at the space on the bridge of her nose where her glasses used to be; she no longer needed them, but her brain hadnt caught up to the fact.

Hell have to abandon it, or theyll fire upon him there. She leaned close, looking left and right, perhaps trying to time the rudimentary intelligence shed helped program into the tanks. Right about now . . .

The long-range-cannon-equipped tanks interrupted her with their boomsthum, thum, thum, thum. Darren watched the big man, still struggling with the axe. It was hard to see his expression at this distance, but he imagined he was frustrated and exhausted. Undoubtedly, that explosion had hurt. He had to be exhausted, ready to quit. Perhaps that was why he didnt jump again, why he didnt flee. Was he really too tired? Was this the end? Darren wouldnt relish seeing the haughty, beautiful woman beside him in mourning, but he also wouldnt mind taking her down a notch. What would Issa say? Would she finally bend a little, admitting that what they brought from Earth, their technical know-how, made them worth listening to?

With those thoughts racing through his mind, Darren clenched his hands into fists of nervous anticipation and watched as the big man disappeared in a cloud of colorful smoke, turned-up soil, and fiery gasses. The four long-barreled tanks had struck direct hits, and already, the others were firing mortars, fire canisters, and short-range cluster munitions. Yes! Felicity hissed, clapping her small hands together. Direct hits!

Darren was watching as she spoke, and sure enough, the smoky ground zero of the first shots suddenly erupted with fire and more smoke as the dozen other tanks landed their hits. Ouch! Again, my apologies, Lady . . . Valla. I do wish youd have surrendered for him.

She didnt respond, but when Darren looked at her, he saw for the first time that shed pressed her lips into a firm, flat line. She was worried. His heart began to race at the idea. Had they just killed him? The hero of the Free Marches as that fool, Alec Green, had been billing him? Had Darren really just orchestrated his death? The idea was both terrifying and thrilling. Hed truly advanced his agenda with this display. Who would stand against him? This demonstration would certainly sway the voters, and the next election would be a landslide . . .

Like something out of a monster movie, a roar ripped through the smoke and dust, echoing over the field and up the wall. It shook the very mortar in the stone crenelations, and Darren found his knees buckling as they started to tremble involuntarily. What the . . . he managed to say through lips suddenly dry, with a tongue that felt like it had been salt-cured. But then the roar sounded again, and this time, it ended in a mad, bedeviled laugh that threatened to loosen his

bowels. Something fell on him with that sound. Something like a blanket of pure, oppressive dread. He had to clutch at the crenelation to keep from falling, and he realized he wasn't alone. Many people on the wall had fainted or fallen, pressed down by that palpable field of hatred, fury, and fear.

What . . . Felicity tried to say, her voice trembling and thready. What is . . . she had to stop and lick her lips, also hugging the smooth, lime-washed wall to keep from collapsing.

That's Victor's aura, the tall, angelic warrior-woman said, her voice perfectly steady. He must have summoned his banner. You'll see it after that smoke clears. Judging by that mad laughter, I'm afraid that he's likely gone berserk, too. I don't think any of your machines will be salvageable.