

When it came time for Ordus ap'Yensha to take a knee before Victor and place his Energy signature on the oath scroll, Victor felt a twinge of guilt. Why should such a man, someone who'd accomplished so much in his life and who was so much older than Victor, kneel before him? Wasn't half of Victor's power due to luck? He had nothing to do with his bloodline; his ancestors were responsible for that. Was he somehow to credit for his powerful spirit affinities? It didn't seem like it to him; it felt like pure chance. Still, he'd already received oaths from the other commanders and captains, men he respected more or, at least, knew better than Ordus. Even Polo Vosh had taken a knee before him, and it would be odd to start balking now.

"I swear," Ordus began, his voice oddly tight, emotion heavy in the words, "to endeavor to further the goals of this campaign, to obey the righteous orders of my commanders, and to guard against treachery. I swear that, should my own goals cease to align with those of this campaign, I will resign my post and distance myself from this fine army and anyone who may wish it harm. I make this vow willingly and with a true heart. May the System bleed me of Energy should I break it."

The spoken words weren't necessary; as soon as Ordus sent some of his Energy into the document, he was bound to the contract. The recitation was a ceremony, and Victor was already growing weary of it. He'd had to repeat his part more than a dozen times and had yet to hear the oaths of the lieutenants. Annoyance aside, he sent his Energy into the rolled document and said, "I receive you into this campaign, Ordus ap'Yensha. I accept your oath and swear to lead this army with victory always in mind. I swear to choose our battles wisely, and when I cannot choose, I will listen to the counsel of my officers and do everything possible to vanquish our foes. If I betray the trust of this army or the campaign it pursues, may the System bleed me of Energy."

Ordus stood, saluted, and smartly turned back to the assembled troops, returning to his position in the row of captains next to Sarl. Valla had given Victor's friend, the disgraced Ghelli noble, command of the ninth cohort. The instant Ordus stopped moving, Edeya called out, "Lieutenant Darro, aide to Legate Rellia ap'Yensha!" Darro marched out of line, straight up to Victor, his youthful face riddled with stress as he shakily took a knee where Ordus had just been. Victor held out the oath scroll, and Darro stretched forth a trembling hand.

The sixty lieutenants took nearly two hours to get through their oaths, and if Victor thought he'd been growing weary when Ordus had kneeled, by the time they were finished, he was ready to burst from agitation. It seemed he wasn't the only one because as the last lieutenant returned to her place in line, Rellia strode forward, turned to the assembled troops, and announced, "Congratulations, officers! You are all dismissed. The next oath ceremony will commence in one hour at each cohort command tent."

The captains and lieutenants cheered, several approaching the stoop of the command fort where Victor stood, vying for the opportunity to clasp his or one of the other commanders' hands. He smiled and shook as many as he could, and when Valla saw him looming over a growing crowd, she stepped up and shouted, "The Legate Primus has important meetings—time to head out. Come, come, let's go, let's go. Congratulations!"

Most of them heeded her words and quickly began to filter out, but Polo and Sarl lingered, drawing a scowl from Valla, but Victor smiled and clapped Polo on the shoulder. "Thanks for your oath, Captain." He winked down at Sarl and revised, "Captains."

“Thank you for the opportunity!” Sarl nodded. “I’d hoped to ask you a favor before I move off to receive my own oaths.”

“Sure, what is it?” Victor asked, still grasping Polo’s shoulder. The big Vodkin also looked down at Sarl, his moist, black eyes spelling out his curiosity.

“Well, when your Primus here,” he nodded respectfully to Valla, “promoted and reassigned me, my men, the ones from the Wagon Wheel, were left with my old cohort. Can I transfer them to the ninth? I’ll send replacements to the second . . .”

“This isn’t something the Legate should be concerned about, Captain Sarl,” Valla interjected. “Speak with Taz-dak, your old captain, and arrange for the troop exchange.”

“Ahem.” Sarl looked down and straightened his posture, turning to look Valla in the eye, “I tried that, ma’am. Captain Taz-dak wasn’t receptive to the request.”

“So, you wish to capitalize on your friendship with the Legate and go over his head?” Valla scowled.

“Easy, Valla,” Victor said. He wanted to tell her to relax and that whatever Sarl wanted was fine with him, but he also didn’t want to undermine her. Before she could say more or interpret him wrongly, he added, “Sarl, she’s right, however. There are systems in place for how this should work. If Taz-dak is giving you a hard time, it probably means he wants something. Find out what that is, and if you can’t manage it, talk to Polo here. He’s a great man, and he’ll give you good advice. I think it’s best if I don’t get personally involved.”

Polo had stiffened at the mention of his name, but his fuzzy cheeks lifted with a smile as he rumbled, “Aye, Captain Sarl. It’s good to meet you properly. I didn’t know you were friends with the Legate! Let’s go talk to that old bastard together, huh? I bet we can sort this out.”

“Thank you!” Some of the stress had bled out of Sarl’s expression, and he offered Valla and Victor a snappy salute as he turned and walked with Polo toward the palisade. He was tiny next to the bulky Vodkin, but Victor knew that Sarl was built of tough stuff, if not physically, then mentally.

“Thank you for not contradicting me,” Valla said as the two captains exited the courtyard.

“Well, you were right. I can’t get involved in petty squabbles. I’ve already intervened plenty on Sarl’s behalf. I think if I’m seen bailing him out of every disagreement, it’ll just make more problems for him down the road.”

“Your solution to that was elegant,” Rellia said, startling Victor. She’d approached from behind him, and he saw, in Valla’s expression, that she’d surprised her too.

“Did you use my own bulk to sneak up on us?” Victor asked her, shifting so he could look at both Rellia and Valla while he spoke.

“Not intentionally.” She smiled and shook her head, bemused. “Still, I heard what you said to that captain, and it was clever. Rather than intervene on his behalf, you gave him a powerful ally. Polo will respect that he’s earned your trust and help him with sincerity.”

“He’s a good man.” Victor shrugged. “Polo could do worse than to have him as an ally.”

“Mmhmm, yes. I think the ceremony went very well. The oath is quite a lot less burdensome than the Legion uses, but I believe it will suffice. Were you pleased with the compromise?”

“Yes, especially as the contract itself is set to expire in three years or when I decree the campaign is over.” Victor held the fancy, ribbon-bedecked scroll aloft, then grinned as he sent it into his storage ring.

“That part wasn’t unusual.” Rellia frowned momentarily, then, exposing her brilliant, sharp, white teeth, she curved her lips upward and reached up to smooth back a loose strand of coppery red hair, gleaming in the midday sunlight. “Do you have plans for the evening? I hoped I could get you and Valla to join me for dinner. There’s much left to discuss before we march.”

Victor looked at Valla, but she offered no assistance, her eyes focused somewhere to the left of Rellia’s face. “I wanted to spar with Polo this evening. Right now, I have some work to do with a spell. I know it doesn’t sound important, but it might make the difference between me trying to wrestle a giant lizard into submission or having a proper mount.”

“I . . .” Rellia’s eyes narrowed in confusion. Victor could almost see the wheels turning in her head, but then she gave the tiniest, most sophisticated shrug Victor had ever seen and said, “Let’s have a late dinner then. Say, nine? Surely you can finish your tasks by then.”

Seeing she wasn’t going to take no for an answer, Victor nodded and said, “I’d like that. Thank you for the invitation.”

“My, but you’ve certainly become smoother with your words than I remember. See you tonight then, Legate.” She looked at Valla, nodded, and said, “Daughter.”

Valla said, “Mother,” and watched Rellia turn and saunter into the fort. “She’s up to something.”

“You think so?”

“Nothing terrible. Perhaps she just wants to pester us about the command appointments or marching formations. Mayhap she wants to build up our support for her in the event we have a disagreement within the command council.”

“That stuff isn’t set yet? Marching formations?” Victor turned and started for the fort before someone else could ambush him with questions or invitations.

Valla followed behind him and replied, “There are many theories on the best way to travel as a legion. Some commanders like a single sturdy column, while others prefer each cohort to march independently, though in a sort of checkerboard pattern, ready to assist each other should combat arise.”

“Checkerboard? They have those here?”

“It means alternating tiles of differing patterns . . .” Valla looked at him like he was daft as they began to climb the stairs.

“Well, in my native language, it also describes a game with a board with a pattern like that.”

"I imagine the word I'm thinking and the one you're hearing are different." Valla sighed.
"Sometimes I grow weary of the System and the way it has wormed its way into our minds, our language, our customs, our . . ."

"I get it."

"Are you going back to your room?"

"Yeah. Polo's going to be busy for hours with his cohort oaths, so I want to get a start on modifying my totem summoning spell."

"Do you mind if I go observe some of the ceremonies? I'm sure Lam and Borrius will be about, walking among the troops. I should make my face seen."

"Yeah. That's a good idea, Valla. I'll be in my room, and if you don't hear from me by the time Polo finishes up, will you grab me?"

"Of course. See you then. Oh, Victor?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't blow us all up with some wild elder magic Energy surge or some such."

Victor widened his eyes and said, "Who, me?" They both laughed, and then Valla turned and rapidly descended the stairs. Victor strode over to his room and went inside, locking the door behind him. His quarters were as plain as could be. Spartan, he supposed, was the way to describe them. Rough planks made up the floor, ceiling, and walls, and the only furnishing was the bed. He didn't care; it was a temporary camp structure, and he planned to shop in Persi Gables for something more comfortable on the campaign trail.

He sat on the floor between the door and bed, crossing his legs under him, and then took out a blank notebook. One at a time, he created the patterns for Shape Spirit and Manifest Spirit in his pathways and copied them onto blank pages of his notebook without casting them. That done, he sat back and stared for a while, observing each. After a few minutes, he ripped out the pages and laid them on the floor before him. Side by side, he began to see their similarities and differences. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, though, and, after a few more minutes, had to admit that he'd been hoping for some kind of inspiration.

"Inspiration!" He snapped his fingers and cast Globe of Insight and Inspiring Presence. In the revealing light of the orb floating over his head, he looked again at the two pages. "That seems familiar," he muttered, tracing part of the Shape Spirit pattern. He picked up his notebook again and conjured the pattern for Spirit Walk into his pathways. After rapidly copying it onto a fresh page, he ripped it out and set it next to the Shape Spirit spell. The Spirit Walk pattern was almost entirely represented by about half the lines of the other spell.

"Of course," he muttered. Shape Spirit forced the caster to go into the spirit plane when they were selecting their totem—half the spell was basically a Spirit Walk. With that in mind, he recopied the Shape Spirit spell, but without that section. He wasn't sure why; it seemed the Spirit Walk was essential, but for some reason, Victor wanted to break the spell down to its

basics before he started to tamper with it. In his mind, it was important to understand what he was messing with before he began to modify it.

He set the new, truncated pattern for Shape Spirit next to the Manifest Spirit spell, chuckling as he began to recognize the System's idiosyncrasies with spell design. When he compared the patterns to the spell Tes had taught him, the only way he could describe their differences was to say it felt like seeing a utilitarian blueprint versus an artist's rendering. He imagined that if you asked the System to design a room, it might look something like the one he was currently sitting in. Whoever first crafted Tes's spell had made a room with a hundred different textures, a thousand features and furnishings, and many levels, windows, and doors.

What it boiled down to, he decided, was a matter of potential. The roots of the System's spells were perfectly functional for what it wanted them to do, whereas a pattern crafted like Tes's spell was rich with potential—filled with hooks and roots for more and more functionality as a caster built upon it. What his Alter Self spell did, modifying each of his cells, reducing the density, reducing the size, and using his own Energy and the potency of those cells to power the transformation, was an order of magnitude more complicated than the two spells before him.

"Well, but why should they be more complicated? Unless . . ." Victor began to wonder if he couldn't combine them somehow while still adding additional functionality. Clearly, the System had limited the scope of the spells for a reason; as he'd taken them from basic to improved, he'd gained the ability to summon a second totem. Would he be breaking some kind of unwritten rule if he tried to modify them to allow for a third totem? Should he wait until the System granted them to him?

The main problem with that line of thinking was that Victor was no longer a "Spirit Carver," and those spells and their "improved" versions had been granted to him upon leveling in that Class. The only way he could see to improve them further was to cast them over and over—how could he do that with the Shape Spirit spell, which only served to allow him to choose his totems? "No, I need to improve these myself."

Staring carefully at the Shape Spirit pattern, he traced every line and whorl, looking for the section that might be what governed or, more accurately, limited his possible totems. "I wish I still had the basic version to compare," he muttered, but he didn't. Regardless of that, he traced the pattern, hoping his intuition, inspiration, or just the many, many hours he'd spent studying Tes's pattern would help him figure it out. He'd gone over the spell a few times, making a notation where the Spirit Walk component he'd cut out was supposed to be tied in. As he followed a nearby spiraling pattern, he came upon a sort of branch in the main Energy pathway, two loops that led away to the part of the spell he'd cut out.

"That's it. That's where the spell limits me—two paths for two totems." He pulled the other spell, Manifest Spirit, near and looked for a similar "gate" mechanism, and he found it. "Here's where my intention is determined, which totem I want to summon, and then the Energy follows the correct path." He didn't know whom he was speaking to, but it helped him to organize his thoughts, so he continued, "What if I remove that component? Would I be able to summon as many as I want?" Victor frowned. Something seemed off about that. Something felt . . . dangerous.

No, he reasoned, there was a good reason, probably, why the System put such a hard limit on the spell. Was it to protect the caster? Could he harm himself if he summoned a bunch of totems cut from his own spirit? How would the magic know what to "shape" from his spirit if he

didn't do the Spirit Walk first? There were probably untold risks to creating a spirit totem without first solidifying it in his psyche as the first spell was meant to do. "I could put an option in. A determination pathway like the one that's there now, the one that allows me to choose coyotes or a bear."

Victor ripped out a fresh page and began to design a new spell, one that combined the two he currently had. He planned to create a branch at the beginning of the spell; if he wanted a new totem, it would trigger the Spirit Walk component, and if he didn't, it would follow the other branch, allowing him to choose one he'd already found. He removed the limiting gate on the Spirit Walk component, which would, theoretically, allow him to find as many totems as he wanted.

When he got to the manifestation part of the spell, things began to get more and more complicated. Operating purely on inspiration, instinct, and, likely, with some guidance from his Elder Magic feat, he found the two "gateways," which were meant to refer back to the Shape Spirit spell, choosing one of the totems he'd discovered. Again, Victor removed them and instead added a complicated loop that would refer back to his previous Spirit Walks and use his intention to summon the correct totem. He'd basically taken off the training wheels and would have to use his own better judgment not to split his spirit into too many totems.

"And if I can't find a new totem?" Victor frowned. Would he be stuck in limbo forever until he completed the spell? Sighing, he scribbled out a section of the pattern and began to embellish the part of the spell that was meant to guide him to his totem. He could see where it dug into his memories, trying to find options to present. The spell had grown complicated as he'd combined the two originals, and now he was struggling to add the complexity he wanted without ruining parts of the pattern he'd already written.

With a frustrated groan, he pulled out a copy of Tes's spell and looked at it. "Oh," he said almost immediately, slapping his head. "Of course." He'd yet to try to employ the weird many-dimensional twists in Tes's pattern. "If I do that here," he said, tweaking a branch of his design, "I can build this new section out here . . ." he stopped muttering as his mind began to race with the ideas running through it.

Time bled away as he drew, revised, and drew again. Repeating the process over and over until, as the shadows of the afternoon began to climb up the walls of his room and orange-red light filtered in through his window, he held up a design that was complex, wild, and a hundred times prettier than the System's originals. "Well," he said, wearing a satisfied grin, "at least it *looks good*."

He'd written the spell twice without feeling the need to revise anything, and he felt like it would work; still, he was nervous. He was messing with the building blocks of magic, modifying the System's spells to make something, potentially, a great deal more powerful. What if he was wrong? What if he *did* blow up the building? What if it was less explosive but just as dangerous, and he got himself stuck in the spirit plane or, worse, lobotomized himself with Energy? It wasn't too far-fetched an idea—part of the spell was designed to dig around in his mind, looking for possible totems.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," he said and began to construct the new pattern in the wide pathway just outside his Core.