

# Phandagron Chronicles: The Ninja and the Paladancer

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# Chapter 1

## The Calm

When people talk about alternate or parallel universes, they always talk about how different or similar such a world would be. They'd be wondering how the world would be without a Hitler or without religion, or even smaller things, like, what if I did go to college, what if I stayed with this girl. They're all asking the wrong question.

The question they should be asking themselves is, if there are an infinite amount of worlds with infinite possibilities, would there be someone writing about me? But more importantly, if everybody is at some point someone's imagination, would it be fair to look at fictional characters differently?

For a long time I never had these questions. I was just a simple store owner, making a living out of my hobby while at the same time taking care of the bookstore that once belonged to my grandfather, until he retired. He told me he got too old for this business, mostly since he felt like he wouldn't be able to keep up with the current trends, and especially because he knew physical things would eventually be a thing of the past, more and more people would purchase their books online, in ebook form, but I knew the death of my grandmother also had something to do with it.

It was a stormy night, and I was going through my finances, when she stood there outside, in front of the door, waiting to be let in. It wasn't the weather to go outside to go shopping, let alone go to some family owned business to get some books. Even the most dedicated would just order their literature from Amazon. I decided to open the door and let her in. She was heavily coughing, but otherwise was completely fine. She didn't have a fever or anything. She was lucky, all she wore was a dress and some red coat of some sort, and she was carrying a backpack.

"What were you doing outside?" I asked her. There was no answer. I wasn't sure if she understood me, but I took her upstairs, my home. "Let's get you dry first."

She was shivering, so I brought her to the living room. It was an old building, but my grandfather made sure this house was well equipped. There was still an old furnace in the living room, but the central heating made sure at least the living room was warm enough for her. I got her a clean towel, after which she sat down on the sofa, while I made some hot chocolate for her.

"So, where do you come from?" I asked. She didn't respond, didn't even look

up. I didn't want to push her, she might have gone through a lot, and she was visibly tired. It didn't seem like the storm would pass anytime soon, and I didn't want to send her back out again.

"If you want you can stay in the guest room." This probably got her attention a bit. She looked at me, and after a short time she nodded, after which I replied, "Feel free to make use of any of the facilities around here." I then went looking for clothes. I had a lot that belonged to my grandmother. My grandfather couldn't bring himself to throw away her clothes, so he left them in the old workshop where she often spent her time during her final years. I asked him what I should do with the clothes, but he said I could keep them, or give them away, he didn't really care, as long as he didn't have to do it. There were a lot of other stuff in that room, most belonging to my grandmother, while others were just things they never got around to toss out.

I found some clothes that would fit her. She wasn't that tall, but fortunately, neither was my grandmother. I put the clothes on the bed in the guest room, then went back to the living room. It was empty. Did she leave again? I listened closely if she was still walking around somewhere, and noticed she was taking a shower. At least she didn't go back out. It was getting dangerous. I decided to reheat some of the leftovers I had around. There were enough to feed us both for the next week, and I would often just toss over half of it anyway. And even if this storm would last for over a week we wouldn't have to worry anyway, as I had enough in the pantry to last for a few months.

I noticed she left her backpack next to the furnace, and since I wanted to light it for some extra warmth I moved it. It was surprisingly heavy, but I felt it wasn't any of my business. I moved the backpack in front of the furnace to make it dry faster, when I noticed the label on the inside. "I.U.T., Intelligence Unidentified Threats". This backpack came from a government sanctioned instance. I wasn't sure if she was employed there or on the run, but she didn't seem to be a threat.

I turned on the television, to see if there was anything about the recent storm. The storm only seemed to occur in the area, covering the entire city, but not much beyond that. It was odd that this storm came without warning, and that it didn't move at all, but nobody had actual answers, and there wasn't a lot of coverage about it. The general advice was to just stay inside as much as possible. I was wondering if it was any use keeping this store open. The street the store was positioned wasn't exactly that busy, most of the buildings here were empty. Only a few stores were left, and nobody would want to live in a house with a storefront unless they were either opening a store themselves or were really into these kind of houses. I was almost thinking about expanding to one of the buildings, but I wasn't sure if that would have been a great idea, unless I would branch out to other products than books, something I wasn't looking forward to.

The wind was blowing harder, and I looked outside to see the weather. Thankfully there weren't a lot of trees in the city, so the amount of dangerous debris was limited, but it was still dangerous to go outside. I haven't heard roof panes falling off, but it could happen. The street lights were still working, so that was nice. Every now and then I would see someone walking through the streets, and I would feel sorry for those who still had to cross the streets to get somewhere. It was still early in the evening, so it was expected more people would pass by. There was this dread though, as if anything could happen at any moment.

I could hear she was done showering, so I set up the table so we could eat. As I was doing that, I heard her enter the living room, so I said, "Take a seat, I prepared a plate for you." She hesitated for a bit, but then sat down. After I've set up the plates, we began to eat.

"Anyway," I said, "I don't think I've introduced myself. My name is Edgar." She looked at me, but remained silent. She then continued to eat. She ate like she didn't have a good meal in a very long time. When I asked her if she wanted some more, she nodded. I decided that today wasn't a good time to ask her more.

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Despite the fact that she had her own guest room, she decided to sleep on the couch with the lights on. She probably had her reasons, so I left it the way it was and went to bed myself. I closed the door, lied in my bed, turned the lights off and closed my eyes. I couldn't sleep. There was this uneasy feeling I had. I turned the lights back on, and the feeling disappeared. Strange, I thought, it was the first time since I was a kid that this happened, on a similar night like this. I decided to just open the door, and let the lights of the living room light up the bedroom.

The wind blew furiously, harder than ever. It was hard for me to sleep, so I got up for a bit, and looked out the bedroom window. Some of the street lights were out, probably damaged, but there was something out there, something moving. It seemed human, but first of all, the figure didn't have trouble moving around in this weather, and second, this figure seemed too tall for a regular human. Then it turned around, and I wasn't sure, but its brightly shining eyes seemed to be staring at me. I quickly backed away, took a pillow and some blankets, and moved to the living room. Maybe it was nothing, but I wasn't going to sleep alone that night.

The floor was hard, although the carpet softened it a bit. I decided to take out a sleeping bag and a camping mattress as quietly and quickly as possible. I'd explain to her later what I was doing there.

The mattress was not comfortable, but it had to do. I had already closed the curtains everywhere, so that any light that could be blocked would be blocked. I also turned off my alarm clock, I wasn't even sure why I did that, but it made me feel a bit more safe. Finally, after feeling comfortable enough, I fell asleep.

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I woke up to the sound of my smartphone, which would always act as a back-up alarm. It was time for me to get ready to open the shop. It seemed the storm still hadn't passed. I wasn't even sure if there was any use opening the store, but I decided to open up just in case.

I prepared my cup of coffee, and got ready to open up the store. She was still asleep, so I left her. I guess she was content sleeping on the couch. I took my laptop and went downstairs, where I opened the store. This was going to be a really long day, no way anybody was going to come by.

"Good morning," I said, as a young woman entered the store.

"Hi," she said. "So are you open?"

"I sure am."

"Oh, well, I'm not here to buy anything. I, me and my brother, we just came here. We're your new neighbors."

“Well, welcome to our small city.”

“The name’s Victoria King.”

“Edgar Howard. So, what brings you here?”

“Work, mostly. Me and my brother needed a place to stay here, and this was the cheapest place we could find.”

“An odd day to go moving, though.”

“Yeah, we only rented this truck for today, otherwise we’d have to wait for another couple of weeks.”

“Well, if you need any help, just give me a call.”

“Thank you, I’ll think about it. I mean, we’ll think about it.”

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A few hours later she came downstairs, bringing what seemed to be pancakes. I did tell her she was free to use the facilities around the house, but I wasn’t really expecting her to make something. I thanked her, and she went back upstairs.

It was still dark outside, even for such a weather. It was as if the sun wasn’t shining, although it did help that the street lights were kept on because of this unusually dark time. At least it wasn’t raining anymore, but the wind was still blowing strong. The moving truck had already left, so I guess they either started moving really early or they didn’t really have a lot to move.

The wind wasn’t helping business, but it did give me some time to work on my novel. It was the third one in the series called *Last of Blood*, which chronicled the life of Bianca Franco, daughter of a vampire hunter who willingly turned herself in a vampire. I had some moderate success with the previous two novels, but not enough to make a living out of it. I didn’t really care, though, I mostly wrote for these stories for fun. I guess part of the reason I didn’t earn from it might be because of piracy, but who would even want to pirate a novel, and even if someone did, if people were willing to pay for it they would have done so already. Either way, at least my novels got read.

The third novel was coming along great, for the first few pages at least, but then I stumbled upon a block. I didn’t know how to continue. I’ve tried a lot of techniques, I even considered having a bunch of ninja vampires attack her, but that would have ruined the mood of the story. I did know what it was about, the romance between Bianca and Hektor Bremer, a werewolf. I wanted to avoid the typical forbidden love story, and just focus on moving their relationship forward, while they were fighting a hidden entity that I’ve been foreshadowing. I just wasn’t really sure who or what this entity was.

I looked outside, and for a brief moment the street lights shut down, like a power failure, but in that brief transition where the lights turned off it seemed as if the streets were full of people, or at least they seemed to be people. When the street lights turned back on though the streets were as empty as before. I decided to close up for a few minutes. I was seeing things, and at that moment I needed to be with another adult, or at least somebody.

I headed back upstairs to get some coffee. She was watching television, some cartoon was on. Apparently she was very invested in it, as she didn’t seem to notice me. It was kind of odd, having a stranger in your home and still feel safer here than being alone downstairs, especially as there were no reasons to be afraid. Yes, there was a storm raging outside, but as long as I was inside nothing could harm me.



“How are you doing?” I asked. She didn’t respond. “I’m heading back down, just wanted to check up on you.” After she didn’t give a reaction, I left with a simple, “Okay.”

I turned to some news website with a live feed about the storm, but for most of the day, there wasn’t anything happening that seemed out of the ordinary, except for the fact that the entire city was shrouded in a layer of clouds thick enough it blocked any and all sunlight, making it appear to be an eternal night.

It wasn’t long before Oscar entered, Victoria’s brother.

“Hi,” he said when he first entered the store. “I’m your new neighbor, Oscar King.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I said while shaking his hand. “Edgar Howard.”

“Yeah, Vic already told me. Anyway, just wanted to get acquainted. Anyway, I need to head back. There’s a lot that need to be done, and I still need to get a hotel room with separate beds.”

“Well, it’s been nice meeting you two.”

After that, it remained quiet. This storm was going to kill a lot of businesses, I thought to myself. Fortunately I still had a buffer, but even that would eventually run out. I looked outside again, trying to look at the sky. Of course I wasn’t able to see anything due to the street lights. Normally I would have been able to somewhat determine what the time of day would be by just looking outside, but this time I completely relied on my laptop’s clock. It was still only 2 PM, but it felt as if an entire day had gone by, even with all the browsing and writing.

Even though it didn’t seem like anybody would be coming in, I kept the store open, you’d never know who would come in or not. Every once in a while I went back upstairs to check up on her, but she would still be watching television.

Eventually, Oscar came back into the store.

“Hi, I have a favor to ask.”

“Sure, ask ahead,” I said, not sure where this was heading.

“I don’t really want to be a bother, but, all the hotels in the neighborhood are booked, and my sister doesn’t really feel like sleeping inside our home at the moment.”

“I assume you’re asking me if you could come sleep here. I do have to think about that, because I do have a house guest at the moment, but if you don’t mind sharing a room with her, then I guess it’s fine.”

“I don’t care, as long as we have someplace to stay.”

“I’d have to inform my guest about this first, though.”

I went upstairs to tell her about this. She didn’t really seem to care, so I went back downstairs to tell him the news. On my way down though I did seem to smell something I haven’t smelled before, it was this odd sensation in my nose. It smelled like a freshly cooked meal, and, as it turned out later, it indeed was one, as apparently she had been cooking in-between my check-ups. It was a pleasant surprise, but kind of odd someone was willing to do that, so after I told Oscar the news, I went back upstairs.

“You don’t have to make dinner. I gave you a place to stay, but that’s only because it’s what every human being should do. I really don’t expect anything in return. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I really appreciate it and I’m actually happy about it, but you don’t have to feel obliged to do something in return.”

She turned around, looked into my eyes, and said, “Thanks, but, where I come

from, it's how we show our gratitude."

I couldn't say I was shocked when I heard her talk, but it was still a surprise to me. Why talk now? That wasn't exactly what was going through my head at the time though, instead, I said, "Again, I appreciate it, but it's a lot of effort put into something not many would do." I opened one of the pans, and noticed it was some kind of stew. "I mean, look at this, most of the ingredients in here I don't even have myself."

"Yeah, they're mine," she said.

"Exactly. I mean, really, you don't have to do all this, especially since I don't know you at all."

"Well, I know your name, so I'll give you mine. I'm Diana. And, by the way, I didn't just make the stew for you. It's been a long time since I was able to cook anything at all, or just eat something even moderately fresh."

"Well, since we now have some additional guests, do you have enough for them as well?"

"Of course. I always make things in large quantities. That way I could last for a few days."

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Later that day, while working at the store, she came down to the store as well.

"Hey, Diana," I said. "I want to ask you something. When you said you hadn't eaten something fresh for a long time, what did you mean by that?"

"Nothing that you don't already know about me," she replied.

"So you're homeless."

"More or less."

"Well, I've been thinking for a while. It's going to be hard for you to go out there again after the storm passes, and you know I won't let you go until it does, so, I was wondering if you might want to stay here, until you have the means to find a place you can call home."

"And what do I have to do in return?"

There was a slight hesitation in her tone, so to assure her, I simply said, "Whatever it is you're doing right now, I guess. Cooking, maybe helping out in the store, I don't know, as long as you won't need to feel guilty about staying here, and as long as you always feel safe. I won't ask anything more of you, and certainly nothing you wouldn't want to do."

There was this weight lifted from her, as she said, "Thank you."

For a few minutes we sat there doing absolutely nothing, until I asked, "So, how's dinner going?"

"It's done, actually, it might need to be reheated when it's time for dinner." She looked at my laptop. "So, are you working on a book?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Believe it or not, but when you first introduced yourself I knew I recognized that name. You're the author of *Last of Blood*, right?"

"I am. I didn't think I'd meet anybody who has read it."

"It's the only series I got."

"It's an ebook only, though, so how did you get it?"

"I have an e-reader. Sort of. It's an old discarded thing that I got working again."

“How did you get it to work?”

“I’ve done a lot of small jobs just to afford going to a hotel on cold nights like this. One of them involved opening up old equipment and making them work again.”

“That sounds like a really hard thing to do.”

“It is, but I learn fast. If you teach me now how to run this store, I’d be able to take over your job.”

“So, when you said you’ve done a lot of small jobs. . .”

“If you’re asking about that, no, I haven’t done those jobs. It’s not really worth risking going to jail for.” She sighed. “Anyway, do you know where my clothes are?”

“They’re still in the bathroom where you left them. I forgot to hang them up to dry, but. . .”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said as she went upstairs. A few minutes later she came back downstairs wearing her old clothes, now completely dry.

“How did they. . .” I said, before getting cut off.

“They’re mostly water-proof. They can get wet eventually, but they also dry quicker.”

“That sounds great.”

“It is. The last thing you want is to get pneumonia, so you want to stay as dry as possible.”

“But don’t you prefer some cleaner clothes? I mean, I bet you’ve been wearing them for a long time.”

“I have a spare dress in my backpack. I regularly change.”

“Yeah, but things like pants are nice for when it’s colder.”

“I managed without them.”

“Still, I couldn’t keep wearing the same clothes for that long.”

“This is what I had for most of my life. It’s the only thing that reminds me of who I am, or was.”

“And who were you then?”

She looked up, paused for a while, then concluded with, “I don’t know. Can we talk about something else now?”

“Well, sure. In fact, I was about to ask you if you were fine with my neighbors staying here.”

“It’s not like I have much of a choice here.”

“I just want your opinion, that’s all.”

“I don’t really care, it’s not my house, and I’ve slept at worse places.”

“I’m not even going to ask what you mean by that.”

“If it is what you think I meant, it was nothing like that. I never do anything I don’t want to do.”

“I still don’t want to know.”

“Well, to give you an indication, the worst place I’ve slept that is at least safe enough for your stomach was an old abandoned grave tomb, somewhere hidden in a forest.”

“Wait, a grave tomb in a forest?”

“I know, it really doesn’t make sense, but there it was, a grave tomb in the middle of a forest. For a few days I lived there, until the weather cleared up. It did really stink in there, but I also felt safe somehow, it felt familiar.”

“So you’ve never. . .”

“I don’t. Due to my small physique people confuse me for a teenager, and those

that do want to do it with me are creeps.”

“I assume you must be able to defend yourself, because these same creeps can be very persuasive.”

“I literally sent several to the hospital, which is one of the reasons I never stay at one place. If people knew... I’d end up in jail pretty fast.”

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It wasn’t even close to closing time, but it sure felt that way. I could finally see people walk the streets, either to go home or to run errands. We’ve been following the news online, and a lot of businesses closed early due to the storms, mostly because it would be cheaper than to stay open. For me, it didn’t matter as much, I was already at home, and keeping it open was just like keeping the lights on in the living room.

“Frightening, isn’t it?” Diana said. “The storm, I mean.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“A storm by itself already is frightening, especially the hard ones.”

“Then why does this one terrify me the most?”

“Take a guess. Just observe. What do you see?”

I took a real good look, and took a moment to think, then replied, “It’s the entire situation. There’s something off about this storm, and I don’t know what. Nobody knows what’s wrong. I mean, take a look at the sky. Most see nothing, but that’s the problem, we see nothing, not even a bit of light passing through the clouds. It’s a sense of seeing something unfamiliar, something that is seemingly unnatural. I haven’t seen the sun in two days now. That’s not something that happens regularly in this area.”

“So what you’re saying is it’s something you’re unfamiliar with?”

“Exactly. It’s the same reason why people associate the light with good and the dark with bad. The darkness is a place of uncertainty, you don’t know what lies inside, you fear what might be, what could be. When you shine a light, you know, you see.”

Diana smiled. “And that’s why you feel safer inside, right? Because it’s something familiar.”

“Well, how about you? Do you feel safe here?”

She needed a moment to think, but eventually said, “Yeah, I guess I do.”

I looked outside again. Out in the sky was a quick burst of light, like lightning, and a few seconds later, the light sound of thunder. I looked at Diana, wanting to know if she saw that. The concerned look on her face told me she had.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is it the lightning?”

“No,” she quickly said. “No, it’s nothing. It’s... It’s nothing.”

I knew she was hiding something from me, but I didn’t feel like asking. She did tell me that she had a lot of secrets. Everybody had secrets, she said, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad reasons, but there at least is a reason. I guess this was one of those moments where she had her reasons not to tell me. I wouldn’t blame her. For a long time I myself was afraid of lightning, even during my teens. I later learned to cope with it by rationalizing lightning. It was just some static discharge, nothing more, nothing less. Yes, lightning could kill me in an open field, but I wasn’t anywhere near that.

I figured she had a fear for lightning as well, although I wasn’t sure if it really

was a fear for lightning itself or if it was something else, something associated with lightning. It wasn't any of my business, though.

"I need to go back up," Diana said. "I need to check up on the food."

"Didn't you turn down the stove?"

"I did, but I need to check the taste. The taste of food changes as time passes, so I often leave my food to rest before I serve it."

She went up, and a few minutes later, she went downstairs with what appeared to be a tablet of some sort. I could see it was a really old one. It had scratch marks all over, at some places the plastic seemed to have melted or chipped off.

"Wow, I'm surprised you actually got that one to work."

"I've read a lot about electronics. Once you get the basics, it's easy. You just need to learn how to solder, that's all. That and you need to have patience. I had to scavenge for spare parts. Some work was done by others though, getting all the different components to work together was something I couldn't have done alone."

"I can imagine that."

After she started it up, she began working on it. I wasn't sure what she was doing, but it seemed she was looking for something.

"So, how exactly did you learn all this?" I asked.

"Like I said, I read a lot. There are public libraries all across the country. You can find anything you need if you know where to search. Anyway, take a look at this."

She showed me a picture. I wasn't really sure what it was, it just looked like a regular photo taken during the night.

"I took this photo in California," Diana said, "during a storm that lasted for just two hours. This one was taken at around 2 PM."

"A storm just like this one?"

"Yeah, and there have been many more, dating even as far back as the late seventies, or at least that's the first time these events were ever recorded. Most of them take place during the night, or at sea, and don't last very long, but there are a few that do."

"How do you know all this?"

"I follow these storms. I try to chase them, but they're unpredictable. You won't be able to know where one strikes."

"But is there something that sets these storms apart from all the others?"

"Yes. There are no signs of them ever coming, and in fact most of them shouldn't be happening at all."

"I assume you've also read about them."

"A lot. Newspapers, archives, as much as I can. Anyway, there were only some rare cases where there was any form of lightning."

"And what does it mean?"

"It didn't really happen frequently enough, so I'm not sure if it's the same this time, but if those previous times were any indication, there's more coming."

"More? As in, it will last longer?"

"No, as in, more. More storms, either in this city or in areas around it, all shorter in length than the main storm, but still showing the same signs, appearing out of nowhere, blocking all light."

I took a glance at the window, and apparently so did Diana, because at that moment the entire sky lit up with a big flash, with a thundering sound that almost

seemed to shake the ground afterwards.

“That never happened before,” Diana said.

The wind seemed to blow even harder for a moment, until we could hear rain falling.

“Rain,” she said. “Rain’s good.”

“What do you mean? How’s rain good?”

“It means this storm is finally about to be over. When the rain stops, it ends.”

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Despite having her tablet with her, all she did was stare out the window, looking at the rain. There was a sadness in her eyes. I just had to ask her.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No,” she said, “I’m fine. I think I’ll be going tomorrow.”

“Look, Diana, I don’t know what it is you’re looking for. I know you’re searching for something, but instead of going out there, probably chasing another storm, you should stay here. I don’t know if I can help you, but I’m going to do my best.”

“But there’s nothing left for me here.”

“You’ll never know. I just, I don’t like letting you go knowing you’ll be sleeping on some park bench again. Besides, I bet you’re curious about the aftermath of this storm.”

“I am a little.” A brief smile appeared on her face.

“Look, I’m not going to force you to stay here, but at least think about it.”

## Chapter 2

# The Plot

Diana insisted on sleeping in the living room. I wasn't sure why, but she said she had her reasons. I allowed her, on the condition that she'd sleep in a bed. I already had a bed ready for her, it just had to be assembled. My grandparents stored a lot of beds, in case the whole family came to visit. I would often sleep in the living room with my cousins, and we'd imagine we went out camping. We were singing, pretended to roast marshmallows and tell spooky stories. We rarely actually went camping together, because we all lived in different states, but when we got together we would always meet up at our grandparents.

I was always fortunate enough to live so close to my grandparents. They'd always take care of me while my parents were at work, and when my parents worked late, I'd always sleep over. My grandmother would always tell me fairy tales, sometimes the familiar, sometimes more obscure ones, but most of the time with her own twist. When I was older, she told me about the various darker versions of the fairy tales, some of them being the original versions. I always preferred the kids-friendly ones, but the more grim ones inspired me to write my own stories.

"I still think 'Vampire's Tome' is too blatant of a name for an ancient book of vampyric spells," Diana said.

"Are you guys talking about Last of Blood?" Victoria asked.

"You know about the series?"

"Yeah, my cousin once recommended it to me, so I gave it a shot."

"And?"

"I think it's nice. I can see why the story isn't that popular, but it's not bad."

"How did your cousin know about it?"

"She always hangs out on these fiction boards, mostly one with stories based on fairy tales and myths. She always purchases these books from people posting there. I could only remember this one because she was really thrilled to find out one of the authors she followed released a book. She didn't even know about it because the author never posted something about it. How about you two?"

"I got it as a gift."

"I wrote it," I said, barely containing my laughter. I could see Victoria was chuckling a bit, until she saw the straight face Diana gave her.

"Wait, you're serious?" Victoria said.

"He is," Diana said, "he's even working on the third book."

“Well, not really working per se,” I said, “it’s still in the beginning stages.”



