

Victor BK3: Ch4

Book 3: Chapter 4: Festival

“Let’s not take a coach,” Thayla said as they passed through the gates of Lam’s estate. “I want to talk a bit while we walk.”

“All right. I could use the fresh air,” Victor said, and he meant it. As the evening darkened the skies, the breeze blowing in from the north had brought a crisp chill to the air, and he was enjoying it. He was used to heat, used to the sweltering sun, but he always loved it around November in Tucson when the mornings would have a bit of bite to the air, and he’d smell mesquite burning on the breeze.

No one he knew had a fireplace, but there were a few houses he walked by on his way to a friend’s house or up to the restaurant where he’d worked when he was sixteen—they loved any excuse at all to burn some mesquite, and a chilly morning seemed to be cause enough. He could smell woodsmoke now, but it was different. Still, it reminded him of November and family gatherings and good food.

“With magic and shit, I’m surprised people need to burn wood for heat,” he said, sniffing the air.

“Energy at the levels you have isn’t that common, Victor. Not everyone can afford Energy furnaces, either, and if they could, not everyone can recharge them. It takes longer to charge a power stone than it does to craft an Energy bead, and you’ve seen how long that can take. Oh, dead uncle! I forgot to tell you! You’re rich! At least compared to a lot of people. I staked your beads for you, and you were a fifty-to-one underdog.”

“Dead uncle?”

“It’s a curse! Is that the only thing you heard?”

“No, I heard the rest. That’s great, Thayla. You have some weird curse words, though.”

“Victor! Not very many people have fifty thousand Energy beads!” Thayla shook her head in exasperation, giving him a shove as they walked.

“Well, half of those are yours, right?” He nudged her shoulder with his fist, returning the favor.

“If you insist!” She laughed. “I’ll give you your half when we get back to the estate, all right?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.” He kicked at a fallen branch, clearing it off the brick walkway.

“You know Lam’s using you again, right?” Thayla’s eyes grew serious, and her smile faded.

“Yeah. I’m not stupid, you know? I know everyone has their own reasons for doing things. That doesn’t mean she’s bad, though. She wants a chance to gain power and influence, and this whole thing gives her a shot at gaining some land of her own—outside the Empire. I mean, Rellia’s after the same thing.”

“Yeah, as long as your eyes are open to it.” Thayla shrugged, then she changed the subject, “What about Belikot? I thought you were going to let things go with him. You were pretty sure he was busy with his own problems. Why the change of heart?”

“You know better than anyone that I tend to give people too much credit. When he warned me about my spirit wandering and said I should learn that Tether Spirit spell, my instinct was to give him a whole lot of credit—you know, a powerful necromancer showing me some mercy, letting me go, and warning me at the same time. I’ve thought about it since then, though, and something just felt off about it. I think he was afraid of me.” Victor paused and looked at Thayla, and she raised one of her dark eyebrows.

“Somehow, my spirit was wandering in his proximity—what if I found him? What if I came upon him on the Spirit Plane? I might be new to that whole thing, but my spirit is strong, Thayla. My will is fucking high. I might just be able to beat his ass in that realm. So what does he do? He warns me, ‘Oh, look out; you’re wandering in dangerous areas, better tether your spirit down, don’t let your subconscious guide you to me!’”

“You think that’s what was happening? Your subconscious was seeking him out?”

“Maybe! I mean, fuck, I’d been thinking about him nonstop for days and days. I was worried about him, but I also wanted to confront him. Anyway, I’ve been thinking about this, and I won’t be cool leaving him alone. I need to at least talk to him and see what his deal is. You weren’t wrong when you said he’s not a nice guy, though. I’m willing to hear out those Naghelli, but they did attack us first, and there was something pretty creepy about them.”

“Turn here,” Thayla said, and Victor realized they’d made their way back into the city while they were talking. The streets were fairly quiet, but a lot of noise and light came from further in. Victor followed Thayla’s directions and turned up a side street, and the light fell away behind them.

“What’s going on back there?” he asked.

“It’s still Harvest Fest time. There’ll be a celebration in the main square for a few more nights.”

“What kind of celebration?”

“Music, food, games, things like that.” Thayla shrugged.

“What the hell, Thayla? Let’s get Deyni and go there!”

“Really? You want to go?”

“Hell, yes! I can count the fun things I’ve done in this world on one hand—half a fucking hand!”

Thayla laughed, and Victor loved the way it sounded. She’d been so serious since his fight—he was glad to see her let loose a little. “I’ll get Deyni while you’re talking to Ganjoon.”

“Ganjoon?”

“The Artificer I told you about. That’s with a capital a, by the way. He’s a real Artificer, as in that’s his Class.”

“Oh, cool. I haven’t heard a name like his. Is he Ardeni or what?”

“He’s an Ilyathi, like that bounty hunter you fought on the bridge. Quite a different type of person, though,” she chuckled. “We’re not far now, just up at the corner.” She led the way to the shop, a corner store with window cases displaying all sorts of items with descriptive hanging tags. He saw everything from self-cleaning glassware to an entire suit of red plate armor densely inscribed with silvery runes. The sign above the door simply read, “Corner Artifice.”

“Huh,” Victor said, reading the rather bland name.

“He told me his work speaks for itself when I asked him about the name,” Thayla said, noting his gaze. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you, then I’ll go get Deyni.”

“Okay,” Victor said, and the two entered the shop. A bird trill accompanied the door opening, and Victor smiled, wondering where the sound came from. He knew it was some sort of enchantment, but shouldn’t it need a speaker or something? He snorted; he knew Energy didn’t work like tech, but he still wondered how it did something like make a bird sound. Was it like a spell pattern but written into the door?

“Hello! Thayla, I’m glad to see you again!” A warm, tenor voice interrupted Victor’s musings, and he turned to the sound.

A tall, thin man with a smooth gray head and wide black eyes smiled at him from behind a counter. He looked similar to the bounty hunter, but Victor could see the differences, especially in the

warmth of his smile and the laughter lines around his eyes. The sides of his head were covered in tattoos depicting runes and sigils that meant nothing to Victor, though he thought they looked cool. The shopkeeper wore a plain green shirt but had a leather toolbelt buckled around his waist with dozens of slender tools poking up from pockets. “This the friend you told me about?”

“Yes, Ganjoon, this is Victor.” Thayla stepped forward and gestured back to Victor while she moved to clasp the man’s hand.

“I see. Yes, I doubt he could be anyone else,” the shopkeeper said as Victor came out from behind a display and stepped toward the counter.

“Yeah, not many like him around,” Thayla chuckled.

“All right, All right, go get your daughter before you get into your joke material about my size,” Victor grouched, nudging Thayla aside so that he could reach out for Ganjoon’s hand. The man gave him a firm handshake, smiling all the while. Thayla grunted and gave Victor a shove, putting her shoulder into it like he was a boulder she was pushing up a hill. When he barely budged, she sighed heavily and turned back to the door.

“I’ll be back in about twenty minutes—we’ll get a coach on the way back.”

“Sounds good,” Victor said, waving as she stepped out.

“So, warrior, let me see the lovely lady,” Ganjoon said, gesturing to Lifedrinker hanging from his belt. Victor didn’t lift Lifedrinker free right away, though. Instead, he took a deep breath through his nose and looked around the shop. He knew Thayla liked this guy, and she’d told him a thing or two about Victor and Lifedrinker, but that didn’t mean that he had to trust him instantly. He wanted to get a feel for Ganjoon, so he walked over to the nearest display. It was a glass-shelved case of rings and bracelets.

“Do you make the items in here or just enchant them?” he asked, leaning over to study the jewelry. They were all quite beautiful as far as he was concerned, clearly crafted from precious metals and gemstones. Some were carved intricately, with little symbols or tiny flowers and animals. Some were plain but gave off a luster that hinted at their fineness.

“I do both, Victor,” Ganjoon said, clearly taking the hint that Victor was feeling him out. “I started my career as an Enchanter. At tier-two, I refined my class to something called an Energy Tinkerer, and at tier-three, I was lucky enough to gain the Artificer class.”

“You made all this?” Victor gestured around the shop to the myriad items from jewelry to weapons to household goods.

“Heaven’s no! The items with yellow tags were crafted by me, the ones with blue tags were only enchanted by me, and the white tags are simply on consignment—items I thought were worth a spot in my shop.”

Victor nodded, pulling Lifedrinker from her loop and walking back to the man’s counter. He gently laid her on the wood, resting his palms nearby as though reluctant to let her out of reach. Ganjoon leaned forward, producing a lens, something like a magnifying glass, but with an opaque glass that sparkled with little lights when Victor tried to see what it showed. Ganjoon scrutinized every part of Lifedrinker, from the knob of her haft to the edge of her blade. When he straightened up, he had a grin on his face.

“Lovely, lovely weapon, she is! Sleeping Gods, but I’d of liked to see her before the, well, the incident. Thayla told me about it, you see.”

Victor wanted to ask him about the “sleeping gods” interjection but instead said, “You know anything I can do to help her come back to me faster? I had to kill a shit load of monsters, and some powerful ones, at that, to wake her up the first time.”

“She has a Heart Silver core, which allowed her to come alive. You know that, right?” Victor nodded, and he continued, “Somehow, the Heart Silver was embedded in an alloy primarily comprised of cobalt. Some serious artificing went into the construction of that axe head! I can see the tracery of the Heart Silver’s growth here.” He ran a finger along the slightly discolored black metal of the axehead where the bright silvery veins had been growing.

“Yeah, before she saved me,” Victor said quietly, looking at Lifedrinker like he’d committed a crime.

“Lad,” Ganjoon said, shaking his head. “You don’t need to feel bad about that! She wouldn’t have done it if she didn’t want to. Waking up Heart Silver isn’t easy; I’ll have you know! It’s not just a matter of gathering a lot of Energy—the metal, shaped into a purposeful tool, has to feel a connection to another soul. It’s like it has to catch a spark from that soul, and it won’t do that for just anyone. Nah, she wanted to help you, and it filled a sort of purpose for her. She’ll be even stronger when she comes back, mark my words.”

Victor felt emotion constricting his chest as he stared hard into the mysterious depths of Ganjoon’s eyes. “Really?” he asked with a thick throat.

“Really! I have texts on this subject. There are only a handful of accounts of someone actually waking up their Heart Silver weapon or tool, despite the hundreds, nay, thousands crafted every few years. I can feel her stirring in there. You can, too, right?”

“Yeah, she’s not like when I first got her. She didn’t give up everything.”

“Right! So you don’t have to worry; the hard part is done, and the spark is struck! Just help her recover, give her Energy.”

“Is there any other way to do that? Other than killing things?” Victor asked, clearing his throat and straightening up, feeling like a weight had been taken from him.

“Well, sure. She’s an axe, though, and she’s grown accustomed to feeding a certain way, hasn’t she?” He asked, and Victor nodded with a wry grin. “Well, that’s always going to be the easiest way for her to gain strength and to grow. Pure Energy forms, created to spur growth in the consumer, will work for her, too, particularly those the System gives as rewards. Have you ever seen an advancement orb?”

“Nope,” Victor said.

“Well, sometimes the System gives them out as rewards. They’re like balls of Energy, but you can’t cultivate them or even move them—the first person to touch them will gain enough Energy to advance a level. They’re rather rare, but you can find them, not too uncommonly, in dungeons or for completing System-generated quests. I think that Lifedrinker could consume such an orb.”

“All right,” Victor said, nodding, “that’s cool. Anything else?”

“I’m sure there are natural treasures that might offer her some advancement. Certain fruits with the power to improve a person’s Core are often filled with easily digested Energy. Most importantly, Victor, you need to keep using her. Treat her as the wonderful weapon she’s always been. Speak to her, and remind her that you’re waiting for her.” He gave Victor a long, hard look, then asked bluntly, “Do you love her, Victor?”

“What?” Victor asked, surprised. He started to deny it, to say something like “hell no!” but he looked down at the axe lying on the bench and clamped his mouth shut. How could he say something like that in front of her? After everything she’d done for him? She’d shown him her love, and if he were honest and not trying to seem like a macho idiot, he’d admit that it had sparked deep emotions in him. He cared about Lifedrinker and wanted her to be all right. Did he love her? He wasn’t sure that was the right word, and if it was, it certainly wasn’t romantic—he didn’t want to marry his pinche axe!

He cleared his throat and said, “I care about her, man. I want her to be all right because she’s the best friend I could ever ask for,” Victor paused and reached out to put a heavy hand on Ganjoon’s shoulder and added, “You better not repeat that to Thayla! I mean, Thayla’s my best friend with two legs, but fuck, Lifedrinker’s been through hell with me.” He reached out and gently caressed the warm haft, and Lifedrinker rewarded him with a vibrating buzz on Ganjoon’s countertop.

“Wow!” the shopkeeper said, “She’s listening to you! You know, I’ve had the luck to inspect a few intelligent weapons in my time, and I never saw one actually move itself! I saw a sword that would glow and pulse with light when its wielder spoke to it, but this is the first time I’ve seen something like that!”

“Yeah, she’s something special,” Victor said, lifting Lifedrinker from the counter and slipping her into her loop. “Thanks for your advice, Ganjoon. I’m glad I met you.”

“Likewise, Victor! Can I interest you in any items while you’re here?” Victor thought about it and realized Ganjoon had spent a lot of time with Thayla and with him, talking about an axe with no profit in mind. It made him want to help the man’s business.

“Yeah, why not? You got anything for kids? Any cool magical toys?”

Ganjoon looked at him with a puzzled expression for a moment but nodded to cover his bafflement at Victor’s strange turn of phrase and said, “Of course! Could you describe the child in question?”

“She’s Thayla’s daughter. Um, I think she’s six, but she’s a real coyotita—she’s clever and bold and loves her mama.”

“Six, hmm? I bet you’d also like to please Thayla with this gift, eh?”

“Sure! Something for them both would be perfect!”

“I have an idea,” said Ganjoon walking to a cabinet at the corner of his shop. He rummaged through one of the shelves for a moment and returned to Victor, holding something that seemed to be made of glass in his hand. When he held out his palm, Victor saw two necklaces with silver chains. Each had a crystal pendant attached, shaped roughly like an elephant, though they differed in that these animals had delicately carved manes of feathers around their necks and six legs.

“Pretty,” Victor said. “Do they do something?”

“Of course! This is Corner Artifice, is it not?” He handed one of the crystal elephant-like pendants to Victor and said, “Watch.” He walked back behind his counter and through the swinging door leading to his shop’s back room. A moment later, Victor’s pendant began to pulse with purple-blue light, and a tiny voice came out of it.

“Victor?” the little elephant creature said, its trunk moving up and down. “If you hold the amulet tightly and speak, your voice will come out of the other one!”

“Oh, cool!” Victor said, recognizing Ganjoon’s voice, though it was higher and had a faintly sharp quality. Ganjoon came out of his back room wearing a broad smile.

“Don’t you think they’d like this gift?” Ganjoon asked.

“Of course! How far away can they be from each other?”

“Oh, anywhere around the same house—a few hundred meters at most.”

“Ahh, still, that’s fucking cool. Do you have any with a longer range?”

“Not presently, but I sometimes get requests for such. They’re popular with the military and adventurers, though quite costly. These short-range crystal bolisii are four hundred beads, for instance. If you want some that can reach much further, say a few miles, they would require a material that can hold Energy more densely, and, even then, each use would require a day or so of recharging.”

“Well, even then, I could imagine some uses. I’ll keep it in mind, Ganjoon. For now, let me buy these little elephants.” Victor held up the necklace in his hand.

“Elephants?”

“Oh, um, what did you call these animals? They look like something called an elephant where I’m from.”

“Ah. They’re called bolisii. They’re large, mild-tempered beasts that are often used for labor on farms and such. Will the price be any problem?” Ganjoon smiled warmly, and Victor wondered what he’d say if Victor said yes.

“Nah, it’s fine.” Victor stepped over to the counter and pulled out one of his sacks of beads, spending a few minutes sorting and counting out enough to give Ganjoon the requested four hundred. When he was finished, Ganjoon nodded and scooped the beads into a dimensional container of his own.

“I’ll wrap these for you,” the shopkeeper said then, and he took the two pendants over to another table where he worked on boxing and wrapping the gift.

Victor started to peruse the shop again while he waited, but the door opened, a bird sang out, and then Deyni charged at him, wrapping her little arms around his knees. Victor laughed and scooped her up, holding her on one of his hips and looking to the door where Thayla was just stepping into the shop. “Hey, ninita, ready to go play some games and get some treats?” he asked Deyni, poking her little nose.

“I am, Victor!” Deyni said, carefully articulating her words. “My mom, Thayla, says they have sugar crisps, and I can win prizes!”

Victor smiled, looked at Thayla, and she shrugged. He looked back at Deyni and said, “Deyni, I know your mom’s name. You can just say ‘mom,’ okay?”

“Okay, Victor!” She reached out to touch his cheek, and Victor wasn’t sure what she was doing. He looked at her, bemused, but then he realized she was running her tiny fingers along the sparse stubble growing there.

“Gah!” he said. “I need to shave, hmm?”

“Victor?” Victor turned back to see Ganjoon approaching, holding out a small box wrapped in shiny silver paper with a delicate, beautifully tied, pale blue ribbon. “Here’s your package.”

“Thanks, Ganjoon,” Victor said, handing the package to Deyni. “This is a present for you and your mommy. You guys can open it later, okay?”

“Victor!” Thayla said, stepping forward. “Why are you getting us presents?”

“It’s really for Deyni. Don’t get yourself all worked up,” Victor said, chuckling.

“Here, I’ll hold onto it ‘til we’re back at the estate.” He took the package, giving Deyni a wink, and put it into his ring. Then, still carrying the little girl, he walked toward the door calling over his shoulder, “Ganjoon, I’ll be back if I need anything magical. See you soon, I’m sure.”

“Farewell, Victor. Good luck with your lady axe.”

Out on the street, Thayla walked up beside Victor, rubbing her hands in the brisk night air, and said, “Lady axe?”

“‘Bout time someone else gave her the respect she deserves,” Victor grinned, turning to start walking toward the festival.

“Oh, Ancestors! Did he offer you any help?”

“Not exactly, but he gave me a lot of information about Heart Silver and how it works. He’s sure Lifedrinker’s going to be okay, though, and that made me feel a lot better. Come on, now, Thayla! Let’s go have some fun.” He picked up his pace, still holding Deyni, and the little girl giggled as Thayla had to almost jog to keep up.

“Hurry, Mommy!” She called, giggling at her mother’s breath pluming out.

“Do I need to carry you too, Thayla?” Victor laughed, slowing to a normal pace. She just sighed and reached up to pinch her daughter’s cheek, and they continued on their way. It wasn’t long before Victor started to smell the food and hear the music from the festival, and soon they were pushing their way through crowds, and Victor had to struggle to keep his mouth closed as he took in the bright lights strung through the sky, and the colorful, amazingly diverse crowd.

Most everyone dressed normally, like Victor and Thayla, though some wore costumes. He figured they were like clowns in this world because they had painted faces with exaggerated expressions and brightly colored robes and cloaks, and they moved through the crowd handing treats to

children. Thayla called them “harvest spirits,” though, and explained that they represented the people's ancestors, handing out “blessings” to the children, ensuring their good fortune for the year to come.

The celebration took place in two market squares and the streets between them, and all the businesses lining the markets were open, providing more space for the festivities. Victor insisted on sampling food from nearly every cart they passed, enjoying his stomach's ability to appear bottomless. He bought sweet treats for Deyni and himself, which Thayla usually refused, and he ate several different types of marinated meat skewers.

Victor enjoyed everything but couldn't help wishing there was even one good taco stand. He came upon a cart that offered a kind of sandwich with thin, chewy bread stuffed with meat and vegetables soaked in a creamy, spicy sauce, and it almost scratched his itch for a good burrito, though.

They played all sorts of games, and they reminded Victor of carnival games he'd seen people playing in VRs about small towns where the weather changed a lot more than in Tucson. He helped Deyni win a handmade doll at a booth where you had to throw beanbags through holes. It was easy, and he almost wondered how the people made any money, then realized he'd paid more for the chance to throw the bags than the dolls probably cost.

Throughout the evening, the air was inundated with music from bands that played in the corners of the squares. The music reminded Victor of his time at Steampool Vale and at the Red Roladii with Thayla. He didn't dance, but he bounced along with the music, usually when he was carrying Deyni, and her giggles and bright eyes made him want to clown it up even more.

Victor found the entire experience to be more fun than anything he could remember doing. He was sure he'd had more fun at some point growing up, but his life on Earth was so distant in his mind that it almost seemed like a dream, and the festival that night seemed more real, more solid, than the distant memories of wrestling tournaments or parties at his cousins' houses, or even when he'd made out with his girlfriend after a school dance.

Deyni got sleepy after a few hours, and Thayla and Victor walked back to Lam's estate together, with the little girl sleeping on Victor's shoulder the whole way. As they approached the gates, Victor fished around in his ring and pulled out his present, handing it to Thayla. “Open that when you guys wake up tomorrow. It's just a little something for Deyni and you.”

“Thank you, Victor. I wish I had something for you,” she said, grabbing onto his arm as they walked, kind of leaning into him.

“You don't have to give me anything, Thayla. I'm just glad I have you and Deyni. If it weren't for you, I'd just have Lam and Rellia to deal with, and, well, they're more interested in how they can use me than they are in me. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean, Victor,” Thayla said, squeezing his arm and leaning her head against his shoulder. “Exactly.”