

Victor BK4: Ch2

Book 4: Chapter 2: First Impressions

“So, four major groups of people originate from this world?” Victor asked, his words slurred by the potent ale he and Valla had been drinking.

“Aye,” replied Livag, their innkeeper and bartender. “You’ve got those like me, the Vesh.” He reached up and touched the long black horn curving out the side of his head. “Then you’ve got our cousins, the big folk, the Degh.” He paused, nodding to himself, and then pointed behind Victor and to the left, where some of the bright green insect people were sharing a loaf of bread at a nearby table. “There’s the Tong-pan, and if you look behind them,” he pointed to a corner table where some hooded serpent people were sipping drinks, “you can see some Yazzians.”

“No offense,” Victor said, glancing around the room and wiping his tingling cheeks and nose, “but I don’t think I’ll remember all that. I was just starting to wrap my head around the different people from Fanwath, er, Valla’s world.” Victor pointed to Valla, who watched him coolly, sipping at her beer. “Don’t mind her,” Victor said, leaning closer to Livag, “she’s not a big conversationalist.”

“Hah!” Livag shook his head and turned to fill a mug for another patron.

“Careful, Victor,” Valla said, “The alcohol is strong here; they must brew it with alchemy to have a greater effect on people with high vitality scores.”

“Yeah,” Victor nodded. It was true—he hadn’t felt a buzz like this since he and Thayla had put away half a dozen pitchers at the Red Roladii Inn. With a slight frown, he boosted his vitality with Sovereign Will and pushed his mug back on the bar top. “Give me a few to sober up, I guess.”

Valla nodded and spoke softly, “Probably best to keep our wits until we know more about this place.”

“Yep.” Victor cleared his throat and said, “Livag, how much for a room?”

“Ten beads per night.”

“Ten?” Victor could easily afford it, especially considering the yet uncounted treasures lying within ap’Horrin’s and Boaegh’s rings. Still, ten beads for a night was a lot more than they’d pay in Persi Gables.

“Aye, pup. Ten.” Livag’s easy grin didn’t falter as he pushed a mug of ale toward another member of his species, a woman with enormous tusks jutting up from her oversized jaw.

“Hey, another thing—you assumed me and Valla were ‘low-tier’ what does that mean in these parts?”

“Low-tier? Anyone who has yet to reach level fifty.”

“Hey!” Valla said, speaking up to Livag for the first time since he’d poured her ale. “I’m level fifty-two.”

“Oh, well, no offense, but your aura isn’t even as heavy as Victor’s here, and I can tell he ain’t out of the lower tiers.”

“Really?” Valla frowned.

“Aye, but don’t fret. You’re from a newer world, aren’t you?” Livag reached for Valla’s cup, but she pulled it back, holding her hand over the top.

“Yes. I believe Fanwath is a relatively new world. The System crafted it a bit more than four hundred years ago.”

“There you have it! You all haven’t had thousands and thousands of years to stockpile natural treasures and learn the best way to gain certain classes, skills, or Cores. The monsters that roam the wastes out there,” he gestured broadly with one arm, “would probably pose quite a threat to a city in your world. While we grow stronger, so do they.”

“Is that why the Warlord offers prize tokens for killing them? So they don’t threaten the city?” Victor asked, already starting to feel the edge of his buzz fading away.

“Nah! Even an adult wyrm would break itself on our great wall. No, the warlord wants monster trophies because they’re natural treasures—he can use them to improve his or his people’s strength.”

“So if we’re low-tier, what’s high-tier?” Victor asked, still annoyed at being considered a runt.

“Well, here in Coloss, if you’re between levels fifty and one hundred, you’re considered mid-tier. People over level one hundred are high-tier. There aren’t so many of them.”

“Seems like really broad categories. If I fought in the arena you mention, are they separated by tiers?”

“Oh, aye, lad. I wouldn’t go in there, though. The prizes are great, but so’s the risk; mercy is encouraged but not guaranteed, and if you lose, there’s a good chance of being maimed or slain.” He moved off to fill another drink request, and Victor studied Valla’s face; she looked troubled, almost annoyed, her pale green

eyebrows drawn together, creasing her forehead as her eyes stared into the void of introspection.

“Something wrong?”

“Several things,” she replied, shoving her mug back on the bar with a look of disgust. “Us being weaklings certainly doesn’t bode well for our chances to get back to Fanwath; that’s one. Two, I just learned that because I come from a backwater, ignorant world, I’ve ruined my potential—I’ve spent fifty levels with subpar skills, classes, even my Core.”

“Hold up,” Victor said, turning to look at Valla more directly, “Livag didn’t say you were ruined, just that it wasn’t surprising you were from a newish world. Right, Livag?” Victor asked, getting the barkeep’s attention.

“What’s that, Victor?”

“Do you think Valla’s chances for being strong are ruined cause she came from a low-tier world?”

“Ruined? No, I wouldn’t say that. You’re at a deficit, but I’ve met many people from many worlds, and you aren’t the worst I’ve seen. Maybe you can get some treasures to improve your Core while you’re here. Why, there might be a mentor here for you! What affinity do you channel?”

“I . . .” Valla glanced at Victor, clearly uncomfortable talking about herself. Victor nodded, and she continued. “I have elemental affinities: iron and air.”

“Oh? That’s a strong combination! What about your Class? Is it advanced, at least?”

“Yes, I’ve had an advanced class since tier two.”

“There you go! A little work with a master and a few natural treasures, and you’ll be up to snuff. With the right master, I’d be shocked if your next refinement didn’t pull you an epic Class option.”

Victor watched Valla while Livag spoke, and he saw her scowl smooth out as she nodded along.

“You’re a good bartender, Livag,” Victor said, slapping the counter. “Hey, we can use some rest, but in the morning, I’m going to want to do some research. Will you be working? I want to get directions from you.”

“Yes, and can you point me in the direction of a ‘master’ for my affinities?” Valla added, suddenly more talkative.

“I’ll be here. Never a day off for an old tavern commander. Talk to me over breakfast, and I’ll point you where you need to go. Here,” he said, pulling a smooth crystal disc about the size of a drink coaster from his belt. “Touch your

finger to this stone, both of you.” Victor and Valla reached out together and placed their fingers on the stone, hers thin and pale blue, Victor's swarthy and enormous next to it. Livag nodded and pressed his own calloused, hairy digit on the smooth surface. It flashed with mauve Energy, and he nodded, scooping it up and slipping it into his belt.

“What was that supposed to do?” Valla asked belatedly.

“Hand me ten beads, please—I just assigned you to room twelve. The door will open for you when you head up.”

“Hey! Pretty cool,” Victor said as he dug a handful of beads from his storage ring. He glanced to his right, where the staircase climbed the back wall of the common room, and said, “So, no giant rooms upstairs?”

Valla frowned, following his glance, but Livag spoke, “Nope. All the Degh rooms are on the first floor. It saves a lot on construction costs.”

“I noticed quite a few businesses on the way in that didn't have giant-sized doors. Do the Degh not get upset?”

“Upset?” Livag frowned, “Why would they? This isn't a Degh city.” He shrugged and added, “Most Degh are grateful for those of us willing to go to the expense of building to accommodate them. It pays off, though, between you and me. Degh pay well.”

“Huh, I guess I just pictured the warlord as one of them,” Victor said, scooting out his stool, “I mean one of the Degh.”

“Nah, he's a proud Vesh like me!” Livag thumped his chest. “Though he's as strong as any Degh, you can believe that!”

“Okay, cool. C'mon, Valla.” Victor wound his way between tables, standard and giant-sized, and started up the steps, keeping to the right to avoid bumping into a group of the serpent people coming down. He shook his head ruefully—he'd already forgotten what they were called. Two of the four had passed by him, but the third gave him a shoulder check that sent him reeling into the banister.

“Watch your step, scaleless,” the tall, wiry, orange-scaled . . . person hissed.

Victor felt his heart start to thud, felt his rage-attuned Energy begin to bleed into his pathways, and he stood up straight and stared into the serpent person's weird yellow eyes. “Excuse you.”

“Leave the scaleless runt in peace, Cheggra. It doesn't even have a horn or tusk to collect,” a more yellow-toned, slightly smaller serpent person said. Cheggra whistled out a strange warbling sound through his or her narrow nostril slits, and Victor wondered if he or she was laughing. He felt Valla firmly pressing a hand

between his shoulder blades, and, for once, he decided to let things go and continued up the stairs.

“This isn’t Persi Gables, Victor. I don’t want to have to try to make my way back to Fanwath alone, all right? Try not to get into brawls with people who, if our innkeeper is to be believed, may well be tier-ten.” Valla kept propelling him down the hallway until they stood before the door to room twelve.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Victor said, turning the knob. It clicked at his touch, and the door opened easily. “You’re kidding me,” he said, looking around the sparsely furnished little room. It had a rough wooden floor and walls, and its only furnishings were two narrow beds and a wooden trunk. “Not even a bath.”

“Baths are down the hall,” said a boulder-shouldered man with a pink-hued bald head, black sideburns, and a single eye on his forehead, hustling past their room toward the stairs.

“Thanks,” Victor called after the lumbering figure. He stepped into the room, and when Valla had entered and shut the door, he said, “Pretty shitty room for ten beads.”

“Imagine if half the population in this world is beyond what they call ‘low-tier,’” Valla said, walking over to the bed on the left and sitting down on the edge of it with a huff. “If there are so many people over tier-five, all the way up over level one hundred . . .” she trailed off, and Victor nodded.

“Inflation, I guess. Lots of Energy being thrown around. Lots of dungeons conquered and monsters slain. Well, let’s see what we’re dealing with, money-wise.” Victor pulled the four rings he’d taken from ap’Horrin from his belt pouch and sat down on his bed, facing Valla. “This one is a dimensional container,” he said, placing the silver ring etched with leaves to the left. Then he held one of the other three in his hand, a gold-colored metal band with tiny squares of something like turquoise mounted around it.

He could see Valla was going through the contents of Boaegh’s ring, so he trickled some Energy into the ring he was holding.

Ring of Berl’s Touch: This ring can be used once daily to evoke feelings of peace and pleasure in a person or animal you touch.

“What the fuck?” Victor chuckled and told Valla about the ring.

“It sounds like something a scoundrel would use for sexual conquest or to appease an angry family member,” Valla said with a scowl, still concentrating on the space within the ring she held. Victor shrugged, put the ring back in his

pouch, and picked up the next one, a silver band with three dark, black stones. He bonded with it and read the description:

Ring of Negation: Each stone in this ring can be used to absorb a magical effect. 0/3 charges remaining.

“This one’s used up,” Victor said, stuffing it into his pouch. “Think we might be able to sell it to an artificer still—maybe they can recharge it or something.” The final ring was made of bronze or copper, carved or cast to look like the head of a goat or ram. It felt cheap in Victor’s hand, much lighter than the precious metals of the other rings. Still, he sent some Energy into it and was rewarded with a description:

Ring of the Ram: The wearer of this ring can strike an obstacle with the force of a siege engine. Each use will permanently deplete a charge. 4/8 charges remaining.

“Kind of cool,” Victor said. Again, he put the ring into his pouch and then picked up ap’Horrin’s dimensional storage ring.

“What was it?” Valla asked, surprising him; he’d thought she’d tuned him out.

“Oh, I can use that thing four times to hit an obstacle like a battering ram or something.” Valla didn’t say anything, but he saw a corner of her mouth lift in a smirk. “What?”

“That should save your head some pain,” she laughed.

“Really, Valla? I thought you and I were different, you know, because you weren’t one of the many women in my life who enjoy busting my balls!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Victor. I was trying to banter as you suggested . . .” she trailed off when she saw Victor stifling a laugh. “You’re not really upset.”

“Nah, you’re cool, Valla, don’t worry. Now let me concentrate on this ring; ap’Horrin was a packrat.” He wasn’t lying—ap’Horrin had a wardrobe’s worth of clothing in the ring, and even though Victor thought the clothes were reasonably stylish and well-made, he knew he’d never wear any of them. He shoved them into a corner of the ring’s “space” and sifted through the next big pile: food and beverages. Ap’Horrin had barrels of ale, casks of wine, waxed wheels of cheese, cured and aged meats, and loaves of fine bread, all perfectly preserved by the ring’s magic.

After going through the foods, Victor produced a pair of swords, rapiers if he wasn’t mistaken, and held them out to Valla, “You know more about swords than I do. These worth anything?” She paused in her own cataloging and took the scabbarded blades with a frown.

“I imagine they are; give me a minute to examine them.”

“Sure,” Victor replied, then he pulled a large, black felt sack out of ap’Horrin’s ring and set it on the bed. It was heavy and clicked with the tell-tale sound of Energy beads. “He’s got five sacks like this, and I think they each have more than a thousand beads.” Valla had stood up and was carefully examining the blade of one of the rapiers—it was thin and appeared fragile compared to her broadsword, but Victor could see there was something special about it; the blade looked like crystal, not metal.

“I won’t use this rapier, but it’ll fetch an enormous sum at auction. Its blade is a single blood crystal; I imagine ap’Horrin used it in conjunction with his affinity. Rumors around Persi Gables were that he had a blood affinity.”

“Yeah, he sure did.” Victor shook his head, remembering the creepy spells ap’Horrin had used while he’d pursued him around the oubliette. “He was sucking the Energy out of one of those insect guys when I found him—it looked like he was pulling his blood through the air.”

“Ancestors!” Valla shuddered, then said, “This other blade is also valuable, but not so much as the first one.” She pulled the second sword free of its scabbard to show Victor. It had a shiny, silvery blade with golden runes etched into it. “It’s an enchanted steel alloy. I’m not sure what metals went into it, but they must have been rich because it has strong effects, more than an Artificer could impart on simple steel.”

“All right. Well? What about Boagh’s ring?”

“Nearly twenty-thousand beads,” Valla said, walking over to the foot of her bed and proceeding to unload leather sacks of Energy beads, one after another, until she’d set down nearly thirty bags. “Put them into one of your rings, please.”

“We should split ‘em up, don’t you think?”

“No! I have my own wealth. You made these kills despite my failings, not with my aid, so no, I’ll not be taking a share. Hurry now, pick these up before we’re robbed. There are a couple of items in Boaeagh’s ring that you might be interested in; the rest are mundane objects—food, clothing, furniture, and books.”

“All right, but let me know if you need some money while we’re here.” Victor moved among the leather sacks, touching each one to transfer it into one of his rings. He wasn’t going to argue with Valla—for all he knew, she had a million beads in her dimensional containers. He wondered how many beads the adopted daughter of one of the most powerful families in an empire would consider a fortune.

Valla had moved back to her bed and was setting some objects on the thin, gray blanket, so Victor spent a minute gathering and organizing the beads from several containers into one area. With the money from Boaeigh and ap'Horrin added to his own pile of beads, he knew he had nearly forty thousand, and that was without selling many of the potentially precious items he'd been hoarding. "What have we got here?" he asked, looking over Valla's shoulder.

"Four items we should probably sell," Valla said, gesturing her hand over her bedspread. "A 'Diadem of Concentration,' used for spell casting during combat—I think it speeds up the process of gathering Energy and focusing it into a complicated spell pattern," she pointed to a weird silver and ruby-studded headband with long metal points that would hang down over the wearer's cheekbones.

"Huh," Victor shrugged, "what else?"

"This rod," Valla picked up a thick, rune-etched, dull, black metal wand, "another focus item for fire-attuned Energy.

"Kay. What about that cloak?" Victor pointed to a folded, hooded red cloak.

"'Cloak of the Flame Walker.' It allows brief immunity to 'scorching flames.'" She picked it up and shook it out, showing Victor its rich fabric and crimson, silky lining. "I don't know how hot 'scorching' is or how long 'brief immunity' is, but it seems like it could be useful."

"Well, that's pretty awesome. I think it's kind of wasted on me with my new feat, but why don't you keep it? We might meet more pyromancers or maybe fire-breathing monsters." He'd expected Valla to object, saying they should sell it or something, but she just nodded briefly and swung the cloak up to fasten at her shoulders. The garment seemed to contract on itself, shrinking to fit her perfectly. "Looks good," Victor said, reaching out to feel the silky fabric between his thumb and forefinger.

"I like it; it's brighter than I would have bought for myself." Valla pulled the finely stitched lapels closer together and fastened the ornate brass button near her throat. "I didn't mention that it's supposed to reduce the discomfort of a hot environment." She looked up at Victor and grinned, perhaps somewhat guiltily.

"Oh, you 'didn't mention' that, huh?" Victor laughed. "No wonder you didn't argue about keeping it!"

"Yes, well," she cleared her throat, and Victor saw her blue cheeks had grown a bit darker and that she was struggling with words. Was she really feeling guilty about snagging up that cloak? He laughed and reached out, jostling her shoulder.

“Relax. I’m glad you took it—not my style.” He looked at the bed and saw the last item was a dagger in a shiny black scabbard. It had an ornate basket hilt and a red gem at its pommel. “What about the dagger?”

“It’s been charged with a spell; something called Lava Blood. It has one use—a person stabbed with that knife will have the spell discharged upon them, and the weapon will be destroyed in the process—according to the description, anyway.”

Victor picked up the dagger and nodded. “Might come in handy, huh? We can always sell it later if not, but for now, I’ll hold onto this, okay?”

“Of course. Do you want me to hold the other items until I’ve had a chance to sell them?”

“Yes, please. I have too much to keep track of in these rings already.” Victor looked down at himself—most of his armor and clothes were clean, thanks to their enchantments, but the backs of his hands had bits of dried, caked blood on them, and he knew his hair and neck and the rest of him needed cleaning. “I’m going to check out the baths. What about you?”

“We should stay together, or at least close,” Valla said, moving to the door. “We don’t know what people are like here other than powerful. Would they break in here and kill us for our belongings? For your axe or my sword?”

“All right, heading to the baths together, then.” Victor moved through the door and then turned left down the hallway. At the far end were three doors with bathtub-shaped images carved into the wood. Faded blue paint depicted overflowing water, and Victor smiled at the artistic touch.

Two of the doors were locked, but one was open. Victor pushed open the unlocked door, revealing a small room with a bench, clothing pegs, and a simple brass tub, big enough to accommodate people larger even than he.

“At least they’re private,” Valla said, and she might have tried to disguise it, but Victor heard the relief in her voice.

“Yeah, you go first.” Victor nudged her into the opening, and as he pulled the door, “I’ll wait for another to open up. Just holler if someone messes with you.” Valla didn’t protest, and he heard the lock click home after he pulled the door shut. Sighing, he leaned his back against the door jamb and watched the other two doors, waiting for one to open.

He let his mind wander, thinking about what he’d already learned about this world. He pictured giant, powerful monsters, and then he thought about a different kind of monster; it didn’t have a face, more an amorphous mob consisting of the thousands of people in Coloss that would make Polo Vosh seem like a novice. He felt a gentle nudge at his shoulder and nearly jumped out of his skin—had he been that out of it, or had this person moved like a ghost to stand next to him?

“Excuse me, sir,” said a dry, wispy voice from within the deep, blue hood.

“Yeah?” Victor asked, turning to face the tall, slender, robed figure. He tried to hide his irritation at being surprised but doubted he did a good job of it.

The hooded figure reached up with long, blue-gloved fingers to pull the hood back, and Victor was startled to see a very human-looking woman standing before him. He supposed she was one of the Vesh—like the innkeeper—but he couldn’t see any horns or tusks or extra eyes. Maybe she had a tail or something, he mused during the three seconds it took for the woman to lower her hood from her curled, blonde hair and say, “Is that your mate within?” She gestured to the door where Victor leaned his shoulder.

“My mate? That’s my friend.”

“We’ve not seen one such as she in Coloss. My employer, War Captain Forl, would enjoy the opportunity to meet her.” Her bright, pink lips curled up, brandishing a brilliant, white-toothed smile at Victor, her hazel eyes twinkling in the glow lamps. She held out, between gloved fingers, a simple white piece of cardstock. “He’s invited her to dinner, and you are welcome to escort her.”

“Oh?” Victor reached out and took the card, noting the pale orange runes painted on one side.

“Yes, just activate this card, and it will guide you to his estate.”

“Sorry, but I’m new here; is a War Captain, like, an official title?”

“Yes, he’s one of four War Captains that serve under the Warlord.”

“Well, I’ll pass on the invitation, but I don’t speak for Valla. If she’s not into it, we won’t be coming.”

“There are no expectations attached to the invitation, sir. We’ll hope to see you.” She bowed, then, and began to turn, but Victor’s impulsive mouth wouldn’t let her slip away that easily.

“Hey, are you one of the, um, Vesh people?”

“Me? Oh no,” she said, and then her skin darkened from pale flesh to glimmering blue scales, and her body elongated and thickened with a surge of Energy that was palpable to Victor. “I’m a dragon, manling,” said the woman’s pleasant voice from the extended snout that now loomed before him, thick white fangs poking up around the scaly lips that still somehow curved into a smile. “I’d take on my full shape to show you, but it would ruin this building.”

“Holy shit,” Victor managed to utter as the dragon’s aura pressed him back into the door, his body’s urge to flee threatening to destroy the puny wooden barrier. He inhaled a shaky breath, and then, with another surge of Energy, the lovely,

normal-sized woman was standing before him again, still grinning like a cat with a mouse.

“I, too, am a visitor to this world. It’s been an age or more since I laid eyes on a human. If the War Captain knew you weren’t just a runty Deshi, he’d be more interested in you than your companion; I’d wager. Worry not, human. I’m just here for my own amusement, traveling and learning from a few talents I’ve yet to meet in this part of the universe. Still, I do hope you and your friend will attend the War Captain’s dinner tomorrow. It could also prove fruitful for you—connections are important in this city.”

She smiled again, stunning Victor with her radiance, and pulled her hood back over her head, turning to leave. “Wait,” Victor finally choked out. “Does he know? The War Captain?”

She glanced back over her shoulder at Victor and asked, “That I’m a dragon?” At his nod, she continued, “No. You’re the only one in this world I’ve shown. Strange, don’t you think?”

“I . . .” Victor started to say, but she was gone. A faint misty, blue haze lingered near the floorboards, the only evidence that she’d ever been there. “Fucking hell. I didn’t know dragons were chicas bonitas on the inside.”