

Victor BK4: Ch3

Book 4: Chapter 3: Monster Hunters

“So, this War Captain invited us to dinner simply because he thought I looked interesting?” Valla didn’t look directly into Victor’s eyes while she spoke, and he realized she was embarrassed.

“He’s probably just a rich asshole who’s used to getting what he wants. Forget it—we don’t need to go.”

“No . . .” Valla said, holding up a hand and shifting under her blanket. Victor had found her nearly asleep after he’d finished his time in the bath. He was standing at the foot of her bed, having just handed her the invitation card the dragon lady had given him. While he’d soaked in the tub, it had dawned on him that he hadn’t even gotten the woman’s name, so dumbstruck had he been. “I think we should go,” Valla finished. “If only because we need to learn the politics of this place if we hope to return to Fanwath in a timely manner.”

“Okay, but if the guy gets too creepy, we can bail. Just let me know.” Victor wanted to say more, wanted to assure Valla that he had her back or that her feelings mattered to him, but, despite their time together, she still had a sort of default chill toward him, especially when her feelings were the topic of conversation.

“Well, that’s for tomorrow. Tonight we should get some sleep. We can get an early start; I’d like to learn more about the prize tokens. I wonder if it’s difficult to join a monster-hunting ‘crew’ as the innkeeper suggested.” She turned to her side, back toward him and his bed, and fluffed her pillow, tucking it up under her head.

“Yeah, me too. Also, we can try to find someone to help you with your Core.” Victor moved to the far side of his bed and sat down to pull off his boots; he hadn’t wanted to walk back from the baths barefooted. He heard Valla yawn as he slipped his belt, boots, and shirt into his storage ring, then he leaned Liferdrinker against the wall next to the little maple-colored headboard.

He ducked under his blanket, stretching his legs, and was somewhat surprised that the bed didn’t creak alarmingly and that his feet didn’t hit the footboard. “Kinda weird not to be the biggest guy around,” he said with a loud yawn of his own.

“I can imagine. Back home, you were starting to loom large in size and reputation.”

“Home . . .” Victor said softly, wondering at how strange it seemed to think of Fanwath that way.

“I suppose you don’t feel that way yet,” Valla said, shifting under her covers so that she lay on her other side, facing him. Victor also turned from his back to his side and frowned, staring across the little gap between their beds into her otherworldly green eyes that reminded him of mint ice cream.

“I don’t know. I feel like the Victor that came here from Tucson is dead. Damn, that’s depressing to say out loud. Anyway, yeah, I almost feel like I don’t have a home. There’s no place I fit in.” Valla’s eyes narrowed, and he saw her mouth open like she wanted to say something, but she closed it again, apparently lost for words. Victor cleared his throat and added, “Eh, that was over dramatic. Don’t mind me; I just need some sleep.”

“I . . .” Valla tried again, then she sighed and said, “Good night, Victor.”

“Night,” he replied, closing his eyes and forcefully slowing his breathing. He heard Valla touch the glow lamp on the little table between their beds, and then the red glow of his eyelids turned black. Though he was only pretending to sleep, he soon found his mind drifting. He tried to think about what he would do the next day or to wonder what Thayla and Deyni were up to, but soon, true sleep captured him, and he didn’t stir again until warm sunlight was falling on his face through the window they’d neglected to pull the curtains on.

He stretched, pressing his arms against the headboard and pointing his toes as the movement became involuntary and his muscles strained against the bonds of his flesh. As the little waves of pleasure and relief ran through him, he inhaled deeply and grinned, realizing the bed had creaked and groaned from his efforts. “See, I still have what it takes,” he whispered, stealing a glance at Valla’s bed, happy to see she was still sleeping, her blanket pulled up over her head.

Victor sat up on the side of his bed and got himself dressed. He pulled an old notebook out of his storage ring and wrote a note for Valla, letting her know he’d gone to get breakfast. Truthfully, he wanted to give her some space to get dressed; when they’d traveled together to Persi Gables, she’d had her own tent, and he’d never felt like he was awkwardly looming over her while she handled her personal business. This room felt too small, as far as he was concerned.

As he pulled the door closed, carefully depressing the latch so it wouldn’t make noise, he resolved to find better accommodations. He was a damn successful adventurer; why should he share a tiny room with twin beds? He walked down the hallway to the stairs, his nose informing him that breakfast was definitely up for grabs.

Livag saw him coming down the steps and motioned him over to the bar. “Morning, traveler. Was your bed acceptable?”

“Well, I’ll be honest; I was going to complain about it, but I slept like the dead, so, yeah—it was good.” Victor pulled out a stool and sat down, glancing over his shoulder at a pair of the giant Degh who sat a short way behind him at one of the oversized tables.

“You were going to complain?” Livag asked, turning to pour steaming black liquid into a mug.

“Well, yeah. I mean, for ten beads, I thought we’d have a bit more space, you know?”

“Ten beads is cheap in this town, lad. I thought I sort of made that clear last night.” He set the steaming drink before Victor and smiled. “If you’ve the means, I have an acquaintance with much finer accommodations. I could send you her way.”

“What’s this?” Victor asked, lifting the mug and wondering if his nose was playing tricks; it smelled like coffee.

“Coffee. They don’t have it in your homeworld?”

“Are you shitting me? They have it in my homeworld, but not Fanwath, the world I’ve been living in recently. I thought I’d lost it forever. I mean, don’t get me wrong; I didn’t drink a ton of this stuff—too easy to pop open an energy drink, you know?” Livag just nodded like he understood precisely what Victor meant, so he pushed on, “I’d get some now and then, though, and my abuela drank it every morning.”

“Well, you should be pleased to know that many worlds have coffee. So many, in fact, that once some interworld trade becomes established, it’s uncommon not to find it.”

Victor lifted the mug and took a tentative sip. It was bitter, but the smell was so nostalgic that he smiled, thinking of his abuela at the kitchen table sipping her coffee while he hoovered down some eggs and tortillas. “Thanks, Livag. I didn’t know Fanwath was so backward. Shit, man, I should buy a boatload of this stuff before I head back.” He took another sip, then grinned and asked, “So, when you say, ‘if we have the means,’ what kinda price are we talking about?”

“Well, my cousin, Brecia, runs a fine establishment in the Arena District—suites only. I think she’s got some available for ninety.”

“Ninety beads a night?”

“Right,” Livag nodded, then asked, “Porridge and toast all right for breakfast?”

“Porridge, huh? Yeah, why not?” As Livag turned to holler through the swinging door behind the bar, presumably at someone in the kitchen, Victor added, “Will you give me directions to your cousin’s inn? I wanted to check out the arena, anyway.”

“Of course, I’ve the name of a few powerful Elementalists in the city, as well. I think your friend would do well to speak to one or more of them.”

“I was about to ask you about that. Thanks, Livag.” Victor took another sip of his coffee and then set it down; some of his nostalgia had worn off, and it wasn’t exactly delicious to him anymore. “You have some cream I could put into that?”

“Oh, sure. I should’ve offered,” Livag said, then turned back to the kitchen door and stepped through, leaving Victor alone at the bar.

“You going to the arena, Deshi?” One of the giants behind him rumbled. Victor didn’t know the word, so he didn’t think the guy was talking to him at first. Still, no one answered, so he turned over his shoulder. Both the giants were looking at him, and the nearer one, a hugely muscled man with black hair cut like someone had put a bowl on top of his head, raised a thick, wiry eyebrow in question.

“Oh, me?”

“See any other Deshi around here?” the man rumbled.

“Sorry, I’m not from here. What’s a Deshi?”

“Deshi? Half Degh, half Vesh runt,” the huge man replied, pointing at Victor as if to illustrate.

“Oh, right. I didn’t know that was even possible; I’m not from this world. I’m actually called a . . .” he started to say, but then he remembered the dragon lady’s words and hurriedly changed the topic, “It’s not important. I was thinking of going to the arena, yeah.”

“Low-tier?” the giant thumped his palm on his table, and Victor wasn’t sure if he was asking or declaring.

“Yeah, I’m low-tier.”

“Best time to fight in the arena; people are more vicious, more in need of wins and fame. I love watching low-tier fights.”

“Oh, cool. Good to know, thanks,” Victor said, turning back to the counter, not really enjoying the attention the enormous man was giving him.

“Will you win?” This time the voice was different, and Victor turned back to see the other Degh had joined in. He was lankier than his stocky friend, though he probably outweighed Victor by three hundred pounds. He had long, curly red hair and bright green eyes. His thick, rosy lips twisted into a grin, and he repeated the question as Victor made eye contact with him, “Will you win?”

“I wasn’t really sure I’d fight in the arena; I just wanted to check it out.”

“Huh,” the dark-haired Degh said, shaking his head as though disappointed.

“I mean, I might! I’ve been in plenty of pit fights in my day.” Victor silently cursed at himself. Why did he say that? Was he really going to let the disappointment of a couple of strangers pressure him into signing up for a life-or-death battle?

“Hmm. Experienced, eh? What’s your name, then, stranger?”

“Victor,” he said before his brain could tell his mouth to shut up.

“Mmm,” the red-haired Degh said, nodding. “I like the way it echoes through the ether. We’ll wager on you, Deshi. Good luck.” With that, Victor felt dismissed because the two giants turned away from him and tucked into their rather enormous bowls of porridge. Victor turned to the counter to find his own bowl with two buttery slabs of bread stacked on the side. His coffee had turned from black to creamy brown, and he grinned, getting to work on the food.

“Good; eat up, Victor,” Livag said, straightening up from where he’d been stacking some dishes under the bar. “You need your strength if you’re going to the arena.”

“Arena?” Valla asked, climbing onto the stool next to him.

“Good morning! I’m just going to check it out . . .”

“Good idea,” she said, surprising him. “I’ll just take toast, Livag,” she added, eyeing Victor’s bowl of porridge with pursed lips and a raised eyebrow.

When they left Livag’s inn, they had a list of places to go and directions to get there. Victor had, somewhat guiltily, roused Gorz to pay attention to the directions, so they didn’t have to write them down. The amulet spirit had seemed a little groggy but otherwise happy to oblige. While they walked to their first stop, a place called “Hunter’s Hall,” where, according to Livag, people could join monster-hunting expeditions, he tried to engage the amulet in some conversation, thinking his words to him like he did back in mine.

“Gorz, how are things? Have you noticed any other strange . . . feelings, I guess?”

“Yes, Victor. I feel more and more detached. My grasp on this reality feels strained. While you engage me and I focus on the impression of your surroundings, I can stay present, but it feels like I’ve been gone a hundred years since you last spoke to me.”

“Really? It’s only been a day.”

“I wonder if leaving Fanwath, traveling to wherever this world exists in the universe, has somehow weakened the bonds holding me to this plane.”

“But you weren’t from Fanwath . . .”

“Yes, I’m aware of the flaw in my logic, but there might be other factors. Perhaps drifting through the ether as we did, my larger soul felt me. I feel a pull, a tugging sensation. I feel more and more incomplete as the decades slip by.”

“Gorz, let me remind you; it’s only been a day.”

“Odd. Turn left, Victor. Your destination lies in the square ahead.”

“Up here,” Victor said, carefully looking left and right before he crossed the street to follow Gorz’s directions. Valla jogged along with him as he hurried between a bargelike, floating wagon and a group of Degh riding atop mammoth-sized, maroon-colored lizards. The animals had leather blinders over their eyes, and their bridles were heavy-looking metal affairs that doubled as muzzles. As they crossed the smooth, brown cobbles behind the great animals, Victor almost stepped into a ripe, steaming pile of black dung.

“Ugh! What do those things eat,” Valla asked, skirting around the stinking pile.

“People!” laughed one of the Degh, glancing over the rump of his animal and winking.

“C’mon,” Victor said, eyeing the huge, floating wagon coming their way. It had high, fence-like sides, and he could see some sort of livestock milling around within. It didn’t appear to be slowing. He grabbed Valla’s arm and hurried to the opposite corner of the intersection. He didn’t slow until they were up on the pedestrian cobbles. Even then, they had to hustle to the far right side of the path to walk at a normal pace; Degh strode along on the left faster than Victor would typically jog.

“This city is busy!” Valla said, her eyes alight and pale blue cheeks sort of rosy with excitement.

“You like it!” Victor chuckled, continuing toward the upcoming square.

“Yes! I’ve not seen so many wondrous sights in all my time on Fanwath!”

“You just say that because you were born on Fanwath. None of this seems more ‘wonderous’ to me than the things I’ve seen in Persi Gables.”

“I suppose it does have a lot to do with everything here being new to me,” Valla replied, nodding. “Still, it’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Victor replied, quickly looking away from a scowling, tusked Vesh with one eye that glowed like the socket was full of roiling lava. “Just a little nerve-wracking, maybe,” he muttered. When they stepped into the square, and more space opened up, allowing them to walk more sedately with less fear of being trampled, he exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and tried to relax a little.

The square was enormous compared to those in Gelica and Persi Gables. A vast expanse of dun-colored cobbles spread out before them, with one structure dominating the center; a great, open-air building with a high peaked roof held up by massive marble or stone columns. Food stands and merchant carts dotted the rest of the space, but plenty of wide, open area remained; traffic was directed around the edges of the square with a high curb discouraging mounts or vehicles from traversing the central portion.

“That must be the hunter hall or whatever it’s called,” Victor said, striding through the square directly toward the big structure. Valla followed along in his wake, eyes wide as she took in the sights.

“Did you see that man with the wings?” she asked, pointing toward the edge of the square off to their right where a tall man, probably a kind of Vesh, had launched himself into the air and was rapidly beating his bright turquoise wings to gain elevation, streaking off to the south.

“Pretty badass,” Victor nodded.

“Faster than I’ve ever seen a Ghelli fly,” Valla breathed, her voice hushed and full of wonder.

“You seem different today,” Victor said, skirting to his left to avoid a big group of the insect people—he’d forgotten what they were called.

“Oh? I slept well!” Valla said, hurrying to match his long stride. “Why are you walking so fast?”

“I . . .” Victor started but then stopped to really think about it. Why was he hurrying? “I feel vulnerable, I guess.” He shrugged and kept walking; the truth was that he was worried about Valla and didn’t want to say as much. She’d already had one apparently powerful guy take an interest in her. What would he do if one of these high-level assholes decided to “ask” her on a date or some other bullshit?

“You really are feeling your change in stature, aren’t you?” Valla’s voice held a hint of amusement.

“Look,” Victor said, slowing to a stop so he could turn and face her, “I spent a lot of time on Fanwath being a punk that got pushed around and nearly killed a few dozen times. I was starting to get over that, starting to feel like I could walk around with my head up, and now I’m here, with everyone and their pinche abuela stronger than me!”

“Victor,” Valla said, shaking her head, “think about your life, about people you’ve known. What sorts of people get picked on?” She reached a hand up to his shoulder and gave him a nudge to start walking again while they spoke.

“I dunno, weaklings?”

“Come, even I, with my poor social skills and lack of friends, know that the people who act timid, afraid, weak—they attract abuse.”

“It’s not me . . .” he shook his head. He wasn’t Valla’s father. He wasn’t her brother. Why was he feeling responsible for her? Shit, she had a lot of levels on him! “Never mind; you’re right. Fuck these assholes.”

“It’s not you?” Valla asked, and Victor sighed. Why couldn’t he have shut his mouth a fraction of a second faster?

“C’mon, Valla. Do you see how these dudes are looking at you? You’re the only person with blue skin I’ve seen, and you’re not exactly ugly!”

Valla pressed her lips together, and her eyebrows drew down into an alarmingly sharp V. She let go of Victor’s shoulder and said, “You aren’t my chaperone.”

“Right. Uh . . . sorry,” Victor said, knowing there was nothing else he could say.

“I’m a Captain of the Imperial Legion. I’m a tier-five Sword Dancer,” Valla growled, still glowering at him as they walked.

Victor avoided her eye contact, quickly glanced at her, and said, “Yeah, sorry.” He wasn’t going to get into an argument with her about this; he’d seen too many women in his life get that expression on their faces, knew there was nothing he could say to make her realize his intentions were in the right place, even if it was offensive or whatever. No, the only solution he knew of was to apologize and let her cool off on her own.

To his surprise, Valla said, “Well, I appreciate the thought, anyway. You’re right, now that you mention it; I’m suddenly quite aware of the stares some of those Vesh are giving me.”

“Yeah,” Victor nodded, vindication loosening his vocal cords, “Those are the guys I was talking about! The snakes and bugs aren’t giving us a second glance.”

“Victor!” Valla hissed, reaching up to grab his shoulder again. “Don’t describe them like that! You know, some people gain exceptional hearing as they advance in power! Not to mention, it’s rude!”

“Right,” Victor said, ruefully running his hands through his hair, grabbing the sides of his head, and looking around the square. No one seemed particularly irritated with him. “Guess I got lucky. Um, what are they called again?”

Very softly, Valla said, “Tong-pan and Yazzians.”

“I’m sure I’ll forget that again, but I’ll be more careful with my . . . descriptions.” They’d come to a flight of marble steps that led up to the open structure. As they climbed, cresting the top, they saw that the soaring roof of the building provided shade to a concave depression underneath. A big crowd milled about in the

central area, moving from table to table where, apparently, monster-hunting groups were recruiting.

“Have you noticed guards like that anywhere else?” Valla asked, drawing Victor’s attention to the men and women in silver cloaks standing around the building at regular intervals.

“Now you mention it; I don’t think so,” Victor replied. Some of the guards were Degh, but most were the human-monster-looking Vesh.

“None of them are, uh, Tongpin or Yozzians,” he said, wincing at his butchery of the names.

“Almost,” Valla said, smiling, again surprising him with her good humor. “Tongpan and Yazzians, and you’re right! That’s interesting, isn’t it? I wonder if they’re culturally distinct. Maybe they’re seen as visitors to this part of the world.”

“Well, let’s check out one of these, uh, booths,” Victor said, climbing down the short flight of steps to the central arena-like depression under the vaulted stone canopy. Valla walked beside him, and after they’d carefully worked their way through the milling crowd to the first table on that side of the space, Victor approached the Vesh woman sitting behind it. “Hello.”

“Hey there, traveler! Interested in joining an expedition to Vagrant’s Oasis? We’re chasing down rumors of a blood wurm sighting!” She was thin, with limbs that seemed too long for her body, and looked very human, with a tan complexion and coppery-red hair, but, as with most Vesh Victor had seen, there were a few things that ended the comparison—she had a single, thick, white horn sprouting from the center of her forehead, and what looked like folded, black, leathery wings on her back. What really stood out about her, though, was her aura; Victor could feel the weight of it more so than anyone else he’d spoken to on this new world, save the dragon woman.

“I’m Victor, and,” Victor said, turning to include Valla in the conversation, “we’re new here if that isn’t obvious. How does this all work?” He gestured around the hall.

“New to Coloss, hmm? Low-tier?” She frowned but pressed on, “We’ve room for the likes of you on the expedition. I’m the hunt master, so it’ll be me that determines your pay; it’s based on contribution. Most of the hunting companies operate the same way.” She paused, pointed to the table to her right, and continued, “Some are like Royne there; they’ll offer you a fixed payout, and as long as the hunting company returns intact, you’ll be paid that amount, no matter what.”

“So, there are two kinds of contracts? Contribution and fixed pay?” Valla asked.

“Since you’re new and low-tier, I’ll give you a tip,” the woman said, leaning forward. Victor saw the way her yellow-green eyes glimmered with Energy, and he wondered how far she’d advanced her race; she exuded power. “Most companies that give fixed payments won’t be worth the time for a low-tier unless you’re a real lazy bones. You’ll be out for days or weeks and come back to be paid with a few handfuls of scales or a piece of bone—nothing great.”

“But your way is better?” Valla prompted.

“Sure! If you work hard or get lucky. As long as you have a fair hunt master, that is.” She grinned and thumped her silky blue blouse at the center of her chest with her fist, “I’m very fair!”

“So, if I do a lot of damage in the battle with whatever monster we find, I’ll get a bigger piece of the prize?” Victor asked, trying to demonstrate his understanding.

“Exactly! Don’t forget about the Energy, too! We’re hunting monsters that require a real team to take down; if you do a lot of the work, the System will give you a big portion of the prize. I’ve seen a low-tier gain three levels from one kill. Sure, she had high Energy affinity, but still.” She shrugged and smiled, then pointed to a gray slate on the table before her. “Should I sign you up?”

“How long do we have to decide?” Valla asked.

“I’m hiring twelve hunters today; you’ve got however long that takes.” She grinned and drummed her fingers on the slate.

“Um, when does your hunt start, and how long do you think it will take?” Victor asked.

“We leave in three days, and the journey to the oasis will take another three. After that, it depends on how long it takes us to find our quarry.”

“Sign us up,” Victor said and was immediately rewarded with an elbow in the ribs from Valla.

“Shouldn’t we talk about this? Maybe check some of the other tables?”

“We can if you want, but I get a good feeling from this lady. Uh, sorry I didn’t get your name.” Victor shrugged sheepishly.

“I’m Cayle, and my hunting company is called Spears of the Copper Sunset!” She smiled hugely as she said the name of her company, and Victor looked from her to Valla, watching as his companion’s purplish lips pressed together as if fighting the urge to smile.

“I like that name, Cayle,” Valla said, nodding.

“It paints a pretty picture,” Victor agreed, hoping this meant that Valla was going to agree to sign up for the hunt.

“What if we don’t make it for some reason? To wherever your hunting company meets up in three days?” Valla asked.

“Then never come asking me for a job again,” Cayle replied, shrugging. “I might also spread word to some of the other companies; reputation is important for a monster hunter.”

“Sounds fair,” Victor said. “So, yeah, let’s sign up. We’ve got a few other places to get today.”

“Right! Welcome to the company, at least temporarily, though if you do well and you like the way things go, you might sign on for a longer commission; you’ll earn more as a regular member. Of course, it all depends on how your first hunt goes. We might decide you’re not a good fit.” She pushed the gray slate over the tabletop toward them and said, “Put your hands on the slate, and we’ll make it official.”