

Victor BK4: Ch35

Book 4: Chapter 35: Tinctures

Victor had to drop his Titanic Aspect in order to step into Shouza's shop, and even then, he had to duck under the lintel and take care not to knock over any racks of wares for sale. He saw Shouza deftly polishing some beakers with her tentacle arm behind the counter, and as Valla stepped in behind him, he called out, "Hey, Shouza."

"Ah, the arena champion returns!" She grinned as she looked up and met his gaze as though she hadn't seen him coming in through the door. "I was beginning to hope I'd get a chance to auction off your tinctures."

"Oh, how amusing, my dear lady!" Victor laughed, pleased with himself for his choice of words. He gestured to Valla, who'd come up beside him, and said, "This is my friend, Valla. She's in the market for a tincture or two as well."

"Pleased to meet you, Valla," Shouza said, leaning forward with an infectious smile, her eyes glittering beneath her white bangs. "Can I tell you, I've never seen someone with such beautiful coloring! I love your hair and the way it complements your eyes!"

"Oh?" Valla chuckled, perhaps a little nervously, and reached up to brush at some stray strands of minty-green hair. "Um, thank you."

Victor grinned and put a meaty hand between Valla's shoulder blades, urging her forward until the two of them stood before the counter. "Well? How'd things turn out?"

Shouza tossed down her cleaning rag and pushed her dirty beakers to the side, clearing some space on the counter between them while speaking, "Really well, Victor. I had a Class breakthrough while I made one of your tinctures, improving one of my skills, and I think I increased the efficacy of the end product. Oh, and I identified that vial of red liquid you left with me. Here," she produced, seemingly out of the air, the glass jar with the deep red, thick fluid and set it on the counter, "take a look. See this stamp in the bottom of the glass?"

Victor peered at the bottom of the jar as Shouza's nimble tentacle turned it upside down. Sure enough, indented into the bottom of the glass was a mark that looked kind of like an H or a partial hashtag. "Yeah, I see it."

"I found a reference to it in one of my texts. The mark is found on some System rewards, which led me to another reference manual, and after running a few tests, I found that it's a speed enhancement—permanent. Did the creature you had to kill to earn this reward have great speed? That's usually how the System does things."

"Um, yeah, he was a big ass ghoul that moved really damn fast. So," Victor said, reaching for the jar, "a speed enhancement?"

“Yes, your dexterity, agility, or maybe both will improve with the consumption. I’d hold off on drinking it, though; you’ll want to take this one first.” Shouza handed him the jar but then produced a much smaller glass vial of sparkling silver liquid, stoppered with black wax. “This is your drake gall bladder tincture, the one I had the breakthrough on as I crafted it. You’ll get more out of this than from that System prize.”

“Oh!” Valla said, “It’s really beautiful!”

“Yes! I was amazed at the Energy it absorbed in the crafting process.” Shouza nodded, proudly smiling as she set the tincture on the countertop. “Finally, here’s your magma horn tincture.” Shouza put another vial next to the silvery one, this one slightly larger, more bulbous, and filled with a shimmering honey-like substance. She held her hand over them and grinned, “Just a minor matter of the payment. Three hundred beads, okay?”

“Oh, shit, Shouza. You deserve more than that.” Victor pulled out one of his bags of beads and set it on the counter. “I mean, even though I provided the main ingredients, your skill clearly made a difference. Take five hundred out of here, please.”

Shouza smiled and nodded, using her magical counting rod to lighten the bag’s load. As it deflated slightly, Victor tucked it away, and then he took his three tinctures or potions or whatever one might call them and safely stowed them away in one of his dimensional container rings. “I’ll drink ‘em back at the citadel.”

“You’ll want to save that Core breakthrough for when you reach stage nine in whatever tier you’re working on. I’m fairly sure it’ll push you through the threshold.” Shouza nodded as though affirming her own words. “What can I help you with, Miss Valla?”

“Oh,” Valla said, startled out of some contemplative thought, “I was looking to purchase some sort of acuity-boosting tincture. Mental acuity, that is.”

“Oh?” Shouza looked Valla up and down and narrowed her eyes. “I thought you carried yourself like a swordfighter—you’ve got that easy grace and the posture of someone who’s swung a lot of heavy metal around. Your shoulders are so straight, and the tendons in your arms . . . I was sure . . .”

“Can’t a swordfighter want to improve their mental acuity?” Victor asked, wondering at Shouza’s weird behavior.

“Yes, yes! Of course! I’m so sorry, Miss Valla.” Shouza ducked her head several times. “Sometimes I think I’m more clever than I am!”

“You are clever, Shouza, don’t worry. I am a Sword Dancer, and yes, I’ve spent more hours dancing around with my blade than I’d care to think about. I’m trying

to clear up some deficits in my training, though, and that starts with the tincture I asked for.”

“Of course!” Shouza said again, then she turned and disappeared among her rows of bottles, bags, vials, jars, boxes, and tins. Her voice came from behind the third row, calling out, “I have several options for you.” Victor could hear the clinking of glass as the woman gathered up some of her products, and then she came back to the counter and set them all before Valla—nine different, variously shaped bottles and vials.

As she arrayed them in groups of three, she looked at Valla and asked, “Are you familiar with how attribute-enhancing tinctures work? I mean, do you know about diminishing returns?”

“Yes, I’ve heard that if you take too many, they stop affecting you until you’ve gone through some racial or Class evolutions.”

“Correct—your system will build up a tolerance that only gets purged as great surges of Energy alter your body or your Core and pathways. That said, I have three different types of products here and three tiers of each.” She gestured to the three separate groupings of vials and potion bottles. “I have mixtures that will improve your intelligence, mixtures that will improve your will, and then, more costly, mixtures that will improve both. The reason the mixtures that improve your overall acuity are more costly is that they’ll boost both attributes before increasing your tolerance.”

“I see.” Valla nodded, looking over the colorful, sealed glass containers.

“How much is the best one?” Victor asked, trying to get to the punchline.

Shouza let her tentacle hover over the bottles for a moment, moving from left to right, then selecting a black glass vial the size of Victor’s thumb and stoppered with what looked like gold. She picked it up, held it aloft, and said, “This is a tincture made from the liquified and distilled brains of seven deep minds. I’ll trade it for two Coloss Prize Tokens or one hundred thousand beads.”

“What’s a deep mind?” Victor asked.

At the same time, Valla said, “It will improve my will and intelligence?”

“Yes, to you, Valla. Likely a great deal.” She turned to Victor and said, “A deep mind is a fantastical creature that dwells in the depths of Zaafor. They look much like a mushroom, though they’re very different from the mushrooms you might put in a salad—they have a brain and work powerful Energy magics. It’s quite lucrative and hazardous to harvest them.”

“Wild . . .” Victor stared into the dark glass while his mind pictured huge mushrooms shaped like brains flinging fireballs through the darkness.

“I’ll take it,” Valla said with a curt nod.

“Shit!” Victor looked at Valla, startled. He’d expected her to settle on something cheaper.

“Wonderful!” Shouza said, carefully setting the black vial down and scooping up the other potions. “You’ll see the most growth by far with that one.”

Victor continued to stare at Valla, saw her pleased smile, and revised his suspicions that she had a lot of beads tucked away into the realm of confirmed facts. He thought about when she’d given him his arena earnings and said she’d done “similarly” with her bets. If she’d started with a bigger pot than his, she could have made a hell of a lot more. For all he knew, she was already sitting on a million beads. He almost asked her right then, in the middle of the store, but decided it wasn’t really a cool question.

“I’ll box it,” Shouza said as Valla began to unload large leather sacks of beads onto the counter.

“Not necessary,” Valla smiled. “I’ll drink it later today.”

“Of course, of course,” Shouza said, tapping each bag with her rod, deflating them one by one until she got the ninth one, and half of it remained. “All paid up, Miss Valla.”

“Just Valla is fine,” Valla replied, scooping up the gold-stoppered vial. She looked at Victor and said, “Anything else?”

He’d been watching, bemused, as Valla unloaded her sacks of beads and shook his head to bring himself back to the present. “Um, no, I think I’m good for now. We’ll likely be back, though, Shouza. We have some monster trophies to trade away, and if things work out, we might need more tinctures or potions.”

“Oh? I’m often interested in certain monster trophies.” Shouza leaned forward, eyes eager.

“Well, we have a very knowledgeable friend handling the brokering of those for us. I’ll tell her you’re interested, though. That good with you?”

“Sure, Victor. I appreciate it!”

“Cool,” he held out his hand and was amused and surprised when Shouza wrapped her tentacle around it and gave it a firm, warm squeeze. “Speak to you soon.” He nudged Valla, and she smiled, waved, and followed him out of the shop. Outside, after the door closed, Victor looked at Valla and said, “You seem pleased.”

“Oh, I am. I’d never find a tincture like that on Fanwath. Some of the top alchemists in Tharcray claim to be able to improve an attribute permanently, but I know people who’ve spent a fortune to see a few points of improvement.”

“Well, to be fair, we don’t know how much these things will boost us.”

“True, but I’ll be surprised if it’s not significant. Tes wouldn’t have us waste our time and money. Well, me anyway—you earned yours in the arena.”

“Right,” Victor said, guiding them around a corner and up a steeply inclined street. One thing he knew about Coloss was that if they kept going uphill, they’d come to the citadel sooner or later. “You figure we’ll get many prize tokens for our wyrm parts?”

“I hope so! I desperately want to get one of those stones for Blue Razor.”

“What about the racial advancement items? Do you mind me asking? I mean, I’m curious how far you’ve advanced yourself.”

“My race is improved, rank seven.”

“That’s not bad!” Victor said, a little surprised. He shifted around a parked wagon where some Vesh were unloading barrels and then hopped over a curb to turn left on a cross street, trying to avoid more of the jammed-up traffic. “I wasn’t sure, but I thought you must have advanced it a few times cause you’re taller than Thayla, and she was always a lot taller than the Ardeni we met.”

“Well, Shadeni are generally more physically imposing than we Ardeni,” Valla replied, “Though if I advance enough and unlock one of our bloodlines, I might gain some interesting traits. I saw an Ardeni with an advanced race who looked more cat than person.”

“Shit, seriously?” Victor glanced down at her, eyebrows raised. She grinned and didn’t respond, and he was left to wonder if she was messing with him. He sort of hoped she was telling the truth; a blue cat woman sounded kind of cool to him. “Well,” he finally said, “I guess it makes sense—you have a lot of really sharp teeth.”

“True!” Valla laughed and pulled back her lips, growling at him, exposing her pointy white teeth.

Victor laughed again, then said, “Rellia’s gonna be proud of you when we get back. You’ve already made a ton of gains.” Victor turned again, taking long strides up a nearly empty, upward-sloping road.

“Yes, I believe she’ll be pleased, but also with you. She never bargained on a titan leading her army into the Untamed Marches. Still, the stronger we are, the more difficult the System will likely make our resistance.”

“You think so? I know the System will create a challenge for us, but wouldn’t it take into consideration the average strength in the army? I mean, it wouldn’t put a challenge against us that would be geared toward thousands of people like me, would it? If that’s the case, Rellia would be better leaving me behind.”

“No. The System is harsh and wishes to force growth through conflict, but it tends to be at least ostensibly fair. I think you’re right. Perhaps the creatures or armies we’ll face will simply have a champion or two for you to deal with.” Valla chuckled, shaking her head. “The truth is, none of us know. It’s been centuries since the empire tried to push into unclaimed lands, and back when it was expanding, the world was new, and things were different—records don’t reflect our current reality.”

They walked in silence for a while after that, each of them lost in their thoughts. Victor was trying to picture what the Untamed Marches would look like. He envisioned mountains and jungles and then added in his wild fantasies of demonic, red-eyed, scythe-clawed enemies pouring out of portals or from deep caves to try to swallow up Rellia’s army. His chipper mood and easy grin faded as his thoughts drifted deeper and deeper into the imagined scenario, and he was a little surprised when they finally crested the last upward-sloping road, and the citadel rose before them.

“Shit, that was fast,” he said. He glanced down at Valla, and her scowling eyebrows relaxed a little, and she nodded.

“Yes. I was lost in thought.”

“Yeah, me too. Where did Tes say to meet her?” Victor asked as they started over the expanse of open cobbles toward the great tunnel that led into the citadel.

“She didn’t. Don’t worry; she won’t struggle to sniff us out.”

“True,” Victor chuckled, bemused by thoughts of Tes literally sniffing her way through the citadel. Then they approached the gate and the twenty guardsmen that perpetually stood outside it. Their heads swiveled toward the two of them, but none shouted out a challenge, and Victor took it for a good sign that they knew who he and Valla were and that the warlord still considered them guests. “I wonder where Tronk is.”

“Hopefully, he’s decided the threats to our lives have died down enough to let us roam without an escort. Likely that’s the case, or he’d have met us at the gate, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, unless Bell sank her hooks into him,” Victor chuckled.

“Bell?”

“I think she’s his girlfriend. He acted really embarrassed around her. It was kinda hilarious. I mean, sweet, but hilarious.”

“I’d like to see that,” Valla laughed.

They were walking down the enormous central passage toward the gardens, and Victor wasn’t sure if they should just head to their rooms or hang around and wait for Tes. He paused, about to ask Valla what she thought when a tall Yazzian wearing pale yellow robes approached them and cleared his throat. Yazzians weren’t common in the citadel—it seemed the warlord was far more likely to employ Vesh with the occasional Degh like Tronk. Victor looked into the Yazzian’s hood, past its weird, lizard-snake snout to its rather expressive green eyes, and said, “Yes?”

The Yazzian had its delicate, yellow-scaled hands clasped before it and bowed its head, then said, in a faintly masculine voice, “The warlord welcomes you back. He asks if you’ll be continuing your stay at the citadel.”

“What might your name be, good sir?” Valla asked before Victor could form a response.

“I am Dearth, one of the warlord’s Ministers of City Affairs.”

“We’d like to continue our stay in the citadel, yes,” Victor took the opportunity to speak as Valla processed the Yazzian’s title.

“Excellent. Your rooms remain ready for you, and the warlord extends his earlier invitation to use his cultivation chamber. Victor, the mid-tier city champion, Yabbo, is eager to spar with you. Karnice has offered to tutor you both. Will you be available in the morning?”

“Karnice?”

“The arena champion,” Valla supplied, apparently having paid more attention than Victor.

“Yes, the undefeated, high-tier champion of the Coloss arena.”

“Oh, cool,” Victor nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be around tomorrow morning. Where do I go?”

“I’ll ensure that you have a guide waiting at your door. Would two hours past dawn be a good time?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Excellent. Lady Valla, War Captain Blue has requested an audience with you. He asks if you’d be willing to join him for dinner here in the citadel in one of the small parlors?”

“Oh,” Valla said, holding one hand to her chest, just under her throat, apparently lost for words. An awkward moment passed, and then she said, “I think not, Minister Dearth. I have business with the Lady Tes this evening. Please inform

War Captain Blue that I'll entertain his request in the near future should he wish to reschedule."

"Very well, Lady."

"Speaking of Tes, have you seen or heard from her, Dearth?" Victor asked.

"No, sir, I have not." He glanced up and down the grand, airy tunnel and then said, "I'll take my leave if that will be all. If you should need me, simply ask one of the servants stationed near your guest quarters."

"Thank you, Minister Dearth," Valla said, holding out a hand. The Yazzian unclasped his hands and delicately took Valla's hand, then he nodded, bowed, and quickly shuffled away.

"Interesting," Victor said. "Hey, I could meet with Tes, you know. You can have dinner with Blue if you want."

"I'm not sure I want to," Valla frowned at him, shaking her head slightly. "Strange that you want me to."

"I didn't say I want you to!" It was Victor's turn to frown, wondering what he'd done wrong this time. Valla folded her arms over her chest and scowled, and he sighed, saying, "Wanna take turns in the cultivation chamber while we wait for Tes? We could drink our tinctures."

That got Valla's frown to fade, and she nodded, surprising Victor by reaching up a fist and waiting for him to touch his knuckles to it. "That sounds like fun. Come." With that, she turned, and he followed her—a big, lumbering man trailing behind a small blue woman through the corridors and stairways of the citadel.