

Victor BK4: Ch5

Book 4: Chapter 5: The Elementalist Guild

“We don’t have to visit the Elementalist Guild today,” Valla said as they walked away from the arena. “We’re due to go to the War Captain’s dinner in a couple of hours.”

“What else are we gonna do? No, I think this is important, and you’ve been patient with me while I messed around here. Come on, aren’t you excited? It’s a whole guild dedicated to your kind of magic! Do they even have those on Fanwath?”

“There are guilds of practitioners, but none that specialize in elemental magic, at least none that I know of. I suppose there might be private groups in some of the academies . . .” She trailed off, her eyes going kind of vacant as she searched her memory.

“You see? Tomorrow you’ll be busy cheering for me in the arena, and who knows what’ll happen after that. Let’s at least stop by.” Victor dashed across the busy street that ran alongside the arena, trying to follow Gorz’s instructions to the guild house Livag had told them about.

“This way, Gorz?” he asked, turning up a less crowded, upward-sloping lane. Gorz didn’t reply at first, so he repeated the question.

“Yes, that’s correct, Victor.”

“You okay, buddy?”

“I feel the same as when we last spoke. When was that? It feels like years . . .”

“Gorz, I asked you for directions about ten minutes ago.”

“My apologies. How strange . . .”

“Something wrong?” Valla asked, and Victor realized he’d been scowling while he spoke to the amulet.

“Yeah, actually. The spirit in my amulet, you know, the one that memorizes maps and documents and, well, everything—he’s kind of losing it. He feels like he’s being pulled, like his bindings to the amulet are fading, and every time I speak to him, he acts like it’s been years.”

“I’m no Artificer, but maybe we could visit one here that might be able to help.”

“Not a bad idea at all. We should do some shopping here, anyway—I imagine, in a world with so many high-tier Energy users, shops like that are going to have some good magical items for sale.”

The road they were walking along was less busy than the other streets they'd visited, and Victor noted that the architecture was starting to look a little more refined. Tall, more delicate structures with towers capped with colorful tile became more and more common, and Victor noted that none of them were sized for the Degh giants.

"Seems like a wealthier part of the city," Valla said, echoing his thoughts.

"Yeah, and maybe older? Livag said this wasn't a Degh city, so maybe that's why this section doesn't have buildings sized for them."

"Perhaps. We're climbing upward, so you would presume the city started up this way, and as it expanded, it stretched down the hill and into the surrounding country." Valla turned back and gestured the way they'd come, and it was evident they'd gained a lot of altitude, more than Victor had realized. The tops of buildings and tightly packed streets stretched out below them for miles, right up to the edge of the enormous walls that surrounded the city.

"How many streets have we passed since we started up this one?"

"Four, I think. No, five," Valla said, looking back the way they'd come again.

"Okay, the guild's supposed to be up around the next corner on the left." Victor led the way, turning past a storefront displaying beautifully woven rugs, then down a broad avenue with very light traffic. The pedestrians in the area were almost all Vesh, though a few of the snake people, the Yazzians, walked here and there in their typical hooded robes woven from muted earth-toned fabrics.

"Gorz? The Elementalist Guild's on this street, right?"

"Victor! Are you still seeking that guild? My instructions must have been unclear; my apologies. From the corner, it's supposed to be the seventh building on the left."

"Thanks, Gorz, and your instructions are fine." Victor wanted to tell him it had only been a few minutes since he last spoke to him, but he was starting to feel like a broken record. It didn't seem to do any good to remind the amulet of the correct passage of time.

He continued walking, looking back to count the buildings he'd passed, and when he came to the seventh structure, he stopped and looked at the tall brick wall with wrought iron arches and gates. The central gate was open on one side, so he started forward, hoping to get a better look at the building.

A gust of air rushed up before him, creating a sort of swirling curtain of air that reminded Victor of a dust devil, though with less dirt. Unlike a dust devil, it didn't move, hanging in the air before him. A crackling, electric voice said, "Hold, stranger! I detect no elemental Energy at your Core."

"Uh . . ." Victor grunted, backing up a step, not sure what to say.

“I seek entry,” Valla said, stepping forward, and again the voice crackled out of the swirling wind, “You may pass, Elementalist.”

“May I bring my companion?”

“You are permitted a guest. Hostilities will not be tolerated within,” the voice said, its weird, static-like nature giving Victor goosebumps at the nape of his neck.

“Understood,” Valla replied, and the wind suddenly died away, leaving a clear passage through the arched gateway to the stone paved walkway that led to the tall, narrow brick structure within. Victor counted the stories as he followed Valla through the courtyard, coming up with six distinct sets of windows. The peaked gables at the top were capped in brilliant turquoise tiles.

Victor allowed his eyes to drift down and noticed that all the shrubs and flower bushes in the garden were manicured into the shapes of wild creatures. Fountains bubbled welcomingly, and, to his amazement, Victor saw one fountain’s water rise up from the placid pool in its base and take the shapes of a pair of dancing, translucent people. “Pretty cool,” he said, jostling Valla’s shoulder and pointing.

“Beautiful,” she breathed, a rare smile touching her lips. Then she turned and climbed the short flight of stairs to the canopy-covered front doors of the building, and when she reached for the handle, they opened inward, seemingly at their own impetus. Victor followed her into the foyer of the building, where a broad, gleaming hardwood floor led into a vaulted, round room with hallways leading off in every direction. An intricately carved spiral staircase led up to the exposed landings of the upper levels, its wood made to look like flowering vines, branches, and roots.

A young woman wearing pale yellow robes approached them from one of the side passages, and though she was clearly a Vesh with a pair of short, ivory horns, she reminded Victor of one of his old classmates—Sierra Harwick. She looked so much like her that Victor felt struck by déjà vu, and for a heartbeat, his mind skipped back to the last time he’d been in school, and he felt perplexed and lost—like when a person wakes up in a strange bed, momentarily forgetting how they’d gotten there.

“Welcome,” the woman said, pressing her hands together and bowing slightly as she walked toward them. Her attention was wholly on Valla.

“Thank you,” Valla replied.

“How can we help you today, Mistress? Are you seeking to join the ranks of the Elementalist Guild?”

“Perhaps, though, I primarily came here for advice. I’m new to this world and understand that there’s much I could learn from the masters here.” Valla’s diction never failed to impress Victor, and he stood quietly, sure he’d say the wrong thing or be kicked out if he interrupted.

“Advice is freely given by many of the masters that make their home here. What topic, if I may ask, do you seek elucidation upon? I’ll more easily take you to the correct person if you can share such information.” The woman spoke in a sort of sing-song that felt both pleasant and forced to Victor, and he wasn’t sure what to think of her. Was she a servant? Was she an Elementalist herself? She didn’t give him the impression of a powerful aura like he’d felt from the arena master or even some of the potential competitors.

“I seek advice to better my Core, my abilities, and my potential for my next class refinement. My world is less practiced in these areas than this one. I don’t know how long I’ll be here, but our hope,” she indicated Victor with a tilt of her head, “is to leave fairly soon.”

“You don’t wish to remain on Zaafor?” The woman frowned, pursing her bright red lips, almost in a pout.

“No, we have obligations we must see to back home,” Valla replied, ever stoic in the face of feigned emotion. Victor found himself opening his mouth, about to step into the conversation, and he realized he was going to say something flirty. He clamped his mouth shut and carefully arranged his face in a neutral expression—they were here for Valla, and he needed to let her handle things.

“Well, I believe I feel a hint of an air-affinity about you. Is there something more?”

Valla shifted uncomfortably and stole a glance at Victor. He broke his determination to stay out of things and gave her a brief nod. She nodded back and said, “I also have an affinity for iron.”

“Iron? Oh, intriguing! I know just the Elementalist to bring you to. Follow me please,” the woman reached up to tuck a curly strand of blond hair behind an ear and, as she walked toward the spiral staircase, she gave Victor a look and said, “Will you be bringing your . . . companion? I could show him to the parlor.”

“He’ll attend me.” Valla’s tone didn’t brook any argument, and the woman nodded, continuing on her way. Victor’s mouth fell open again, and he wanted to ask Valla what the fuck she meant by “attend,” but, again, he clamped it shut and followed along.

As they walked, the woman said, “My name is Camia. Might I ask yours, mistress?”

“Valla,” she said, and nothing more. Victor wasn’t surprised. They climbed the stairs past two landings, and then their guide led them down a long, broad, wood-paneled hallway past several doors, stopping at a lovely set of double doors made from some sort of cherry-colored wood. Camia straightened up, cleared her throat, and knocked politely.

“Elementalist Troft is a master of iron and fire. Hopefully, he isn’t engaged in anything that cannot be interrupted . . .” Camia began to say but was stopped as the door opened slightly.

“Hello, Camia,” said a young man in an orange robe, much like Camia’s yellow one.

“Ry, hello yourself! This is Mistress Valla, and she seeks an audience with Master Troft.”

“Oh? Something important?” Ry asked, still holding the door partially closed, only exposing his rather mousy face. Victor couldn’t really have described him, though; his attention was focused on the fact that Ry had sharp quills all over his head rather than hair.

“Important to Lady Valla, yes. Nothing that should trouble your master, though. Is he available?”

“I believe so. Please come in,” Ry replied, stepping back and pulling the door wide. The room beyond was a simple but spacious sitting area lined with couches, bookshelves, and a pair of desks occupying one corner. “Please have a seat,” Ry said, gesturing toward a couch and then adding, “I’ll tell Master Troft that you’re waiting.”

“Very well,” Camia said, then she stepped to the side and, as Ry walked through a doorway in the opposite wall, said, “You should be in good hands with Elementalist Troft. Please come down to the foyer if you need anything else, and I’ll be glad to assist you.”

“Thank you, Camia.” Valla nodded her head and then walked over to the flower-patterned couch. Victor followed, offering Camia a smile, perhaps because he felt Valla should have done so, but the woman ignored him, slipping back through the door and closing it behind her. Victor sat down next to Valla, and she said, “So far, everyone’s been very polite. I’m worried there’s something coming—a binding contract, an exorbitant fee, or some such.”

“Well, try to stay positive,” Victor said, enjoying not being in the driver’s seat for a change.

Valla looked ready to say something more, but the door opened, and a man wearing brilliant red, many-layered robes stepped through. He was tall and lean, his cheek and skull bones evident on his clean-shaven head and face. He was a Vesh, Victor was sure, because he had great, green-scaled wings folded at his back, and his eyes were bright yellow with vertical pupils. “Hello,” he said, walking toward the couch. His voice was warm and mellow, and his eyes squinted as he smiled, reaching a hand out to Valla.

Valla stood up and took his hand, “Pleased to meet you. I’m Valla ap’Yensha from the world of Fanwath.” She glanced at Victor, still sitting down, and added, “This is my companion, Victor.”

Troft had eyes only for Valla, completely ignoring Victor as he scratched his chin and said, “Fanwath. Hmm, I don’t think I’ve heard of that one. What brings you to Coloss?”

“An accident,” Valla said truthfully. “We were battling a mage in our world who’d created a portal to this world. He forced me through the portal, and Victor came through to aid me.” Troft finally gave Victor a solid glance as she explained, and his eyes narrowed in momentary confusion.

“Ah! At first glance, I thought your companion was a Deshi. I see I was mistaken. Good of you to chase your mistress into the unknown that way, lad.”

“My . . .” Victor started to say, then sighed and said, “Thanks.”

“While we’re stranded here, I thought I should take advantage of the greater knowledge of elemental magic in this world. It’s become apparent to me that my power is rather lacking for my level.”

“Mmhhh,” Troft said, rubbing his chin and looking closely at Valla. He looked around, and his gaze settled on a nearby chair that he pulled over so he could sit directly in front of her. He stared at her for a long minute, enough that Victor was starting to feel uncomfortable, but Valla sat there stoically, staring directly back at the Elementalist. “Let’s see,” he said after a long while, “air and an earth affinity, aha, iron. Just like me! Well, as far as the iron goes.”

“You have a good eye,” Valla said, nodding.

“What level are you, Valla? I’d guess something like thirty?”

“Fifty-two,” Valla replied, frowning.

“Oh dear,” he said frowning, “Yes, I see how that’s a problem. Your aura lacks the appropriate weight. Have you not been building your will and intelligence attributes?”

“I was raised in a martial family and have taken classes that primarily boosted my physical attributes.”

“Ahh,” Troft nodded, “a pity, but nothing a dozen levels focused on the right things won’t fix. You’ve got your work cut out for you during this tier, though—you’ll want to ensure you get the right kind of refinement at tier-six.”

“I’ve heard similar from others I’ve spoken to, but I don’t know how to proceed.”

“Does your current class give you any unbound attribute points at each level?”

“I’m a Sword Dancer, and no, my agility, dexterity, and vitality are each improved with my levels.”

“Then you’ll need to seek alchemical mixtures and natural treasures to improve your mental attributes as much as possible until level sixty. You’ll want to focus your time on improving your Core. What’s your Core’s current level?”

“Improved-nine.” Her answer surprised Victor. He’d thought she was miles ahead of him, but he was already nearing Improved-two.

“Ah! So low? By tier-five, your Core should be in the advanced stages.” Those words caused Valla’s eyes to widen, and Victor felt his own heart start to beat as a bit of panic touched his mind—he felt like he was listening to a teacher explaining how he should have mastered College Algebra a long time ago.

“You’ll want to really work on that. Buy Core enhancements, spend time cultivating,” he paused and then continued, his voice stern and emphasizing his words, “much more time than you spend on swordwork!”

“Aren’t weapon skills important . . .”

“Of course, but with your affinities, you’ll be able to enhance your weapon skills far beyond what you can do with natural skills.”

“Really? The impression I got from Elementalists back home was that iron and air were a terrible pair, that they conflict.”

Troft looked at Valla, raising his eyebrows, and then he laughed, a deep rich belly laugh. He leaned back in his chair and seemed to give in to it, literally holding his sides and laughing until tears sprang from his eyes. Victor couldn’t help smiling with him, and though he didn’t know what was funny, a chuckle of his own escaped his lips, breaking his silent streak.

Valla didn’t laugh. She didn’t even smile. She frowned at Victor, then at Troft, and said, “I wish I knew what was funny.”

“Oh dear,” Troft said, wiping at his cheeks and finally calming enough to speak, “I’m sorry, but that was the first good laugh I’ve had in years, and I wanted to embrace it.”

Valla stared at him until he continued, “The Elementalists on your world are either lying to you, or you’ve only spoken to abject idiots.”

“Oh?” Valla’s frown began to fade.

“Yes! Iron and air are a powerful combination of affinities. I’ve a dozen spells I could teach you that use both elements to great effect. Do you not know how to weave your air affinity into electricity?”

“Weave it into . . .” Valla said softly, absently scratching at one pale green eyebrow. “I’ve been taught that if I wanted to weave my Energies, I would have

to weave iron with air and that it was impossible because they are opposing elements.”

“Gods! Is that true? Are they really so backward?” Troft leaned forward and took Valla’s hand, “Iron is an excellent match for an air affinity, but first, you must convert the form of your air energy into electricity. It’s really not hard, Valla. I know a spell that will grant your sword tremendous speed and enhance its damage. There’s a spell that will let you warp from one part of a battlefield to another. Both use air-attuned Energy but in the form of electricity. Just as a water affinity can take the form of ice or mist, and earth can take the shape of stone or soil, so too can air take the shape of electricity. You didn’t know this?”

“I . . .” Valla started to say, then shook her head and continued, “I’m a fool. I know there are mages that cast lightning spells and that they have air affinities. I never learned them, and I never thought to try changing the shape of my Energy to mix it with my iron affinity. I was warned off mixing air with iron, but I should have pursued it further. I should have spoken to more experts.”

“Tut, don’t be hard on yourself, youngster. It sounds to me that the people in your life who had an influence over you were steering you away from such things, no? I’m sure you’d have figured things out eventually; I’m just glad I could help you avoid some painful mistakes going forward.” He watched as Valla’s frown deepened, but she nodded, and Victor knew what she was thinking—for all her help and guidance, Rellia had messed Valla up by pushing her to master the sword and forego the other aspects of her affinities.

“What must I do to learn some of your spells, Master Troft?” Valla asked, her voice quiet but determined.

“I’ll give you two things for free, Valla. I’ll show you the weave to turn air into electricity, and I’ll give you one spell. After that, if you want more teaching, I’ll need something from you.”

“What do . . .” Valla started to ask, but Master Troft held up a hand, and she stopped speaking.

“Don’t worry about what my fee might be, not yet. Master what I give you; if you want more, we can speak. I think this will keep you busy for a long while because just knowing how to make electricity from your air affinity will allow you to alter the skills and spells you already know. Oh, dear! I said I was only going to give you two things, and here I am giving you clues to pursue so many more . . .” He chuckled as Valla’s eyes widened. Victor couldn’t help himself and bumped an elbow into Valla’s shoulder, grinning like a fool at her good news.

Valla ignored Victor and stood, bowing before the Elementalist and saying, “Thank you very much, Master Troft.”

“You’re quite welcome, Valla. How would it look if I didn’t help a young Elementalist, the first visitor I know of from a new world? Wait here, won’t you? I’ll have one of my assistants write out the weave and the spell pattern. Come back and let me know when you’ve mastered them.” With that, he stood, patted Valla in a comradely fashion on the shoulder, and exited the way he’d come.

“That’s some pretty cool shit,” Victor said when they were alone. “You never knew you could make electricity from air?”

“I knew it, but I thought it had to do with the spells you cast; all the spells I learned used simple air-attuned Energy.” She looked at Victor and said, “What about you? Are there other forms of your affinities?”

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, I know so—I can twist my inspiration-attuned Energy into discouragement.” Victor’s eyes squinted as his thoughts began to race, “I never thought about it, but I wonder if I can twist rage into the opposite form like that? What the fuck would it be anyway? What’s the opposite of rage? Peace?”

“I don’t know . . . happiness?” Valla shrugged. “I think you should do some experimenting when we have some time. I’ll have plenty to keep me busy, it sounds like.” Victor nodded, still deep in thought and only half registering her words.

He thought about how he’d used his inspiration-attuned Energy when he cast Project Spirit; Victor had never been taught any sort of pattern to twist it the way he did. In a way, it was instinctual. Something told him twisting rage in a similar way wouldn’t be so easy. When he projected rage, he stripped out aspects of it, taking away the benefits to strength and healing, but it was still rage.

They both sat quietly, lost in their own thoughts, until the door opened, and Ry stepped through, holding two tightly-bound paper scrolls. “Lady, the master sends these with his compliments. I’m instructed to let you know that you’re welcome here any time and that he wishes you great success.”

“Thank you,” Valla said, standing up and accepting the two scrolls.

“Now, allow me to show you out,” Ry said, moving to the exit and pulling open the door. “The stairway is just down the hallway to the right.”

When Victor and Valla descended the grand staircase, Valla was deep in thought, and Victor spent time ogling the architecture—the high, arched windows, the beautifully carved wood, from the balustrade to the lintels to the doors themselves, and the way the space just seemed so grand, so vast. He wondered if the building was larger inside than outside, and he chuckled, “Of course it is,” he said, remembering that it was the home of a guild of powerful wizards.

Camia greeted them at the bottom of the stairs and asked, “Was Master Troft able to help you?”

“Very much so,” Valla said, nodding. “Thank you, Camia.”

“You’re quite welcome! You should know I’ve earned several merits with the guild for my assistance to you. So, it’s you I should be thanking for the

opportunity.” Camia smiled broadly as she spoke and opened the front door for them.

“Oh?” Valla said as they exited. “An intriguing system.”

Victor couldn’t help himself and said, “Nice to meet you, Camia,” on his way out. The woman smiled and nodded at him, and that was that; they were outside, and Camia had closed the door behind them. Valla didn’t linger, walking straight down the path, out the gate, and then finally turning to Victor.

“That was nerve-wracking. Thank you for accompanying me.”

“It was? I thought it was pretty relaxing. I didn’t know you were stressing out.”

“Well, I was. I’ve avoided seeking help from mages in the past. I think the news I’ve gotten through Rellia’s ‘experts’ dissuaded me on the subject. I’ve focused on swordwork because that’s where my talent seemed to be, but I’ve worried it was a great mistake which made me fear I’d hear some bad news in there,” she gestured toward the Elementalist Guild. “I was afraid they’d say something that would destroy any hopes I’ve been harboring in here.” She touched her chest over her heart.

“Well, I’m glad it was good news,” Victor said, surprising himself with a yawn and stretching. “Guess we’re about out of time,” he pointed to the orange sky in the west where the sun was setting. “Dinner time, soon. What do you think we should wear?”