

Victor BK4: Ch6

Book 4: Chapter 6: Blue

“I didn’t realize you wanted to change inns,” Valla said as they made their way back to the Arena District.

“Yeah, don’t you think we could stand to have a little more space? Maybe a bath inside our rooms? Anyway, Livag told me how to find his cousin’s inn. Wait . . . maybe it was his sister, I can’t remember. Anyway, her name was Brecia, and her inn is called The Sunset Songbird.” Victor hopped over a fallen, partially full sack of grain some wagon or cart had let fall on the side of the road.

“A pretty name. It seems the people of Coloss enjoy poetic titles.”

“That or they really like sunsets,” Victor replied, thinking of the name of the monster hunting company they’d signed on with. He glanced at Valla and changed the subject, “Are you nervous?”

She jerked her head his way and narrowed her eyes, “About?”

“Your big dinner tonight.” He chuckled and grinned, letting her know he was just messing around.

“Ancestors! I know you’re teasing me, but yes, I’m a bit nervous. I hate formal affairs, and though Rellia dragged me to many, I often found myself slipping away early. Promise me something—if I look to be having a terrible time, will you make an excuse for us to leave? I’m not good at such things.”

“Oh?” Victor was surprised by her admission. “Yeah, I can do that. I mean, I’ve got an arena fight tomorrow morning. I can’t very well be out late, can I?”

“That’s an excellent point, Victor,” Valla laughed, reaching out to delicately pat him on the shoulder as though granting him a point.

“The square’s just up here, and I saw the inn on our way out earlier. It’s right around this corner.” He quickened his pace, and Valla easily matched it. The Arena Square had grown busier since their earlier visit, but they didn’t have to fight the crowd much; they rounded the corner, walked for half a block, and then stood before a burnt-orange-bricked building that rose several stories over the cobbles of the square.

A stable building took up the lot next to the inn, but having no mounts of their own, Victor and Valla walked past the waiting stablehands and approached the liveried doorman. He was a Vesh with black horns and wore a fancy, brass-buttoned, maroon coat over black, velvety trousers. As they walked up, he said, “Welcome to the Sunset Songbird,” and opened the human-sized door wide for them.

“No Degh allowed, I guess,” Victor said quietly to Valla as they walked into the bustling lobby. Vesh and Yazzian people moved about, some chatting noisily and others walking here and there, toward the stairs or through the arched opening that led to the common room. A long counter stood off to one side, and behind it, Victor saw several people that must serve as the innkeepers on duty.

Stringed instruments could be heard playing in the common room, and the music drifted through the air. That, combined with the hanging plants and the bright light filtered through stained glass, lent a peaceful atmosphere to the room. Spices hung heavy in the air, the scent of good cooking if Victor were any judge, and his mouth began to salivate. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast,” he announced, and Valla snorted.

“Save your appetite. We’re going to dinner soon, remember?”

“Right,” Victor grunted, approaching one of the Vesh ladies behind the counter. The floor was tiled in pale brown stone, and the walls were coated in something like stucco, and Victor felt like the place had a very Mediterranean vibe. He could even hear a fountain trickling from one of the nearby interior courtyards. “Hello,” he said, thumping one of his heavy hands onto the counter.

“Hello, sir. Welcome to The Sunset Songbird! Are you seeking accommodation or information?”

“Yeah, we’re looking for a room or two.” Victor gestured to Valla as she stepped forward beside him.

“Very good; we have limited availability due to the festival starting on the morrow, but I can offer you a suite with a courtyard terrace.” The young woman had, to Victor’s sensibilities, a rather unsightly tusk jutting up from a prominent lower jaw, but he figured Vesh had different ideas of beauty.

“Sounds nice. We’ll take it.”

“Thank you, sir. Might I ask your name?” she asked, sliding a gray slate toward him. “Please touch this with your Energy.”

“I’m Victor,” he said, pressing a finger to the slate and trickling a bit of Energy into it. It pulsed with orange light and then resumed its flat gray appearance.

“How should the staff address you, sir? Do you have a particular honorific?”

“Just Victor. This is Captain Valla, though,” Victor said, enjoying putting the spotlight on his reticent friend.

“Oh! I’m pleased to meet you, Captain. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize this was your attendant; I assumed you were a couple.”

“He’s not my attendant. At the very least, we are of equal status on our world, don’t let his modesty fool you; he’s a champion fighter and will be displaying his prowess in your arena on the morrow.” Valla narrowed her eyes at him as she spoke, and Victor realized he shouldn’t have been messing with her.

“Oh? You’re fighting in the Horc’s Day tournament? I can offer you a discount in that case! Only one hundred and forty beads per night for your suite.” Victor had figured the price would be higher than the ninety Livag had quoted him; if the inn only had a few rooms available, he doubted they were the least expensive ones. Still, it was more than he’d expected, and that was with a discount. He took some pleasure in the way Valla’s lips parted and how she seemed a bit lost for words.

“Sounds good. We’ll need the room for a couple of nights.” He pulled a heavy sack of beads from his ring and started counting them out. The woman smiled and lifted a wooden stick that looked very much like a wand to Victor and held it toward him.

“I have a counting rod if you’ll allow me?”

“Uh, sure,” Victor said, moving his hand away from the bag. She smiled and adjusted a couple of tiny knobs at the rod’s base. Then she tapped the bag. A neat pile of beads appeared next to it, and the cloth deflated a little. “Oh, cool.” Victor nodded and scooped up the slightly lighter bag, and the inn attendant waved the rod at the pile of beads; they disappeared, presumably to some hidden container.

“Very good, Captain Valla and Victor—you’re paid in full for two nights. The room has been attuned to you, Victor, so the door will open at your touch. If the captain would like similar access, there’s a slate inside the door where you can grant it to her.”

“Okay, can you show us how to get to it? The room, I mean,” Victor said.

“The most direct route is through the courtyard there,” she pointed through an arched opening in the wall opposite the inn’s main entrance. “Your rooms are on the other side of the fountain—The Sand Drake Suite.” She paused, then said, more loudly, “Tral, I’m going to show our new guests to their suite.”

“Very good, Jatta,” the woman further down the counter replied, and Jatta stepped out from around the counter and gestured for Victor and Valla to follow her.

“Nice service,” Valla muttered.

“Yeah, this is more like it,” Victor said, grinning as he followed a few feet behind Jatta. The courtyard wasn’t very large, and he realized there were only three

rooms that opened onto it on the first floor. Balconies on the upper levels hung over the flowering plants and burbling fountains, though, and he could hear people's murmured conversations drifting through the air. Jatta showed them to a little patio with glass-paneled doors and waited for Victor to reach out and touch the handle. It clicked, and he pulled it open.

"You know where to find me, should you need anything else. Once again, welcome to The Sunset Songbird."

"Thank you," Valla said, but Victor was already walking into the room, barely registering the woman's words. The suite's main room was decorated in a similar fashion to the lobby. It boasted a table and chairs, comfortable couches, a small kitchen complete with a stove and a cold cabinet, and bookcases lined with nicknacks and books, mostly filled with poetry. There were two bedrooms with large, comfortable beds, and each had an adjoining bathroom. Victor was pleased.

"This is definitely more like it, Valla," he called from his bathroom after sampling the hot water flowing from the spigot in the big bronze tub.

"Yes, it's lovely. Thank you, Victor," she replied after a few seconds, speaking from the doorway into his room. "We should get ready for the war captain's dinner."

"About that," Victor said, stepping from his bathroom and into his room to look at her. "What should I wear?"

"I'm going to wear my dress uniform. I suggest you wear your armor—the shimmersteel is lovely and finer than any of your shirts. Do you have some black pants?"

Victor looked down at his pants, more khaki than brown if he had to put a label on them. "Yeah, I have black ones—a few pairs."

"Good, and polish your boots." She scowled at his boots, the same ones he'd bought all the way back in Steampool Vale. They were holding up all right and fit his feet like a second skin. Thanks to their enchantments, they weren't scuffed, but they were definitely not shiny; a thick layer of dust coated the dark leather, and the steel toes were dull—far from the gleaming shine they'd had when he bought them.

"Okay, this is embarrassing, but I don't have any, like, shoe-shining stuff."

Valla smiled and stepped forward, a small tin and a soft cloth appearing in her hands. "Rub some of this on the boots and buff them vigorously with the cloth." She looked him up and down as he reached for the offered items and added, "Do the same for your belt. Keep it, by the way; I have a dozen different leather conditioners I've bought over the years."

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” Victor chuckled, pointedly eyeing Valla’s gleaming black boots.

“A shave wouldn’t hurt, either,” Valla said over her shoulder as she walked out of the room. “I’m going to bathe and get dressed. Meet you in half an hour in the sitting room?”

“Yep,” Victor said, unscrewing the little tin and sniffing the yellowish, creamy contents—it smelled like wax with a hint of something else, like sandalwood, maybe, but he couldn’t place it for sure.

Twenty minutes later, Victor exited his bedroom, cleaner than he had been in quite a while. His boots shone, especially the gleaming metal-clad toes. He’d rubbed the road and battle stains from the leather of his belt, and Lifedrinker hung from it proudly. Victor’s armor hadn’t needed any attention; the enchantments and the magical metal kept it lustrous, shimmering from copper to green depending on the angle from which a person viewed it. He’d given himself a shave, combed his hair, and wore his best pair of black, self-cleaning pants. All in all, he felt he’d made plenty of effort for some military dinner.

Valla was waiting for him, pacing in a tight circle by the terrace doors. She wore a uniform similar to the one Victor was accustomed to seeing her in but far finer. Her boots reflected the glow-lamps like dark mirrors, and she’d tucked her tight, white pants into them.

She’d donned a short, fitted, brocaded coat with shiny brass buttons. Dozens of gleaming pins crafted from precious metals covered the left breast, and its high collar framed her head dramatically. The shirt she wore beneath it, white with pearlescent buttons, was tied at the neck with a red scarf-like tie that matched the stripes on her pants and coat.

Valla always looked neat, so her perfectly coiffed, short green hair didn’t surprise Victor, but the makeup did; she’d painted her lips and the pale blue flesh around her eyes in a shimmering turquoise that highlighted her hair and eyes. “You look nice,” Victor said, noting that she wore a sword at her waist—not her usual blade, something fancier and probably a lot less deadly. It looked like a saber of some sort, though it was ornate and decorative, and Victor doubted she’d use it in a fight.

“Thank you.” She nodded and then added, “You look . . . better.”

“Heh,” Victor snorted, producing the invitation the dragon-lady had given him. “This is supposed to guide us to the correct address. You ready?”

“I am; the sooner, the better.”

“Okay,” Victor said, channeling some Energy into the card. As soon as his Energy touched the card, it burst into a shower of blue sparks, and a brilliant, glimmering blue butterfly hovered in the afterglow. The butterfly flitted in a circle around Victor and then, trailing a shower of blue sparkles, flew to the doors and waited.

“Looks like we have a guide!” Victor laughed, hurrying after the butterfly to open the doors. It flew into the courtyard, and Victor and Valla followed it.

“It’s beautiful,” Valla said, and, for the second time that day, she smiled.

“Yeah, it is,” Victor replied, following the butterfly through the inn’s lobby. “Hey, what’s with the chest full of gold and platinum? Are those medals?”

“Yes, I earned them during my time in the legion. Duels, victories, academic achievements, rank insignias—I could bore you for an hour telling you about each one.”

“I don’t think it would be boring. They’re pretty badass if you ask me.”

“Maybe when we start the campaign of the Untamed Marches, we should institute some achievement criteria, and you can earn your own ‘chest full of gold and platinum,’” she said, and though she was at least half-joking, Victor rather liked the idea.

They followed the flitting, spark-trailing blue butterfly through the night-cloaked streets of Coloss. It didn’t move quickly but rather in spurts, always pausing to wait for Victor and Valla. It seemed to know when a part of the road was too crowded to pass and would wait until a break in traffic allowed easy passage, and Victor had time to take in the sights, sounds, and smells of Coloss at night.

People seemed more cheerful, elegant, and colorful than they did in the daytime. He saw representatives of all the local peoples wearing bright, fine clothing. He saw Yazzians in robes lined with light and reflective metallic threads; he saw a giant Degh wearing plate armor that shone in the darkness, leaving a silvery trail as she jogged down the street as fast as most horses could run. The crowds in the squares were denser, there was music playing everywhere, and the scents of food that hung in the air had Victor’s mouth salivating and his stomach rumbling.

Victor was close to breaking down and buying something from a vendor to tide him over when the butterfly turned up a steep road that climbed into a part of the city that reminded him of where they’d visited the Elemental Guild. The crowds thinned out, the street vendors faded away, and soon, they were walking among finely dressed Vesh, clearly on their way to gatherings of their own.

“I believe this city was founded by Vesh,” Valla surprised him by saying. “In these noble districts, you don’t see many of the other peoples.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.” Victor nodded toward a pair of large gate guards wearing black plate armor. The butterfly flew past them, continuing down the cobbled walkway toward another gate, this one brightly illuminated by blue-tinted glow lamps. The guards outside this gate also wore plate armor, but it followed the blue theme. When the butterfly reached it, it spun into a tight spiral and exploded in a shower of blue sparkles. “I think our host likes blue.”

“Yes,” Valla said, frowning and walking toward the guards. “I begin to understand why he has an interest in me.”

“Welcome,” the guard to the left said, his voice echoing strangely from his heavy metal helmet. Neither of the guards’ faces were visible through their thick plate visors. He gestured toward the open gateway and the cobbled path beyond. Blue glow lamps lined the pathway, illuminating the way, though dimly, allowing the darkness beyond to cling like a shadowy blanket. “The war captain and his guests await; follow the pathway to the manor.”

As they walked up the path, Victor tried to match Valla's pace, trying to remind himself that this was her event; he was here only because she'd been invited. The walk to the manor wasn't long; how could it be in a city so crowded with structures? When they rounded the first bend, following the dim blue lights, they saw it ahead; a palace that matched Lam's estate in elegance, though it was easily twice the size.

What stood out, what bothered Victor, was the predominance of the color blue everywhere. Blue stained glass windows, more blue glow lamps, guards in blue armor, servants in blue livery, carpets and rugs all in shades of blue, and even many of the walls—plastered or painted blue. As they followed one of the servants that had waited near the door, guiding them through the corridors toward the “great hall,” Victor couldn't hold his tongue any longer, and he asked, “What's the deal with all the blue?”

“Sir?” the Vesh woman asked, pausing to face him.

“The blue? Everywhere? The, um, war captain's favorite color?”

“I'm not sure of his personal preference, but each war captain is assigned a color. This is the home of War Captain Blue, and he has three peers—Black, Red, and Green.”

“Ah!” Valla said, smiling at the woman. “Thank you for clearing that up; we're new to Coloss.”

“Of course, Lady.” The woman curtsied delicately in her blue skirts, then turned and continued guiding them through the manor. When they came to a set of enormous, blue-stained wooden doors, she presented them to the two uniformed guards, each wearing gleaming plate helmets with high feathered plumes—naturally, they were blue.

The guard on the left turned, pulled open one of the doors, and announced, loud enough that his voice cut through the din beyond, “The Lady Captain Valla of Fanwath and her escort, Victor!” He turned, bowed, and gestured for them to proceed into the suddenly quiet hall. Valla reached up to grab Victor's elbow, and he felt himself stand up straighter, suddenly feeling nervous for the first time.

Of course, the great hall was carpeted in blue, patterned with flowers, and the lights were, thankfully, more white than blue, but still, the chandeliers dangled strands of blue crystals that threw dazzling patterns on the walls. Victor couldn't take in any more of the decor because he became aware of the hundreds of Vesh guests, finely dressed, standing around in groups or sitting at

tables along the perimeter, all seemingly stopping whatever they'd been doing to stare at him and Valla.

After a moment of standing transfixed, never having had such a silent crowd observe him, Victor shrugged and started walking over the carpet toward the high table at the far end of the room. He felt Valla's grip tighten on his elbow, but she walked with him, head high. Victor had an absurd urge to ham it up for all the staring weirdos; he wanted to wave and shout something like, "How's it going?" into the silence, but he didn't want to embarrass Valla, so he just walked with her toward the group of elegant, beastly Vesh that sat around a man in a massive, blue stone, throne-like chair.

When they were just a few feet away, and the man who had to be the War Captain Blue was just a bit further away than the width of his table, Victor stopped and waited for him, or anyone, to say something. The war captain was big, easily a head taller than any Vesh Victor had seen. He wore a beautifully tailored blue suit cut in a fashion that highlighted his massively muscled physique. He had fine, handsome features, only spoiled—to Victor's human sensibilities—by a pair of long, straight black horns that stood up from the top of his forehead.

The war captain reached up, smoothed his neat, black hair back, tucking some stray strands behind an ear, and spread his lips in a smile, revealing brilliant white fangs. He squinted his pale yellow eyes and said, "It's true what I heard, Lady Valla—you're more beautiful than I could have imagined." His voice was rich and deep, and despite his desire to be irritated, Victor couldn't help but admire the man. "Please, come sit." He gestured to an empty chair on his left-hand side.

"And my escort, War Captain?" Valla asked before Victor even registered that there was only one empty seat at the table.

"Please call me Blue. This large fellow? We've a spot for him just over there." The war captain pointed to one of the tables that ran perpendicular to his along the side of the hall.

"I'd prefer . . ." Valla started to say, but Victor interrupted her.

"It's fine, Valla." He knew he was being a little selfish; he had no desire to sit at the high table and watch this guy try to flirt with Valla, and he'd noticed that the dragon-lady was seated at the table where the War Captain had pointed. "Come on, I'll walk you to your seat," he said, turning to walk around the captain's table.

"What happened to the music?" Blue shouted, and suddenly the room was filled with the lilting tunes of a group of stringed instrument players that occupied the far corner of the chamber. Victor tried to keep his face impassive as he walked with Valla around the table, but he couldn't help frowning when he saw the dirty looks many of the Vesh sitting at the table were throwing their way.

He leaned toward Valla's ear to whisper, and he noticed, for the first time, that she'd worn silver and diamond earrings in a half-moon pattern from her ear's top curve all the way down to her lobe, seven of them. How had he missed that? Shaking his head, he hissed, "Be careful; these people are mad-jealous of you."

“I’m not happy about this,” she whispered back. “Please watch me; if I stand up, it means I want to leave.”

“You got it, chica,” Victor said, pulling out her seat so she could sit down.

“Thank you, warrior,” Blue said, dismissing Victor. Victor was surprised that Blue had called him “warrior,” but then he realized he was the only person in the room, at least sitting at a table, wearing armor. He shrugged, gave Valla’s shoulder a squeeze, and then made his way around the back of the captain’s table, down one tier, and to the lower table where his seat waited.

The empty chair was second from the head, and the dragon-lady sat at that top seat. She smiled at him as he approached, then said to the Vesh woman beside her, “Krae, would you mind moving down so I can speak to this off-worlder?”

“Of course, Tes,” the woman said, standing to curtsey. To his surprise, she glanced at Victor and pleasantly smiled as she moved down to his formerly assigned seat.

Victor sat in her seat, still warm from her presence, and said, “Thanks,” nodding to her, then turned to the dragon-lady and said, “Tes, is it?”

“Tesia’liveen’ashalah, actually, but I find people I meet prefer my short name,” she smiled, her perfectly human-looking cheeks dimpling at the gesture.

“Well, yeah, I think I’ll stick with Tes if it’s all right,” Victor replied, though his eyes were on Valla, studying her face, and he felt himself relax when she laughed at something the war captain said.

“You’re worried about your friend?” Tes asked, following his gaze.

“I mean, yeah. I think this dude’s interested in her because she has blue skin. It’s kinda fucked up, don’t you think?”

“What an interesting way to speak . . .” Tes started to say, but then a commotion from the head table erupted, and she stopped to look where Victor was already staring. A Vesh woman wearing a beautiful blue, silky gown had stood up from her seat two spaces down on the War Captain’s right, throwing her chair back so it clattered against the wall. Her cheeks were red, her eyes like blazing embers, and she strode behind Blue to stare at Valla, who’d also risen from her seat, her hand reaching for her ornamental sword.

The Vesh woman opened her black-scaled wings with a resounding *crack* and loomed over Valla, easily half a foot taller. The room had grown quiet again, and everyone heard what she said, her words thick with emotion, “Enough of this farce! I challenge you to a duel, off-worlder! If the Blue likes your skin so much, I’ll have it made into a cloak and present it to him as a Horc’s Day gift.” The War Captain, to Victor’s horror, didn’t object; he glanced from Valla to the Vesh woman, and his eyes squinted in amusement, a deep chuckle emerging from his lips.

“Fucking hell,” Victor said.