

## Victor BK4: Ch7

### Book 4: Chapter 7: A Dinner Conversation

Victor stood up, his chair toppling behind him in his haste, but he felt a grip on his wrist that might as well have been a steel shackle for how little it moved when he tugged at it. “Wait,” said Tes. “See how things play out before you throw your dice on the table.”

Valla’s voice rang out through the room, “You wish to duel? I don’t even know you.” Her back was straight as a post, face betraying no emotion as she stared the taller, threatening woman in the eyes.

“Reis, restrain yourself,” War Captain Forl—Blue—finally said, still chuckling. Victor started to relax, assuming the man would put a stop to the situation, but Blue kept speaking, “We have too many events taking place today and tomorrow. If you insist on a duel, it will have to be overmorrow.”

“Very well,” said the Vesh lady, Reis. “Overmorrow, it is. Gird yourself well, blue-skin; I won’t stop at first blood.”

Valla looked from Reis to the war captain and, unflinching, said, “Is that how things are done in this world, then? Duels without cause, regardless of level or tier? How backward.” That got a reaction from the crowd, gasps, and murmured outrage at her audacity. Victor had seen enough; he tugged again at Tes’s grip on his arm, but she held fast.

“Victor, no violence will occur tonight; don’t make things worse by inserting yourself. I promise you—it’s the wrong move.” Tes seemed to speak softly, but her voice rang in Victor’s ears, and he took another breath, willing his rage to calm.

“We care about fairness, lovely,” the war captain said, chuckling. “Were you not just telling me that you’ve recently joined the ranks of the mid-tier? Darling Reis is, herself, in the same category.”

Valla looked at Reis coolly, assessing her stature, her glittering black-scaled wings, the fire in her eyes, and the way her hair, long and plaited, gleamed like polished obsidian. Victor knew she was sizing the woman up and measuring the strength of her aura. Finally, Valla said, “And if I refuse?”

“Then you are disgraced,” Reis answered for Blue.

“Sadly, it’s true, beautiful,” Blue said, turning his chair so he could look at the two women more easily. “You’re free to avoid the duel, but I’ll have to ask you to leave. Such disgraceful behavior won’t stand among us—the high-born Vesh. Why, you’d have to forego any access to the finer things in Coloss; the arena, sanctioned monster hunts, even the protection of the warlord, and access to his City Stone.”

Victor couldn’t contain himself any longer, “This is bullshit,” he growled.

“Oh, dear!” Blue said, glancing his way. “Your barbarian seems to have slipped his muzzle.”

Valla jerked her head toward Victor, saw him standing there, eyes blazing in anger, with Tes firmly gripping his wrist, and she stared hard at him until their eyes locked. She narrowed them slightly and gave her head a quick shake, making it clear to Victor, even in his burgeoning rage, that she wanted him to stand down. When she saw some tension leave his posture, she turned back to Reis and said with a firm, steady voice, “Very well, Reis. I will accept your duel.”

Reis grinned savagely, her dark eyes blazing with sparkling Energy. Before the challenger could speak, though, Valla turned to Blue and said, “I understand it’s to be the day after tomorrow. Are there any other rules of which I should be aware? The time of day and location, for instance?”

“Wonderful question!” The war captain stood up and turned to address the entire room. “We have cause to celebrate! Our guest, the beautiful lady from off-world, Valla, will be dueling our very own Reis, the Lady of Tuul. I shall host the event right here, in my grand hall, overmorrow at noon. Each combatant will use their preferred weapon, and no abilities shall be barred, save those that might damage my property!”

To Victor’s surprise, as the crowd cheered, Valla straightened her chair and sat down, turning her back to Reis, who looked angrier than ever. Blue chuckled and said, “Reis, you’ve made your point; please take your seat so that we may enjoy the feast.”

Victor stared at Valla until she met his eyes, and she gave him a nod; she was okay. He sighed and turned to pick up his chair, and that’s when he realized Tes had released his wrist. The conversation around the room resumed, somewhat more animated than before the challenge, and Victor’s muttered, “Fuck these stuck-up assholes,” was lost in the buzz as he retook his seat.

“You have an amusing vernacular,” Tes said, sipping from a blue crystal wine glass.

“I can’t tell if I should be pissed or thankful about you holding onto me like that.”

“Oh, thankful, I should think. There are those in this hall that could smite you rather easily.” She smiled and licked at a droplet of wine at the corner of her mouth and said, “Tell me, Victor, are there many humans in the world from which you hail? I believe my network told me it’s called Fanwath, yes?”

“Just like that?” Victor said, looking around the room. “My friend was just challenged by some racist bitch to fight to the death, and we’re all going to act like nothing happened?”

The woman to his left shifted uncomfortably, turning to speak with her neighbor, and Tes frowned, shaking her head slightly. Softly, she said, “Victor, the people here fancy themselves above such concerns. If you continue to speak so vulgarly, the wrong person may hear you and decide to administer a lesson.”

Victor didn’t speak; he just glowered and reached for the wine glass in front of him. He sipped at the dark red vintage, and though he didn’t consider himself a wine drinker, it tasted good in that moment, and its potency was not in question. Finally, more calmly, he said, “What about you? Could anyone here teach you ‘a lesson?’”

Tes smiled, reaching up to twirl a blond curl, with her long, frightfully strong fingers, and said, “I should think not. Consider that for a moment and think about the implications of having me for a friend.” She glanced pointedly in Valla’s direction.

“Is there something you can do to help her?” Victor asked again, leaning closer so he could speak even more quietly. “She’s underpowered for her level and just barely in the mid-tier.”

“Two things, Victor. One, duels aren’t always about the participants’ maximum power, though it’s certainly a factor. And two, of course, I’ll help your friend; I love an underdog. Perhaps tomorrow, while you’re playing in the arena, I’ll spend some time with her.”

“They say underdog where you come from? Are there dogs in your world?”

“I’ll answer that question if you answer mine.” She smiled coyly and took another sip of wine. It took Victor a minute to remember what her question had been, then he answered.

“Fanwath? No, I think I’m the only human there. Well, that used to be there.”

“Truly? How is that possible? You don’t have parents?”

“I was summoned to that world from mine.”

“Ah! Now the picture grows more clear. Would you mind telling me of your home world?”

“Yeah, but first, tell me how you spending a day with Valla is going to help her enough to survive. What level is that Reis woman? Also, you owe me an answer about dogs.”

Tes looked to the head table, eyes on Reis, who’d retaken her seat, and after a moment, she looked back at Victor and said, “Tier-seven, I’d wager.”

“Fuck me!” Victor sighed, putting his head in his hands. Tes looked at him for a moment, then frowned and stood. Lifting her glass, she cleared her throat, and then her voice, clear as a crystal, rang out through the great hall, cutting through the conversations as though she stood next to every person there, “Great War Captain Blue, I would endeavor to thank you for this fine occasion by offering a toast and a prophecy.” Victor jerked his head up from his hands, and she offered him a quick wink.

Blue stood up immediately, eyes flaring with excitement, and bellowed, “Silence! Let the Lady Tes speak!” His shout was superfluous—everyone had grown quiet as Tes’s clarion voice rang through the hall.

“My Lord Blue,” Tes said again, her voice echoing off the walls of the hall, though she spoke as if to a person right next to her, “I’ve had a vision—should you host the duel between the Ladies Valla and Reis, not overmorrow, but in a month and a day, you will draw the War Lord’s interest, and he will attend the event,” she paused as her words sank in and then added, “Here’s to the elevation of War Captain Blue!” She held her wine glass aloft, and the crowd thundered their enthusiastic echo of the toast.

“You heard her!” Blue roared, throwing his empty glass over his shoulder to shatter on the wall. “My apologies, Lady Reis, but your duel will be postponed for one month and one day!”

Victor watched Valla while he spoke, how she stared impassively at Tes, and though she didn’t look angry or pleased, he thought he saw some tension leave her posture. Tes, for her part, hammed it up, curtsying to Blue, lifting her lovely, multi-layered, blue and yellow skirts daintily. When she retook her seat, she sighed, smiling at Victor, and snapped her fingers. Victor heard a popping noise in his ears, and then she said, “You may speak freely. Interloping ears will find our words strangely garbled.”

“Why now?” Victor asked, thinking back to their prior, hushed conversation.

“Because I fear you’re about to ask me about my false prophecy, etcetera.” She smirked and drank some more wine.

“Well?”

“Very well, I’ll give you some answers, and then you’ll owe me a few. Fair?” When Victor nodded, she continued, “Yes, there are dogs on Aradnue. Dragons quite enjoy their company, though a few savages will eat them. No, I didn’t have a vision regarding your friend’s duel. I can tell you with great confidence, though, that the duel will generate tremendous excitement around the city, thanks to my words, and the Warlord will surely attend—a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you will. Blue believes me because I have shared some auguries with him in recent history that came true; it’s a gift of mine and allowed me to gain status in Coloss quite rapidly.”

“So, we have a month to get out of town?” Victor said.

“Well, that, or prepare your friend in a manner that allows her to win. I intend to keep my earlier promise to help her; I find the prospect intriguing.” She took another drink, and Victor mimicked her, draining his glass. After she’d swallowed and gestured for a waiting attendant to bring more, she said, “Now it’s your turn. Tell me of your home world.”

“I’m from Earth. We don’t have Energy there, and I was base zero when I got summoned to Fanwath. The guys who summoned me threw me into a pit fighting circuit, kind of like throwing out the garbage, I guess.”

“Earth?” A slow smile had spread on her face while she listened to him. “I’m familiar with this world, and though it may be a dead world now, it was once so rich in Energy that mighty armies of Elder races fought over it. There are texts on Aradnue written by legendary dragons that spent time there. I’d give much to visit, even in its current state. Might I have a sample of your blood, Victor?”

“What?” Victor raised an eyebrow and shifted back in his seat.

“With your blood, there are those on Aradnue who could open a gateway to your homeworld. I’d enjoy visiting, though it would be difficult, and I’d need to bring an enormous store of Energy to avoid fading.”

“Fading?”

“Dead worlds cannot sustain creatures of any significant Energy. You would grow weak and die should you try to return. How sad and frustrating that must be!”

Victor frowned, some of his darkest fears suddenly made real. His mind wanted to mull over the blunt news this dragon-woman had just dropped on him, but he forced himself to remain present, to push those feelings into a corner of his mind, and said, “I’d wondered about that. There aren’t people with superhuman abilities on Earth, and I worried I’d lose my strength and abilities if I returned.”

“No, it would be worse than that, I’m afraid. Your body has changed significantly as you gained power on Fanwath. You require Energy to function. It isn’t a simple matter of undoing all of your growth, you’d quite literally starve, and it would be a horrible sensation as it happened.”

“But you want to visit? Couldn’t I bring Energy home with me?”

“Yes, I imagine you could make a quick visit; the Energy required to keep you alive and comfortable for more than a few days is likely beyond your means, but that much is possible. It might afford you a chance to say farewell to your loved ones.”

“Would you help me if I gave you my blood?”

“Or I could simply take it,” she said, grinning, and suddenly Victor had a vision of her true form—her enormous, blue-scaled body filling his vision and her scythe-like teeth gleaming with saliva. He blinked his eyes and shook his head, and she sat before him again, simply a beautiful, petite human-looking woman. “I jest.” Her eyes twinkled in amusement, and she continued, “I will help you, but not now, Victor. You’d be rather difficult to protect on Aradnue in your current state. Speak to me when you’ve gained the strength to fend off those such as me, and then I’ll see that you visit your home.”

“When I can ‘fend off’ people like you?” Victor scoffed, her dragon form looming large in his mind. “My abuela might not live that long!” He leaned forward earnestly, his eyes watery, his sudden, new hope just as suddenly dashed.

“Tut, Victor. There’s no telling if your grandmother is still alive as it is. Before we spoke, you had no hope; now you have some. Look at this as another reason to gain power. By the way, I’m not being cruel or arbitrary in my demand. I’m far from the most potent of dragons, and when some of the ancients of my kind smell your presence, you’ll need great strength to make your petition.

“Are there others that could do it? Someone here, maybe? Open a gateway to Earth, I mean?”

“There are those on Zaafor that can open portals between worlds, but none that could do so with a dead world. It takes an order of magnitude more power and expertise to reach the worlds deprived of the rivers and oceans of Energy.”

“But some asshole from this world went to Fanwath and summoned me there.”

“Summoning someone, given the proper key, is far easier than opening a gateway onto another world. If someone with the requisite skill had a sample of your blood and the strength of will to crush yours, they could summon you from nearly anywhere; reaching out and snatching hold of someone is different than establishing a portal, an opening through space. Tell me, did the wizard have some connection to you, some way to tie his magic to you?”

“Now you mention it, Rellia,” he paused when Tes frowned, unfamiliar with the name, then clarified, “a noblewoman who helped me with some information—she said something about some biological material . . .”

“There you have it! With a biological connection to you, they could reach out and snatch you through the Ether. That’s something you should look into, Victor. How did they get such material?” As she spoke, servants began to deliver the food, and Victor sat back, mulling over everything she’d told him.

He’d learned that he couldn’t return home to live, not ever. He’d already sort of resigned himself to that, but feeling a certain way and knowing it was true were two different things, and he suddenly felt very morose, very moody. He struggled even to acknowledge the food placed before him. He’d also, in the same conversation, learned that he might be able to visit home, but the hurdles to do so seemed insurmountable, at least in the near term. How many more years did his abuelita have? She was in her seventies.

“I’ve ruined your dinner,” Tes said, having just inhaled the aromas on her plate. Her smile turned into a pout as she saw Victor sitting there, brooding. “Victor, I’ll give you the means to contact me. When you’re ready, I’ll help you. I have no obligation to, you know, but I find the prospect—and you—amusing. Don’t ruin that with a sour mood.”

Victor shook his head, trying to throw off the dour thoughts running through his mind, and said, “All right. One thing at a time, huh? For now, let’s make sure Valla survives this duel, hmm?”

“That’s the spirit! It’s always best to devour your meal one bite at a time. Let me worry about your friend; I believe you have your own challenges to overcome, starting with an arena tournament on the morrow.”

“Yeah, but, to be honest, I’m looking forward to it. I’ve felt like getting into a fight all damn day.” Victor took a bite of the rare, bloody meat on his plate, admiring how nicely the silver knife from his place setting cut through it. The coppery, salty tang was good, and it woke up his hunger. As he wolfishly began to attack his serving, he listened to Tes.

“It’s good to have a release, no doubt. Might I make a suggestion, though?” Victor grunted assent, and she continued, “Don’t put all your abilities on display until you have to. If you struggle but still win, it will make your later fights much more glorious; don’t give your opponents a chance to devise strategies around your greatest strengths. I can see more thoroughly into you than the people of Coloss, and I’m certain you’re being greatly underestimated. Make them pay for it.”

“Underestimated?” Victor asked between mouthfuls, eating a pile of sweet, purple mash that reminded him of yams.

“If they knew anything of humans, they’d give you a closer look, approach you with more caution.”

That caught Victor’s attention, and he looked at Tes with a raised eyebrow, swallowed his food, and said, “I guess that brings to mind some other questions I had for you. What is it about Earth and humanity that interests you? I get that there are books about Earth on your world, but what in those books makes it seem special?”

“Earth was teeming with Elder races once upon a time—dragons, various species of titan, the fae, demon-kind, and celestial beings. I could go on if I had one of my grand-matron’s texts, but those are the ones I can think of off the top of my head. Among those great, powerful species, a younger race was born. Humans were excellent adapters, and many of the Elder races grew fond of them, spawning hybrids who were left behind as the currents of Energy were pulled away, leaving Earth to wither.”

“Seriously? Demons?” Victor shook his head and said, “Forget it. Tell me why the Energy left Earth.”

“War between the fae is the most likely culprit. The Winter Court makes something of a habit of stealing Energy from worlds in the physical plane,

redirecting it into the Faewild, specifically into their territories.” She paused, took a drink of her wine and a bite of meat, and, still chewing, continued speaking.

“Well, that’s a possibility, but there are others. With so many powerful beings vying for territory, any number of cataclysms could have occurred that pulled your world out of the flow. It’s also possible the System, younger and more clumsy in those days, disrupted the current further upstream. I think I’ll research this topic if I can use your blood to open a gateway.” Tes stared into space, almost dreamily, tapping one perfectly manicured nail against her chin while she swallowed her bite.

“So humans are special somehow because we grew up around powerful beings?” Victor prompted.

“Oh, silly man, it’s not just that you ‘grew up’ around them; did you not hear me mention spawning hybrids? Your kind lay with them; sex! It’s not a coincidence that my bipedal form looks human! Your bloodlines are rich with the strength of beings as great as I. More than that, you have an affinity for Energy that generally rivals that of any Elder race. Given time and training, humans have immense potential.”

“Damn . . .” Victor felt like a little kid that caught his mom sleeping with an alien.

“Indeed! Do you see why these people of Coloss are foolish to underestimate you? Wait until they get a look at your inner titan.” She grinned wickedly and winked at Victor. “These Degh are a pale shadow.”

“You know . . .”

“I told you,” she touched a finger just under her eye, “I see more than anyone in this city.”

“Well, on that topic, maybe you could give me some advice?” Victor asked.

“Oh? Matters of the heart?” She glanced over at the head table.

“No, shit, no,” Victor laughed and quickly added, “I mean about my attributes. I’ve been dumping a lot of points into will because it seems to benefit me in lots of ways, thanks to my spirit Core and the Classes I’ve had. Do you think I should keep doing that?”

She looked at him for a long moment and then said, “There are things about you I don’t know, but I understand the gist of what you’re saying. Your will strengthens your abilities, and so are you able to strengthen yourself with the application of that attribute. I think, unless you feel you are suffering in a particular area, I’d continue that route. You’d do well to seek a mentor who understands your Core more thoroughly; I’ve little experience with spirit affinities.”

“Well . . .” Victor thought about her words, found that he couldn’t see an argument with them, and said simply, “Thanks.”

He tried to ply her for more information as the dinner progressed, but Tes played him off, changing the topic frequently to more mundane subjects, like the meal, the music, various guests and their clothing, and even the weather. Victor was sure to keep an eye on Valla, watching to see if she was ready to leave, but his friend sat, rather at ease, eating her food and making, what seemed to be, polite conversation with the war captain and the people seated nearby.

When the meal was over, and people started to disburse, some going to dance, others walking off in pairs or small groups to drink elsewhere, Tes folded her napkin over her half-eaten desert—an amazingly rich cake with a distinct coconut flavor—and stood up, “Excuse me, Victor. I have matters to attend in private. Please let your companion know that I’ll seek her out tomorrow in the arena. Here,” she handed Victor a shiny silver token with a pair of horns stamped into one side. “This will grant her access to my private spectator booth.”

“Okay,” Victor said, standing up. He cleared his throat and awkwardly said, “Thank you, Tes. Thanks for helping out Valla and for telling me so much about my world. I feel like a dumb kid more than ever, but I guess that’s what happens when your eyes get opened up.”

“The important thing is what you do now that your eyes are open. I look forward to witnessing your growth; the younger peoples of the universe, like those here in Coloss, are in for a treat.” She chuckled and held out a hand, and Victor, ignorant as he was, knew he was supposed to kiss it. He blushed furiously, but he did it, taking her fingers lightly in his and just brushing the back of her hand with his lips.

“Well done, Victor,” she laughed, and though he never took his eyes off her, she was gone by the time his brain registered that she’d pulled her fingers out of his grip.

“Pinche fucking crazy,” he hissed, looking around the room for Valla. She was still standing near the head table, speaking to Blue and another man with enormous red-furred ears. Victor made his way over, standing a few feet to the side, waiting for her to make eye contact with him. After a moment, when the big-eared guy started speaking to Blue, Valla looked his way and nodded.

As he took the last few steps toward them, Valla said, “Thank you for dinner, War Captain. I must depart; my companion has a busy day tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Blue said, feigning dismay by holding a hand to his chest. He looked at Victor and said, “Can you not manage to make your way home alone, lad?”

“I wouldn’t be much of an escort if I left the lady here alone, would I?” Victor asked, struggling to keep a snarl out of his voice.

“I suppose not. What say you, Lady Valla?”

“I say I’m tired, sir. Thank you again, but I must be going.” Valla sketched a half bow and then turned to leave. Victor nodded to Blue, noting the amusement in the man’s eyes, and followed after her.

“You good, Valla?” he asked, lengthening his stride, so he walked beside her.

“Am I good?” she chuckled, shaking her head. “On the bright side, I had a wonderful meal and learned the names of many powerful people in Coloss. I suppose the gloomy news is that I must fight a woman far more powerful than I in a month’s time.”

“At least it’s not in two days.”

“Do I have you to thank for that?” Valla softly asked, glancing at him with arched eyebrows.

“Not exactly. That woman who made the, uh, prophecy wanted to help you out. I mean, I asked her to, but she said she likes an underdog. She’s fucking strong, Valla, and she wants to help you prepare. I mean,” Victor glanced around the wide hallway they were walking through toward the front doors of the manor, noting the other people walking nearby, and said, “I’ll tell you later, okay? Trust me, though; things aren’t as grim as you think.”

“I do trust you, Victor.” Valla smiled and added, “A lot can happen in a month, right?”

“Damn right, chica.”