

## Victor BK5: Ch1

Book 5: Chapter 1: Fainhallow

For the first time, as he passed through a world portal, Victor didn't feel alone; the whole way through, he felt Valla clutching his hand. He couldn't see her, couldn't even see himself, really, but he could feel her warm, tight grip, and it kept his mind from spiraling away with his doubts, hopes, and fears. As a circle of light rapidly approached out of the void, growing larger with each heartbeat, he stared at it, trying to see through. Despite his efforts, he could only get an impression of hard stone and bright blue.

As the circle grew to the size of a window and then to a doorway and, in the blink of an eye, passed around them, Victor and Valla stumbled out onto a hard, dusty white marble dais. The air was crisp, almost cold, a sharp departure from Coloss's sweltering heat. The breeze smelled fresh and rich, and Victor was put at ease by the pale blue sky and high fluffy clouds. As he let his gaze drift down from the heavens, he came to realize that he and Valla were standing high among mountaintops and, not far away, a walled town or enormous keep sat against the mountainside, colorful pennants flapping in the wind from its many gabled towers.

"Fainhallow," Valla said. Victor looked down at her and saw her gazing at the walled keep. She gave his hand a final squeeze and then let go, walking down the stone steps of the dais toward an enormous, arching span of stone that crossed the chasm between their mountaintop and the one on which the keep and its outbuildings sat.

"Fainhallow?" Victor asked, following her down the steps.

"The academy. It's not too far from Persi Gables as the crow flies. It might take us a week to hike down out of the mountains, though."

"Yeah? I feel like people have mentioned this place before, but I don't remember what about."

"It's a well-respected school for studying the arts of magic, from spell crafting to alchemy. I'd say it's basically a boarding school for rich brats whose families have too much money and not enough patience."

Victor looked up at the gray-white stone walls and the high towers with their flapping pennants, and his mind started drifting toward old movies, VR experiences, and games he'd played revolving around magical schools. "Shit, I haven't thought about games in a long time," he muttered. At Valla's arched eyebrow, he added, "Lots of stories about magical schools from my world. So, like, are there kids here, or it's more for adults?"

"Young adults, generally, though some noble families view their young as exceedingly special and might send them here as adolescents. Rellia wasn't fond of the place; she favored real-world experience and conflict." As she spoke, Valla began to climb a second set of steps toward the stone archway, and Victor followed. Up close, the archway was even larger than it had first seemed—if he

walked toward the middle of it, he doubted he'd be able to see over the edges, which was just fine by him.

"You think they can help us get down to Persi Gables faster?"

"I'm certain of it. If we can't use one of the portals, we can at least wait for their next supply ship." She looked Victor in the eye and clarified, "Airship."

"Ah!" he nodded, walking beside her onto the span, wondering how such a long stretch of curved stone had been put into place—it had to be half a mile long. "I suppose some earth elemental caster built this bridge?"

"Probably," Valla nodded. She gave him another look and then asked, "You haven't finished mastering Tes's spell for resizing yourself, have you?"

"Uh, between running from the warlord, killing Karnice, and stepping into the portal that brought us here?"

"I meant before that! I couldn't remember how far you'd gotten with it."

"I'm close, but no." Victor paused, considering, then asked, "Why? You think they're going to react badly to my size in there?" He knew he was verging on giant-sized even without using his Titanic Aspect spell. Judging by how he towered over Valla, Victor figured he was probably more than eight feet tall.

"No, not necessarily, but you'll have to duck through many doorways." As they strolled along the bridge, Victor working hard to match Valla's much shorter strides, he saw her look down at herself, then over at Victor, and she added, "We'll be respected here. If not for my family name, then for our power. Victor, we were strong fish who spent some time in the ocean, and now we're back in our little pond. Our armor, our weapons, alone, are likely without peer in this world."

"I'm glad I learned to hold in my aura."

"As am I!" Valla chuckled. "You just gained two levels, yes? I imagine your control is even greater. I'll wager you'll master Tes's spell next time you really work at it."

"Yeah, well, you're pushing tier six. Not many people that rank on Fanwath, are there?"

"No, I don't believe there are." Valla stood very straight as she rested her hand on Midnight's pommel. Victor reflexively reached down to let his palm brush Lifedrinker's haft. Smiling, feeling good about their accomplishments, he looked up and noted two chainmail-clad guards holding long metal pikes standing

outside the gates ahead. "Victor," Valla said, "Perhaps relax your hold on your aura just a bit. Let them have a taste, but don't crush them with it."

Victor frowned, "You think intimidation is the way to start? I'd rather try being friendly first."

"Well," Valla, too, frowned, but she relented, "I'll follow your lead in the conversation then."

They were still a hundred yards or so from the far end of the stone bridge, so Victor's mind had time to wander again, and he asked, "Do you think Tes is okay? She was going to give me a means to contact her but never got around to it."

"She has your blood. She knows what world we've come to; if she wants to meet or speak with us, she'll find a way. As far as her being okay . . . I hope so. I think so; if she couldn't beat the warlord or get him to stand down, I'm sure she'd be able to escape."

"Yeah, I agree." Victor remembered how Tes had given Valla and Barn potions that would turn them into smoke so they could escape danger. If she could whip something like that up, there was no way she wouldn't have her own mechanisms to escape danger. The thought, at least, was comforting, and Victor found his lips curling into a smile as he pictured Tes and imagined how she was probably sipping one of her potent alcohols, wondering what trouble Victor was getting into. "Speaking of trouble . . ." he muttered as he saw the big, furry Vodkin guardsman stepping forward, his pike leveled toward the two of them as they approached.

"Halt! This is a place of learning and study, and we want no trouble!"

"Calm . . ." Valla started to say, but Victor rested a big hand on her shoulder.

"You said I could lead the conversation," he said, interrupting her. Valla smiled crookedly, then gestured toward the guard as if in invitation.

"Hello, good sir!" Victor said jovially. "We don't intend any trouble."

The Vodkin's bristling fur settled a bit. His stern expression softened, making his big, moist, black eyes more cute than intimidating, especially as his whiskers twitched and wriggled beneath his button nose. Victor had known a few Vodkin reasonably well, and he knew they could get angry and were quite tough, but they certainly had a disadvantage when it came to intimidation. "Please declare yourselves; what's your business in Fainhallow?"

"Well, we're just passing through, really. We traveled here through a world portal and need to get down to Persi Gables. We can pay for assistance . . ."

"I'm Valla ap'Yensha, and this is Victor, War Leader of my clan. You needn't fear us, for my Lady Rellia ap'Yensha is a Fainhallow alumnus and donor." Valla held up her family signet ring, one Victor had only seen her display twice before, and,

at her words, the guard immediately lifted his pike, striking the butt into the cobbles and saluting.

“Welcome to Fainhallow, ma’am and sir! I am Guardsman Barnt, and I’ve heard of you, m’lady! I served in the Legion for a good many years.”

“Ah, well met then, Guardsman Barnt. May we pass?”

“O’course! Stand aside, Klym. Let these two pass!”

Victor followed Valla past Barnt and the much smaller, blue-skinned Klym, and when they stepped through the gatehouse, he muttered, “I thought you were going to let me . . .”

“I’m sorry, Victor, but I’m eager to get home.” Valla offered him a smile, and he couldn’t find the energy to be upset with her.

“War Leader, huh?”

“I thought it explained you the most easily. I could have gone on about your home world or your various feats and accomplishments. I thought of calling you the Champion of Coloss, considering you bested Karnice.”

Victor sputtered, unsure how to react, finally settling on a snort of laughter. He opened his mouth to reply but found his mind drifting away from the conversation as he took in the courtyard beyond the gate; he’d been gone from Fanwath long enough that the various peoples seemed odd to him again—slight, blue Ardeni, lithe Ghelli with their dragonfly wings, tall, proud, red-skinned Shadeni, and here and there, glimpses of rarer species—floating, alien Onaghi, severe, gray, black-eyed Ilyathi, tiny, painted Bogoli, and even a goat-like Cadwalli.

The square was crowded, and everyone seemed cheerful, festive, even. Victor towered over everyone, and though he and Valla were dressed in fine, beautiful armor, he felt they were very out of place wearing it with weapons on display, especially Victor with his glowering helm. Still, he’d been ambushed once too often lately for him to want to remove it, and he didn’t mind that people gave the pair of them a wide berth.

They passed through the market and followed the road, really the only proper street inside the walls that Victor could see, and soon they were approaching the central building, which had to be Fainhallow’s main, original structure. “It’s strange to be back,” Valla said.

“You’ve been here?”

“Oh, yes—not to study, but to see off cousins and pick them up for holidays. Rellia often sent me to see how the ‘softer’ members of our family were living. I’m sure it was meant to teach me some sort of deeper lesson, but all it really did was make me resentful.”

“I can see how that might happen,” Victor chuckled, gazing around at the manicured lawns and tall brick and stone buildings constructed in a gothic style, complete with stained glass windows and gargoyles. Clusters of what had to be

students walked here and there, some in gray robes while others were in blue or maroon. As Victor and Valla approached the big open hallway leading into the main building, students hurried out of their way, some stopping to gape openly.

“You’re making your usual impression,” Valla chuckled.

Victor shrugged, admiring the inside of the building as they climbed the steps. He saw great wooden beams, many-colored sprays of light coming from the stained-glass windows, and high chandeliers, large enough to require wrist-sized chains to hold them aloft. The space was bright, cavernous, and full of intriguing art, from tapestries to portraits, but before he could take the time to really look at them, a loud, commanding voice coming from somewhere around his knees got him to look down.

“Pardon me! I didn’t know we were expecting dignitaries today!” A white-painted Bogoli, no more than three feet tall, wearing silky black robes, stood looking up at them with blue, crystal-like eyes.

“Hello,” Valla said. “We weren’t planning this visit; a world portal we traversed opened onto your platform across the chasm.”

“Ah! Well, I’m Professor Yunsha. I can help you, or,” she glanced searchingly up at Victor, a strange expression in her eyes, “was there someone else you sought to speak with?”

“No,” Valla said. “We just need guidance on the fastest way down to Persi Gables. Do you have any active portals?”

Yunsha held a thumb to her chin, thinking. After a moment, she scowled and waved away a pair of Ghelli wearing blue robes, “Get to class, you two! Haven’t you been mixed up with enough excitement lately, Adaida?”

“Apologies, professor,” the auburn-haired, pale young woman said, ducking her head. Victor thought she was very beautiful, but something about her looked strange; her skin was wan, and her eyes seemed almost haunted, despite their bright, amber color. She stared up at Victor, her expression hard to read, but he swore he saw something like puzzled recognition there. The other woman, slightly taller, with blonde hair, grabbed hold of Adaida’s elbow and pulled her away, deeper into the building, glancing over her shoulder with a sharp scowl at Yunsha.

“As I was saying, the only portal open at the moment is the one to the new human colony. I could send missives to some of the noble families in Persi Gables to ask if they’d be willing to open . . .”

“What colony?” Victor interrupted, his voice rumbling in an unintentional growl.

“Oh, the humans. They’re new to Fanwath. One of them is a student here—quite gifted. She’s off investigating some trouble down by Persi Gables. In any case,

she and some others of her kind have set up a portal here that leads back to their settlement.”

“Humans?” Victor repeated. Valla had gone quiet, her eyes narrowed, turning to look at Victor with an expression he couldn’t read.

“That’s what I said. Are you familiar with them? I believe they’ve had some small dealings with Gelica and Persi Gables and some frontier towns, of course.”

“How did they get here?” Victor was struggling to process the information, struggling to make sense of the strange little woman’s words.

“Oh goodness! Are we to stand in this hallway all day while I fill you in on these matters? Is it so important to you?” Her frown softened as she took in Victor’s expression and glanced over his figure, from his armor to his axe, to his enormous size. “I apologize, sir.” She turned back to Valla, “I’d invite you to sit in my office so we could speak more comfortably, but your friend would struggle with the furniture. Perhaps we could walk about the grounds? There’s a lovely fountain with a spacious bench not far away.”

“That sounds nice, Professor, and yes, this matter is quite important to my friend here.”

“Very well,” she said, striding around Victor and Valla and leading the way down the steps. “Follow me, and we’ll talk away from these crowds.”

Victor had to move slowly to keep from walking over or past the little woman, but he suffered through it, waiting for news about something he’d never thought to hear; humans were on Fanwath? The little Bogoli lady led them down a side path between two more big stone buildings, and then they walked out over a manicured lawn toward a wrought iron gate that opened into a garden. Few students were around, at least at that time of day, and Yunsha began to speak again as they walked among the flowering shrubs.

“Humans came to Fanwath through the blackness of space from a world called Earth. They traveled on ships of technology. I’m not sure exactly when they first settled down in the frontier, but it must be nearly two years ago by now. One of them, Olivia Bennet, is a student here, and . . .”

“Say that again?” Victor squatted down so he could look the woman in her gem-like eyes, and his voice was thick and intense.

She shrank back from him but repeated, “Olivia Bennet is a student . . .”

“Is this a fucking joke?” Victor stood up and shoved his fists against his head, staring at the sky, his eyes suddenly filled with water.

“What is it, Victor?” Valla asked.

“Bennet. It was my mom’s last name. Before she married my dad.”

“Are you saying . . .” Yunsha backed up, her eyes wide and her mouth twisting in a strange expression between shock and embarrassment, “I’m sorry, sir, but are you a human?”

Victor snorted and turned, wanting to walk away, wanting to find a quiet place to think before he lost his temper and did something stupid. Was he human? The question hurt more than it should, but only because it was something he’d been wondering, too. Meanwhile, his mind was racing, trying to connect some dots he couldn’t quite see. Bennet was his mom’s last name, but he couldn’t think of any cousins or aunts named Olivia. Could he? He traced his thoughts over the people in his memory, over his mom’s sisters, her brother, and his wife, all of their kids, but he couldn’t find anyone named Olivia.

He felt a gentle hand grasp his wrist, and he stopped walking and looked down at Valla. Suddenly his temper and his desire to retreat seemed stupid. This was a friend who cared about him and wanted to help. And before him was a chance to get some more answers. He nodded, forcing a smile, and turned back toward Yunsha, who still stood where he’d left her in front of a lovely peach-colored flower bush. He walked back to her.

“Yes, Yunsha,” he said, again squatting to look at her more directly, “I’m a human, but I have a strong Titanic bloodline. Can you tell me about Olivia? About the humans? They came here through space? I don’t get it—only a few astronauts were going into space when I left Earth. Some private companies were starting to build some kind of giant ship in orbit . . . I can’t remember what it was called. I didn’t pay attention; it was supposed to take decades.”

“How long have you been away, sir?” Yunsha was clearly uncomfortable having a giant man squatting before her, but she must have seen he wasn’t angry, only desperately interested, so she bravely smiled as he answered.

“I’m not sure. Eight months? A year? More? I’ve spent a lot of time traveling, fighting, and being a captive, so it’s all a blur. I think it was summertime when I first arrived, though. I was summoned by an asshole down in Persi Gables . . . he had some material!” Victor looked at Valla, “Could he have summoned me with something from Olivia Bennet?”

“Quite possibly!” Yunsha said, answering for Valla.

“You say your mother shared Olivia’s surname?”

“Yeah, but, like I said, I don’t know an Olivia . . . and there weren’t spaceships full of humans flying around the galaxy . . .” He stood up and grasped his head again, then he looked at Valla, his eyes widened in panic, and his voice rose in pained confusion, “Jesus, Valla, am I from the past?”