

Victor BK5: Ch2

Book 5: Chapter 2: Contracts and Conclusions

“From the past?” Valla frowned, but Victor could see in her eyes that she was starting to connect the dots. “You mean, the humans here could be from your world but from a different time. Or, more accurately, you’re from a different time?”

“Could that happen?” he asked, glancing from Valla’s narrowed eyes down to Professor Yunsha.

“I . . .” Yunsha gently tapped her white-painted chin. “You were summoned?” Victor nodded, and she continued, “I’m not an expert on summoning magic, but using Energy to breach great distances could be tuned to also stretch through time. I’ve read texts from more advanced worlds where such things occurred—civilizations on the brink of disaster reaching back through time to pull forth a great hero. I was studying temporal paradoxes at the time, and it was a case study. If I recall, the author was of the opinion that a new timeline was created at the moment of the summoning . . .”

“I can’t concentrate on a lesson right now,” Victor growled, stood to his feet, and began to pace again. He wanted to rub at his hair, so he yanked off his helm and stored it away. “Valla, can you remember exactly what Rellia’s investigator said about the material used to summon me?”

“Let me see,” Valla said, bringing forth one of her notebooks. “I have the messages and notes from Rellia here.” She spent a few moments flipping through the pages and then said, “Aha! Originally, we simply knew that you were summoned using material from a ‘particularly gifted student at Fainhallow.’ It was later, though, when we questioned Boaegh’s cabal member that we learned he was first hired by Lord ap’Gravin.”

“Ap’Gravin?” Yunsha’s voice rose in disbelief or surprise; Victor wasn’t sure which.

“That’s right. Do you know him? He’s quite influential in this part of the Empire.” Valla turned to look more directly at Yunsha, awaiting an answer.

“Lord ap’Gravin, no. It’s his son that I’m quite familiar with—Professor ap’Gravin.”

At Yunsha’s words, Victor felt a surge of heat in his Core, felt his pathways begin to fill with rage-attuned Energy and his control over his aura slipped as he whirled to face the diminutive woman with a growl. “One of your fucking professors is responsible for yanking me from my world?”

Yunsha blanched. She stumbled back a few steps, and a shimmering, egg-shaped shell of crystalline Energy formed around her, not entirely transparent, but clear enough for Victor to see her blazing

gem-like eyes and her lips moving as she spoke, “Contain yourself, sir! I don’t wish to raise an alarm, but if you intend violence, you’ll find that we at Fainhallow are not easy victims!”

Victor growled, slowly reaching for Lifedrinker’s haft, but he felt Valla move to stand next to him, and he took several deep breaths, trying to think of the right way to proceed. Attacking this little woman and all of Fainhallow by proxy didn’t seem wise or warranted. “I’m not looking to fight a bunch of teachers and students, but I need to see this ap’Gravin guy.”

“I can understand why, but I must speak to the Director and the Heads of Class. We must proceed delicately, for if ap’Gravin is guilty of what you imply, he will likely attempt to flee or prepare a defense for your accusations. Will you trust me enough to give me one night to seek counsel from those more knowledgeable than myself?”

“I think that’s fair, Victor.” Valla reached to grasp his wrist, the one resting on Lifedrinker’s haft.

“It sounds fair, but how do I know this woman isn’t ap’Gravin’s friend or accomplice?”

“Easily,” she said, and suddenly the crystalline Energy shell fell away in a shower of glittering motes, and she produced a book and a quill. “I’ll write a binding contract. If I warn the professor or his lackeys, I’ll suffer Energy death. That’s how much my word is worth. In return, I ask that you agree to avoid violence in this academy.”

“For how long?” Victor lifted his hand from Lifedrinker and folded his massive arms over his chest.

“Indefinitely. . .”

“No. I’ll agree to remain peaceful for two days. If I don’t get some answers before that time is up, then I’m going to take matters into my own hands.”

“Victor . . .” Valla started to say, but Yunsha interrupted her.

“Very well. I think that’s reasonable. We’ll put a two-day limit on this contract.” She nodded and began rapidly scribbling out some runes and words on a blank page of her notebook, shimmery Energy flashing with each quill stroke. Victor worked to cool himself down as she wrote, pushing his rage-attuned Energy back into his Core and laboriously gathering up his aura and pulling it tight. He saw a crease between Yunsha’s eyes where she’d been scowling, slowly relax, but her makeup was indented from the intense expression.

“Thank you,” Valla sighed, giving his wrist another squeeze.

“There we are,” Yunsha said, ripping the page from her notebook. “I’ve already bonded with the contract. It only needs you to do the same.”

“This is a System-binding contract?” Valla asked, reaching to take the page.

“It is. Feel free to examine it for duplicity. I was transparent in my wording.”

Valla scrutinized the page, then said, “Victor, it says that you won’t initiate any hostilities within the walls of Fainhallow until this time, two days hence. Yunsha has agreed to seek counsel about ap’Gravin and to bring you answers without alerting him in the same amount of time.”

“Here.” Victor held out a hand, and Valla passed him the contract. He looked it over and saw many magical runes that meant nothing to him mixed in with clear, easy-to-read words. What he could read was precisely what Valla had said. He nodded and trickled some Energy into the paper.

Alert! You are entering into a binding contract with Professor Yunsha of Fainhallow. Should either of you fail to uphold your agreement, you will suffer Energy atrophy that will lead to your slow decline and death. Do you wish to continue? YES/NO.

He studied the wording of Yunsha’s contract again, trying to see any duplicity, but she’d specifically said he wouldn’t “initiate” any violence, she’d given the contract a two-day limit, and she’d bound herself to it. He shrugged and selected the yes option. The page flared brightly for a moment with the same silvery Energy Yunsha had used to inscribe it.

“Would you like to hold it, or shall I?” she asked.

“Let’s have Valla hold it.” Victor passed the contract to his friend, and she smiled, tucking it away in a dimensional container.

“Thank you for your patience and for agreeing to the binding contract, Victor. Would you two like to stay in the academy, or would you prefer the inn down by the square? It’s a nice facility with many suites—most visiting families get rooms there when they come to Fainhallow.”

Victor looked around the garden, over the hedges, at the big gray buildings with their fancy, gothic architecture, and he thought about all the students wandering around. He liked the place fine, but he didn’t really feel like having magical nerds ogling him while he hung around trying to figure out the mystery of his origins. He cleared his throat and said, “We’ll get a room down in the market. By the way, when’s the next airship to Persi Gables?”

“That’s a good question, and I’m sorry, but I don’t have the answer. If you ask at the inn, I’m sure the innkeeper will be able to find out if any supply ships are inbound or leaving soon. Now, would you mind if we walked back toward the main road? I’d like to start trying to get to the bottom of this little mystery.”

Yunsha gestured toward the path leading to the central academy.

“All right,” Victor said, taking the lead. He heard Valla and Yunsha speaking quietly behind him but tuned them out. He was irritated that he’d come upon this barrier with regard to finding answers about himself, but, on the other hand, he was also glad that he’d managed to control himself and had a substantial lead. Even if this Professor ap’Gravin didn’t give him the answers he wanted, he knew

how to find his father, and Victor wasn't afraid to break some noble heads if he had to. He'd feel a lot better about that than rampaging through a school.

He paused at the garden gates while a group of young women, all wearing gray robes, hurried past, giving him alarmed glances and tittering as they scurried down the path as though they'd just witnessed something startling and crazy. He sighed heavily, looking down at his glittering wyrm-scale shirt, at his fine boots and pants, all clean, unscuffed, and whole. His armor had repaired itself so rapidly after he'd yanked Karnice's spear out that he didn't think he'd ever really noticed the hole.

Were the students startled because he was an unusual sight or because he was a monstrosity of a man? He frowned, reached up, scratched the stubble on his chin, and continued walking. "I'm going to finish that damn spell tonight," he muttered, taking long strides down the path, listening as Yunsha and Valla's conversation faded even further.

Victor was still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that, possibly, a distant relative of his had been at this school, was still a student there, and that someone had taken some material from her to summon him. What was it? Blood? Hair? He shook his head, aware that he was thinking around the main problem with what he'd learned—the humans had come from a civilization more advanced than his. Did he even want to meet them? If he were honest, he really didn't give a damn about them, except maybe this Olivia person.

"Olivia . . ." Victor frowned as, once again, he tried to run the name through his memory of cousins, aunts—anyone. He shook his head as he came up with no answers again. Then, as he stepped off the garden path and onto the main road, his mind wandered to his abuela, and he had to lean over, his hands on his knees, as a thought occurred to him: if he was from the past, then his abuela was surely long dead and buried. She'd been old in Victor's time . . ."

"Victor?" Valla asked, resting a hand on his shoulder and looking into his eyes. In his position, leaning over, they were almost on a level, eye to eye.

"My abuela," he said, his words thick with emotion, and reached up to rub at his eyes. Valla stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his big neck, pulling his chin toward her shoulder. She gently stroked the back of his head, brushing her hand over his thick, black hair again and again.

He was aware of the scene he was causing, a giant weeping man being consoled at the edge of the busy street, but he didn't give a shit. All the time he'd been lost, fighting for his life, then, later, exploring worlds and fighting in arenas, he'd held a glimmer of hope in the back of his mind that he might see his grandma again. "Hush, Victor, it's okay. We don't know anything yet."

"I can feel it, Valla. I think I'm right. My abuelita . . ." his words choked off as his throat grew thick again.

"Come," she said, still stroking his head. Dimly he was aware that Yunsha was standing to the side, a frown of concern on her face, but he ignored her. Valla

kept speaking, "If you were summoned from the past, why not your gran? It's possible! Think about it!"

"I . . ." Victor sniffed, then straightened; his back was getting a kink in it from leaning over so long. He rubbed his forearm over his nose, "I guess that's something to think about." He looked around, his eyes a little bleary, and saw many students begin moving, talking in hushed voices as they scurried this way or that.

"You should head down to the square and get a room, sir," Yunsha said. "Word will be all over the academy soon about your . . . presence, and it's best if people simply don't know who you are."

"Yeah," Victor sniffed again, then he held out his hand, immeasurably comforted and relieved when Valla took it, and they began to walk away from the academy proper toward the merchant square. "Thanks, Valla."

"You're welcome. You aren't alone, you know. Many people in this world care about you. Now that you're back, you could try visiting with your Old Mother and Thayla. I mean with your spirit magic."

"Hey," Victor said, his mood suddenly lifting, "that's a damn good idea! Thanks."

She gave his hand a squeeze and replied, "Of course. There are more, too. Lam, her little lieutenant, what was her name . . . Edeya? I met with her a few times before I came out to the plains to find you."

"Yeah, that's right." Victor nodded and spoke with more conviction, "Let's go to Persi Gables as soon as possible, all right? I don't want to go to the human colony wherever it is. Not yet. We've got work to do, and I feel like . . . I don't know; it will be too much of a distraction. How long have we got until we're supposed to start marching?"

"A matter of weeks. Less than a month. Rellia's last missive to me sounded strained; she grows worried we won't return in time."

"She doesn't have to worry. We'll make it, and then we'll kick some ass in the Untamed Marches. First, we need to talk to this asshole professor, though."

Valla laughed and said, "There's the old Victor." They'd rounded the corner and entered the market square again. Colorful stands and carts crowded the area, leaving a narrow roadway for vehicles and people to traverse, and Valla called out to a woman operating a table covered with wax products from soap to candles and asked, "Excuse me, would you mind pointing us toward the inn?"

"Oh, surely," the white-haired, matronly Ardeni said. "You and your large friend will find it across the square. See that tall, stone-and-mortar building with the high gabled roof? The one with the green banner out front? It's the inn. Tell

Innkeeper Ranel that Yallie ap'Hira sent you. He'll make sure you get a good room."

"Thank you, madam ap'Hira," Valla said, ducking her head, then she tugged on Victor's hand and pulled him through the market square, deftly avoiding the crowds, and soon they approached the indicated building. Up close, Victor could see the green banner flapping in the mountain air more clearly; it was embroidered with a golden-scaled serpent but no words. He followed Valla up the steps and, ducking deeply, stepped under the lintel.

The inn's common area was spacious, with many wooden picnic-style tables and a cold, stone hearth. At that time of day, only a few patrons sat on stools or at tables, and Valla walked straight up to the long wooden bar. A burly black-haired Shadeni leaned forward, elbows on the bar, and let out a low whistle, his big, ruby-red eyes wide. "Welcome! I'm afraid I've no beds to fit you, sir."

"Just some blankets and pillows then," Victor grunted, having thought about this problem in advance.

"Of course, of course. Will you both be needing a room?"

"Yes. Just one. My friend is weary of being stared at, and we're both tired from our journey. Here." Valla tossed a small sack of beads on the counter. "Please show us to our room and bring us up a generous portion of your dinner menu."

"Yes, ma'am! I've a room just at the top of the stairs; follow me." He snatched up Valla's purse, then hurried out from around the bar and started for the stairway at the far side of the room. Valla followed, still clutching Victor's hand, and he couldn't help the warm feeling in his heart and the smile that touched his lips when he thought about how she was trying to take care of him. Had he made that big of a scene back at the academy? He supposed he had.

The inn had a high ceiling, and Victor could stand straight as he made his way to the stairs, though he had to carefully avoid a hanging light fixture halfway. He had to duck at the top of the stairs and in the short hallway, too, but when he stooped through the door to their room, he found the ceiling was high enough to allow him to stand, if barely. The room was simple, though spacious and neat, with a large bed covered in fresh, pale-yellow linens and a trunk against the wall under the window. Other than that, it was empty, which was fine with Victor—more room for him to camp out on the floor.

"Bathroom?" Valla asked as the innkeeper held open the door.

"Just down the hall betwixt this room and the next. There's another across the hall if it's occupied." He stood back, craning his neck to observe Victor as he walked into the room. "I, uh, I'll make sure one of my serving lads brings up a lot of food, and I've got a girl doing laundry as we speak; she'll bring you a few blankets and pillows."

“Good.” Valla nodded. “Thank you, sir. We’ll be fine for now.” She hovered until the innkeeper nodded and began to back out. “I’ll let you know should we need anything more.”

Victor heard the door click shut, then turned and said, “I guess I really need to finish learning that spell. There aren’t giants in this world, and I’m sick of standing out. Can you imagine if I cast my Titanic Aspect spell?” He chuckled.

“You’re all right, Victor. If you learn and use it, that would be fine, but if you don’t, it’s fine, too. You have power that few in this world could imagine. People will accommodate you when they learn about you.”

“Yeah,” Victor sighed, sitting down, folding his legs under himself. “I guess that’s true, but I’d like the option anyway.” He pulled out his notes—pages and pages of copied spell patterns and Tes’s original—and said, “I’m going to get started. Thanks for everything today, Valla. I mean,” he looked up and met her eyes as she walked away from the door and stood before him, “I’m so damn glad you were with me when I learned that shit today.”

“I’m glad too, Victor.” She folded her legs and sat before him, a few inches past his mess of papers. “Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“Hell no.” Victor sniffed, still feeling emotional. “Before you feel you need to say it, I know what you’re thinking—I’m diving into this spell as an excuse to avoid thinking about the other humans and my abuela. I know I’m avoiding it. I have to right now, okay?”

“Okay.” Valla nodded and stared into his eyes, and for the millionth time, Victor stared at them and thought about how damn pretty they were.

“All right, here goes.” He forced a smile, tore his gaze away from those shimmering, depthless teal pools, and started reviewing his notes about Tes’s spell.