

Victor BK5: Ch24

Book 5: Chapter 24: Travel Accommodations

After the skirmish with the Ridonne and his squad of stealthy assassins, everyone, especially Rellia, agreed it would be wise to return to the encampment; her luxurious send-off dinner was canceled. After they'd all reaped their rewards in post-battle Energy, Victor helped the other high-tier members of their party secure the surviving Imperials, gagging, binding, and hobbling them with magical rings and chokers that Rellia produced from one of her storage containers. When that was done, some thirty enemy combatants lay or sat helpless before the carriage, stewing in the blood and fluids of their vanquished comrades.

"Edeya, you and Darro will stand watch over these prisoners while we return to camp and send out an escort to bring them in." Rellia mounted the first step into the coach as though the matter was settled.

"Is that wise?" Victor asked, frowning. "What if the Ridonne returns or whatever sneaky asshole who killed the driver? Nah, I'll wait here with the prisoners, and after your escort picks them up, I'll head into town for some last-minute shopping."

"Shopping?" Lam asked, her wings twitching briefly as she wiped at her face with a damp rag, trying to clean away the remnants of combat.

"Yeah. I need some better accommodations for the trail. You know, a big tent, a bed that fits me, stuff like that. I've got plenty of storage space; I might as well load up."

"I'll stay with him," Valla said, folding her arms and leaning against the carriage.

"And if we're attacked on the way back to camp?" Rellia pressed, moving to stand before Victor, trying to lock eyes with him. "It's clear Borrius was the target . . ."

"The soldiers are dead or captured. The Ridonne ran away, licking his wounds. I think we're fine for the night," Borrius said, enunciating his words in a languorous drawl.

"Are you bored, sir?" Rellia scoffed. "Was this bloodbath too small to garner your attention?"

"Not bored, but this is hardly the first time someone has tried to assassinate me, either. Come, Rellia, let's return to camp. We've much to discuss." With those words, the matter was settled, and soon Victor and Valla were left alone, standing over the broken soldiers, the stench of shit, guts, and blood heavy in the air. Victor jerked his head, indicating he wanted Valla to follow him, then he moved a dozen yards upwind of the battle site. He folded his arms, watching over the huddled survivors.

“I’m surprised they weren’t tougher,” he said after a while. “There were close to a hundred, all told, and you guys held them off for a long time.”

“Most of them are probably tier-two. Lam is tier-four, and Rellia and I are tier-five. They fought bravely, madly, even, and I believe that’s what the Ridonne was counting on for their success—insane disregard for their own safety. I won’t be surprised to learn that a Mind Caster conditioned these troops to fight to the death. It’s a testament to your ability to evoke fear that you made them break. If the negative effects of your banner are as potent as the positive, then I pity the poor fools.”

“You felt it, huh?”

“When you came close, and that light shone on us, it was as though the battle began anew. My arms didn’t ache, the wind returned to my lungs, and I thirsted for the glory of combat. Then, when you began to maul and slaughter their rear ranks, I couldn’t help but want to reciprocate. Lam and Rellia responded similarly. Let’s not forget to mention those enormous hounds of yours. Ancestors, Victor! They were terrifying!”

“Yeah, things worked out all right. Still, that Ridonne was a lot tougher than I expected to face here on Fanwath. If the Empire is openly moving against us, we might have some trouble ahead.”

“I’m not so sure they are. These men aren’t marked with any Imperial insignia, and the Ridonne was careful to escape. Tell me, do you think he could have kept fighting?”

“I thought he could, yeah.” Victor rubbed at a spot of blood he’d missed on the back of his hand. “Surprised me when he bolted.”

“So, he might be acting in an unsanctioned manner. We can hope, at least.”

Victor stewed on those words for a while, watching the prisoners and occasionally glancing in the direction of the camp. After a while, he got bored and walked over to the nearest of the bound Imperials. He reached down and pulled his gag loose, then asked, “What was the name of that Ridonne?” When no answer was forthcoming from the man, a Shadeni with short, black horns, he tried again, “I already beat his ass. He’s not coming to save you. What was his name?”

“I cannot answer.” The man spat a wad of blood from his battered mouth. He’d lost an arm in the melee and looked to be in great pain.

“I’ll give you a bit of healing if you do.”

“Even if I wanted to, Milord, I cannot. I’ve geas upon geas upon my spirit. I’m doomed as it is.”

“Leave him, Victor. It will take Rellia’s Mind Caster days to unwind the spells binding them—if he can.”

“Huh,” Victor muttered, stuffing the gag back in the soldier’s mouth. He looked up sharply at the sound of approaching riders and, within moments, he and Valla were surrounded by twenty heavily armored legion soldiers, all riding roladii clad in red chainmail barding. The biggest roladii Victor had ever seen was being ridden by none other than Polo Vosh, and when he jumped down, Victor clasped wrists with him, truly glad to see the man’s smiling, furry face. “Polo!”

“Victor! I heard you toused with a Ridonne! It’s all over the camp already.”

“I did! I think I learned a thing or two during our duel; he was skilled with the sword. Have you been holding back on me? I’m asking ‘cause it was a lot more fun than our sparring sessions.”

“Fun!” Valla almost choked on the word.

“Hah! Of course, you’d think it was fun! Tell you what, Legate, when we make camp tomorrow, let’s put what you learned to the test. I’ll do my best to keep it interesting.”

“It’s a deal!” Victor clapped him on the shoulder and then turned, getting ready to summon his Mustang.

“Did you bring me my mount?” Valla asked, looking around.

“What? That great cat? Who would dare approach such a thing? Would it even follow a tether without mauling my roladii?”

“Uvu wouldn’t do that . . .” Valla frowned, her words trailing off, and then she sighed and shrugged. “Maybe he would.”

“Don’t worry. You can ride with me, Valla.” Victor concentrated momentarily and then called forth his mount using glory-attuned Energy. He used only a fraction of the Energy he’d used to summon his five giant coyotes. Still, somehow, he intuitively knew it was enough to bring forth a mighty horse. His intuition served him well—a golden, shimmering puddle of Energy appeared in the trampled grass nearby, bubbling as it grew to the size of a small pool, and then, in an explosion of brilliant golden sparkles, a deep red Mustang burst out of it, bucking wildly as it landed on the flattened grass. It stood on its hind legs and whinnied loudly, golden eyes blazing and hooves sparking as it brought them down before Victor.

“Woah!” Polo said, backing up and laughing with delight. “What creature is this?”

“This is one of my spirit totems. He’s a Mustang, a proud creature from my home world.” Victor reached up, rubbed the horse’s snout, and added, “Hey there, guapo. What a good boy. Ready to run?”

“Is that his name? Handsome?” Valla stepped up next to him, gently stroking the horse’s shoulder and then tousling his thick dark-red mane.

“Well, nah, I just think he’s a handsome boy. Don’t you? I don’t think he cares for a name. My coyotes surely don’t.” The Mustang nuzzled Victor’s shoulder, snorting hot breath into his neck, and he laughed, pushing the horse’s snout away. “Come on,” he said, stepping to the side and easily pulling himself onto the horse’s bare back, gripping his mane to steady himself. “He’s tough, don’t worry.” He reached down a hand, and when Valla took it, he swung her up onto the horse behind him. “See you soon, Polo!”

As Polo waved and hollered his farewell, Victor urged the Mustang to run, and then they were off, ripping through the tall grass as he’d never done before. Thistle was fast, but it soon became apparent that he couldn’t hold a candle to the Mustang. Valla whooped with delight and wrapped her arms around his waist, squeezing tightly. Thankfully, both she and Victor had plenty of experience riding on the backs of galloping mounts, and there was definitely something magical about the creature because the ride was remarkably smooth, even without riding tack.

Victor leaned forward, his hands grasping the Mustang’s mane, his cheek next to the animal’s neck as they rhythmically rose and fell with the horse’s gallop. Valla, in turn, held tight to his sides, leaning forward against his back, and Victor decided he liked that feeling a lot and began to wish he wasn’t wearing his thick wyrm-scale armor. Pushing those thoughts aside, he pressed his face into the wind and couldn’t help the joyful howl that escaped his lips while they raced over the plains. The Mustang’s hooves sparked against the ground with magical Energy, leaving a trail of golden motes in their passage, and he grinned, imagining what anyone seeing them from a distance would think of the display.

The carriage had been attacked roughly halfway between the army encampment and Persi Gables, and, at the speed his Mustang raced, the ride to the city only took a dozen minutes or so. When they leaped the berm up to the cobbled road that approached the gates, Victor heard Valla whoop again with excitement. The trees lining the road blurred past, and the gates rapidly grew large before them. He willed the horse to slow, and it did, responding far better than any trained mount might; it was a part of him, after all.

When the guards saw Victor and Valla behind him, they waved them through, but not without boosting Victor’s ego a bit with some compliments on his mount and the proud stately manner with which it pranced over the cobbles. Valla laughed as they bounced up and down, and the horse’s hooves clattered and sparked against the cobbles. The beast arched its neck, snorting and flashing those bright, golden eyes. Victor beamed, of course, too pleased to even consider attempting to act nonchalant.

Once through the gates, he turned over his shoulder to look at Valla. They’d both spent some time washing blood from their faces, and, in the process, her hair had come undone from her usual tightly-bound style. After the Mustang’s sprint over the plains, her shoulder-length aqua locks were

wild-looking, feathered back, and wavy. Her face was flushed with excitement, darkening the pale blue of her cheeks and giving her an eager, pleasant demeanor. While he looked at her, she rubbed at her left eye with the back of her hand, brushing away some moisture the whipping wind had teased out. “Where to?”

“You’re the one who wanted to shop!”

“Well, yeah, but I want to go someplace new. Any recommendations? I mostly want a tent like yours, one that gets larger as you unfold it. I guess I want some furnishings too.”

“Head to the fountain square. It’s on the way to the noble district. I know just the place.”

“You like the horse?” Victor asked, slapping his hand against the bay’s muscular shoulder.

“I’ve never run so fast! Even when Uvu sprints . . .” she shook her head and laughed, “No! I won’t denigrate poor Uvu, but let’s just say that ride was more than spectacular!”

“Yeah,” Victor clicked his tongue, willing the Mustang to get moving, and it followed his intent perfectly, “it was, wasn’t it?” Ten minutes later, they were in a shop called Chori’s Emporium, and Victor was browsing the shelves, looking at all the wonderful, weird things that Chori the Artificer had crafted and put out for sale. While he shopped, he was struck by the fact that he’d intended to shop around stores like this from the first day he’d escaped the dungeon near Greatbone Mine and visited Steampool Vale.

He’d done a little shopping here and there, sure, but always with the goal in mind of getting something he needed. Then he’d move on and say to himself, “I’ll come back.” He never did, though. One goal, one crisis, and one unplanned trip led to another, and he never really got to enjoy the idea of picking up something he liked. The last time he remembered doing that, really buying something that struck his fancy, was when he’d purchased the wagon with Thayla. “And then I gave it away.” He chuckled, shaking his head ruefully.

“What’s that?” Valla asked. She’d been browsing on the opposite side of the rack, looking at magical birdfeeders while Victor examined wondrous little brass and copper, Energy-driven appliances meant for use on the trail—stoves, teapots, lanterns, water dispensers with tanks enchanted by dimensional magic, and even self-cleaning pots and pans.

“Just thinking about that cool little wagon I gave away to Thayla and Deyni. It was big inside, like a little cabin. I remember thinking about how neat it would be to fix it up, you know, decorate it, fill it with my treasures, books, art, and even trophies. I never even got started.”

“You’re far richer now than you were back then, Victor. Why not buy a proper travel home? Why do you think I brought you here?”

“Huh? I thought you brought me here to get a tent like yours.”

“My tent is lovely, and I appreciate the gesture Rellia made when she gifted it to me, but I was a girl, going off to be in the Legion. You’re a Legate, arguably one of the most powerful men in this world. Let’s get you some accommodations that are worthy of your status.” She glanced to the back of the shop where the little Cadwalli woman, Chori, sat atop a tall stool. “Chori?”

“Mmhhh? Yes, Miss ap’Yensha?”

“She’s always seen me as a girl; Rellia used to bring me here to shop when I was too young to ship off to war,” Valla said behind her hand, then raised her voice and replied, “Can you help my friend here with a more significant purchase?”

“Something special? Come closer, then.”

“Come on.” Valla gestured toward the counter, saw Victor’s lingering gaze on the camping appliances, and added, “You can stock up on that stuff afterward.”

“Right.” Victor nodded and followed her over to the counter; he’d reduced his size significantly before entering the shop, but he still felt too large, squeezing between the crowded sales racks and shelves. “You’ve a lot of wares,” he said by way of greeting.

“Aye, big man. Been crafting goods for decades and decades, and my father before me. Still have many of his wares lying about. Some of the better ones—don’t ask me which. So, tell me, something significant, hmm? Seeking a travel lodging?” Even for a Cadwalli, she was small, probably only four feet tall if she weren’t on the stool. Her goat-like features were quite pronounced, from her fuzzy snout to the weird red and yellow irises in her over-large eyes. She pronounced some words with a strange warble and moved carefully, each gesture precise.

“Victor is the leader of Rellia ap’Yensha’s army, the one she’s been forming out on the plains. He needs travel lodgings suitable for a Legate and a great adventurer.”

“Oh? Well, then, you should have said so sooner! Come with me.” Chori slid off the stool and motioned for Valla and Victor to follow her behind the counter and through the rear door. “My travel homes are in the next room; it’s something of a showcase.”

“We should hurry, Valla,” Victor said, suddenly struck by guilt. Should he be shopping around in Persi Gables while the Ridonne conspired against his army? Shouldn’t he be there in case the army was attacked? Who else could stand against those weird, powerful Imperials?

“We’ll ride your Mostrang back; it’ll hardly take a few minutes.”

“Mostrang? He’s a Mustang, Valla!” Victor laughed, shaking his head.

“Excuse me!” Valla feigned a look of outrage. “How many names have you butchered? I hardly ever corrected you!”

“Yeah, you got me there.” Victor gave her a nudge, urging her forward through the swinging wooden door. She went through, and he followed to find they’d entered a room that seemed too large for the structure that housed the shop. The ceiling had to be thirty feet high, and the walls of the square room were twice that in length. The ground crunched as he stepped in, and Victor saw it was covered in loose, pale, cream-colored gravel. Shelves lined the wall to his right, dozens of objects filling them. Some were small, literally resembling matchboxes, and others were bulky, like large, boxy backpacks.

Chori stopped ahead of him, her hooves sinking into the gravel so the hem of her navy-blue smock brushed the ground. She turned to Valla and asked, “Does he want something easy to carry or something bulkier? He’ll have servants, no? Don’t those Legates have dozens of underlings to order about?”

“He’ll want something easy to carry,” Victor answered, done having Valla speak for him. “He’s not planning to spend the rest of his life as a Legate.”

“Oh, clever one, is he?” Chori winked at Valla, then walked over to the shelves, bypassing the backpacks, satchels, larger boxes, and wheeled contraptions that resembled medieval rolling suitcases. She paused before a shelf lined with smaller boxes, some that might fit in the palm of his hand, ranging to the size of a shoebox. She looked over her shoulder, narrowed her eyes at Victor, and asked, “Budget?”

Victor thought about the treasure he’d yet to go through in Karnice’s ring, the treasure he’d accumulated in Coloss and, even before that, from Boaegh and ap’Horrin. He shrugged and said, “Money’s not a concern.”

“Well, then,” Chori picked up a shallow, green stone box about two inches by four and carried it over to him. “I have a lovely leather case for this that will fit comfortably on your belt.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a travel home. I’m ashamed to say that My father crafted this one. It’s been here many a year, waiting for the right buyer. He traveled to Tharcray to learn his craft. Did you know that?” She directed the question at Valla.

“Um, no, I don’t think I did.”

“Yes. While there, in order to graduate from the Vessi-Ridonne Artificing Academy, he had to prove his skill. This was his performance project, his proof of competency.”

“Vessi-Ridonne?” Victor asked, unsettled by the reminder of his recent troubles.

“The Vessi bloodline is extinct. They were the Ardeni equivalent of the Ridonne,” Valla said, shrugging.

“Only Shadeni can be Ridonne?”

“That’s right,” Chori said, “Though I think they’re extinct too. I only ever hear rumors. Have you ever met someone who’s seen one?”

“I, uh . . .”

“Good question, Chori,” Valla laughed, interrupting Victor and saving him the trouble of explaining how he’d just done battle with one.

“Anyway, to graduate, my father crafted this. We haven’t sold it because it’s made from Whel Jade.”

“Well jade?” Victor frowned.

“Whel,” Chori repeated, enunciating the first part of the word heavily so Victor could hear the h. “It comes from the world of Whel, distant from Fanwath, carried here by a rare traveler to Tharcray. My father bought it at auction, nearly bankrupting his family. He says it was worth it because this treasure he crafted won him top honors from the academy, and he made back his fortune a dozen times over the years.”

“Okay, so why can’t you sell it?”

“Oh, I didn’t say we can’t sell it. We haven’t sold it. It’s very dense material and holds more Energy than any ore on Fanwath; I’d only part with it for the right price and for the right person. I’ve turned away a buyer or two in my day.” She set the little box down in the gravel a dozen feet from Victor and Valla, and then she tapped it lightly with her pointer finger. The box began to rattle on the stones, then hopped, and when it settled, it was twice as big. It rattled again, jumped, and then it was the size of a trunk. This repeated several times, and the box grew each time until, with a final rattling thump that shook the building, it

rested before the trio, a jade-green rectangular box the size of a single-wide trailer.

“Woah . . .” Victor began, but the jade structure flared brightly, limned for a brief moment in luminous green Energy, and steps with a railing sprouted from the side, windows, complete with shutters, formed in the walls, and a doorway came into being, all crafted from a reddish-brown, satin-smooth wood. Victor saw glass in the windows, but they were opaque, faintly green, and shimmering in a way that reflected any attempts to peer through.

“The space within is four times that of the exterior, and there is a second level below ground just as large,” Chori said proudly. “Currently, it’s partially furnished, but I can remove the objects within if you’d like to install your own belongings.”

“Does that mean you’d sell it to me?” Victor asked, his voice betraying his enthusiasm.

Chori looked at Victor for a long while, then she looked at Valla, and a certain sort of lightness entered her expression, a kind, almost fond expression. She nodded quickly and replied in a soft, faintly tremulous voice, “I would sell to you, aye. Shall we talk about the price?”