

Victor BK5: Ch4

Book 5: Chapter 4: A Night at the Tavern

“Holy shit,” Victor muttered, swiping away the System message. “I gained two levels for learning that spell.”

“You gained two . . .” Valla sighed and then, shaking her head ruefully, laughed. “You’re charmed, Victor. I’ve never heard of anyone moving through tier four as fast as you have. Of course, I’ve never seen Energy motes like those before, either.”

“Well, I’m not complaining.” He winked at Valla, then stretched left and right, twisting his torso as though he had a kink. “I feel great; how couldn’t I after that Energy boost? But I was sitting around on the floor too much today.”

“Huh. I know people who don’t use furniture at all; they sit on the ground for meals, sleep on mats . . .”

“Yeah, yeah,” Victor chuckled, “I’m just not used to it, all right?”

“Well, you’ll fit in the bed now . . .”

“Oh! I should get us a room with two or maybe a second room, huh?”

“Nonsense! It’s a big bed, and I’m sure we know each other well enough not to worry about propriety by now.”

“Right. Propriety . . .” Victor looked down at himself, at his clothes, all of which had shrunk to fit him, then he bent to pick up Lifedrinker in her harness. He slung the straps over his shoulders, as usual, and they constricted to fit him nicely. Lifedrinker still hung beneath his right arm well enough, though her handle was a good deal closer to scraping the ground. “It’s not like I’m small now, but you didn’t shrink at all, did you, beautiful?”

“I like you better when you’re full of might and rage. You seem meek now!”

“I seem meek?” Victor asked, outraged.

“Your aura is smaller, lighter! I know you did this to yourself, or I’d be thirsting for the villain’s blood!”

Victor was torn between amusement and embarrassment at Lifedrinker’s admonishment. He glanced at Valla, and she looked at him with that strange, skeptical expression people took on when he spoke to his axe, offering no help at all. He gently rubbed Lifedrinker’s shiny metal head and said, “I’m fine, chica. I can end this spell anytime I want, and then all the Energy I’m tying up to change myself will flood back into me.”

“Did you learn this magic for deception? At times it is wise to keep your enemies ignorant of the length of your fangs. In that case, I approve.”

“Thank you,” Victor chuckled, then looked at Valla and shrugged. “I’m not tired, are you? Wanna go down to the common room and have a drink?”

“I’d like that,” Valla nodded, picking up Midnight and wrapping her belt around her waist. She was wearing her typical uniform-style clothes, having taken off her armor earlier in the day when Victor first began to study his spell. He, too, had removed his wyrm-scale vest and didn’t think he’d need it to enjoy a drink or three. He fingered the fine fabric of his gray shirt and decided it was adequate.

“Right. After you,” he said, pulling the door wide and holding it for Valla. She mock curtsied and stepped out, and Victor had to smile—he liked this side of Valla. She’d loosened up with him, and he was seeing it more and more. They made their way down the stairs to the common room, and Victor quickly snagged them an open table near the window. It wasn’t difficult; more than half the tables were vacant.

He fished his little watch out of his pocket, wondering if it would be accurate in Fainhallow—did they have time zones on Fanwath? If they did, would the magic of the watch compensate? In any case, the little device told him it was just after nine at night. Even so, outside the window, in the market square, lights were bright, people were still about, and he even heard music playing. “It’s like a party out there.”

“I imagine students keep the small number of businesses quite busy in the evenings.”

“How many students go to Fainhallow?”

“I’ve no idea, but it must be hundreds. We saw that many just in passing.”

“Right.” Victor looked up as the man who’d brought them their food earlier, the father of the two children Victor had spoiled, approached their table. He wore a quizzical expression and was openly staring at Victor.

“Excuse me . . .”

“Yeah, it’s me, not my smaller brother. I used a spell to make myself more comfortable in your establishment.”

“Amazing, sir!” He ducked his head, then turned to Valla, “Welcome to the Gilded Serpent’s tavern and common area. Would you like to order some food?”

“Just drinks,” Valla said. “We rather enjoyed that frosty ale you served us earlier. We’ll start with a couple of those.”

“Right away!” he said, hurrying to the bar.

Victor leaned back in his seat and enjoyed the sounds and smells of the tavern. More than the pleasant aromas of well-cooked foods, and the distant hum of music, he appreciated the sounds of jovial conversation and laughter. People here were happy; they didn't worry about wars, dungeons, wyrms, or invasions. They did their jobs or studies and then unwound at the end of the day with people they cared about. He could see the appeal in that. Still, he felt he'd get bored after a while. No, he'd tasted a little too much glory and seen what true power looked like; there was no way he'd be willing to give up those pursuits for a quiet life such as these folk lived.

"I think you have an admirer," Valla said, startling him from his reflections.

"Huh?"

"The girl Yunsha chased away in the academy—the pretty auburn-haired Ghelli. See? By the bar?"

Victor followed Valla's gaze to the bar and, sure enough, past a table where a pair of Bogoli argued good-naturedly, he saw her. The pale, dragonfly-winged girl with the silky blue robes leaned against the bar, holding a small glass of liquor and staring directly at him. When their eyes met, she apparently took it for an invitation and began to work her way through the common room toward him and Valla. "Huh. Guess she's coming over."

"Presumptuous," Valla said. Victor glanced at her and saw her sitting up straighter, her face falling into the severe and dead-pan expression she'd worn all the time when he'd first met her.

"Excuse me," the lithe Ghelli said. Her hands were clasped before her, and Victor saw that she was nervously wringing them, waiting for their reaction.

"Uh, yes?" Victor answered. Valla simply sat, stoic and unresponsive.

"Are you, um, forgive me, but are you a human?" With a visible effort, the young woman unclasped her hands and reached up to brush a thick curtain of beautiful hair back away from her face over her left shoulder.

"He is, Ghelli. Is there something amiss?" Valla asked before Victor could respond.

"I'm sorry. Sorry to intrude. I just, well, I'm close with one of your people, a woman from your colony; she studies here, and I was hoping you had word from her. Do you know her? Olivia Bennet?"

"It's not my colony," Victor replied, an unintended growl in his voice. The woman flinched and started to back up a step, so he quickly altered his tone, trying to sound friendly. "Sit down, though. I'd like to hear more about Olivia."

"Oh, thank you," the Ghelli said, carefully pulling back the chair on that side of the table, placing herself between Valla and Victor. She avoided looking directly at Valla the whole while. "My name's Adaida."

"Adaida, huh? Nice to meet you. I'm Victor, and this is Valla."

“Captain Valla.” Before Victor could analyze his friend’s insistence on her title, the barkeep returned with two very frosty mugs of amber-colored ale.

“I didn’t know you had a friend joining you. Would you like something more to drink, miss? I see you left your brandy at the bar . . .”

“Oh, um, no, thank you.” Adaida continued to fiddle with her thick hair, clearly nervous, perhaps because of Valla’s stony-faced silence, perhaps because humans frightened her—Victor had no idea.

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’ll be ‘round to check on your drinks.” He turned to leave, but Victor stopped him.

“Hey. Hold up a sec—what’s your name?”

“Oh, of course, of course. I’m Harl, Lord.” He ducked his head and then hurried away, once again moving as though retreating from a battle.

“Huh. People are skittish around here,” Victor said, turning to Adaida. “Hey.” He thumped his palm on the table and said, “Relax, would you? We’re nice people, aren’t we, Valla?”

“We are,” Valla said, though her face didn’t offer any proof to her words.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try; I honestly haven’t been myself lately. I . . . I used to be more confident.” Adaida moved her hands to the tabletop, and Victor was struck by how thin she was. Her fingers were very slender and pale.

“Have you been ill?” he asked, trying to soften his voice.

“More a sickness of the heart or mind, perhaps. It’s why I came to you, hoping to hear word of Olivia; we didn’t part on the best of terms.” She bit at her lower lip, nervously glancing between Victor and Valla.

“Oh? Well, I don’t have any news of her, but I might see her soon. We’re heading toward Persi Gables, and I have a few questions for her. You want me to pass on a message?”

“Truly?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, I’m not promising anything. We might miss her, but I definitely want to talk to her.” Victor shrugged and took a long pull of his ale, enjoying the cold, crisp drink as it tickled his throat on the way to his stomach. “Damn, that’s good. Drink up, Valla! You sure you don’t want one, Adaida?”

“Can . . . can I ask you something? Weren’t you a lot bigger earlier today? I’m sure I’m not losing my mind, but . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. I was. I learned a pretty cool spell that lets me appear a bit smaller than usual. Makes things like sitting at tables a lot easier.” Victor nodded approvingly as Valla drank from her mug, though he was a little annoyed that she hadn’t joined the conversation at all.

“I thought you looked human, but I didn’t know they could be so large. There’s something more, though, something about your eyes or the expressions you make—I swear you remind me of Olivia. I’ve met a few other humans, and none gave me that impression.”

Finally, Valla broke her silence, “That’s interesting. Still, you remind me of a few Ghelli I’ve met. I doubt it means anything.” Victor closed his mouth, rethinking what he was going to say. Valla was probably right—probably best to keep his possible relation to this Olivia Bennet person to himself for now. What if this Ghelli went to the academy and started blabbing his secrets? What if ap’Gravin found out and ran away before Victor could confront him?

“Right. Of course, it’s nothing.” Adaida nodded.

“Well?” Valla asked.

“Well?” Adaida echoed, her voice small, her tone rising nervously.

“Do you have a message for this Olivia person, should we encounter her?”

“Oh! I do! I, um, I learned how to enchant a Farscribe page. Will you pass it on to her? I’ve already written a note for her at the top. I’m hoping she’ll reply to it.”

“Hey! That’s pretty cool,” Victor said, nodding, then drained the rest of his pint.

“Yes, we will,” Valla said, her stony expression softening slightly.

“Oh, thank you! She was depressed when she returned to the academy after our last break. I wasn’t as understanding as I should have been, and I said some things I regret. It’s been keeping me up at night for weeks. My heart’s just sick . . .” She trailed off, her pale cheeks reddening with embarrassment. “Anyway, here’s the page.” She produced a tightly rolled piece of creme-colored parchment wrapped delicately with a lavender ribbon. Before Victor could reach for it, Valla snatched it and made it disappear into one of her rings.

“I’ll be sure to give it to her if we cross paths. I’m sorry for your heartache, young lady.” This time, Valla’s face really did soften, and she offered the girl a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” Adaida said, sniffing, then she pushed her chair away from the table and, with a deep breath and a forced straightening of her shoulders, she stood up and nodded to Victor, “It was nice to meet you, Victor.” She turned to Valla and said, “Captain Valla.” Then she was winding her way through the tables toward the door.

“That was weird,” Victor said, meaning more than Adaida’s request. He squinted at Valla and said, “You’re always so stern with people you don’t know.”

“Not always . . .”

“Well, definitely with that poor girl. She was just lovesick, I think.” Victor held up his empty mug, hoping to catch someone’s attention.

“Yes, I finally realized that. I was afraid she was snooping—a spy or something else. Should I read her note to Olivia?”

“No!” Victor wasn’t sure why he was so adamant, but he shook his head and repeated, “No. How would you feel? I mean, I know I’m probably no older than that girl, but she seemed so innocent. So naive. She’s clearly led a sheltered life. She reminded me of the girls at my old school.”

“It’s easy to forget you’re so young,” Valla nodded. “You don’t look it. Your face is hard and weathered. Your eyes reflect what you’ve seen; no one looking into them would see a child. Even now, in your . . . reduced state.”

“Hah! My reduced state!” Victor laughed, not just in amusement at Valla’s words but in pleasure as he saw Harl approaching with not two but four mugs of ale.

“You’re a wise man, Harl.”

“Well, I saw how fast that first one went, sir.” He grinned, bowed, and quickly backed away, leaving the four frosty pints on the table.

“Come on, Valla. Keep up,” Victor said, picking up a glass and draining half of it. Valla narrowed her eyes, took a deep breath, then, shaking her head, finished off her first glass. “Now, we need to talk about something important. I’m going to ask Khul Bach and maybe Old Mother some advice, but I’ll hear your take first.”

“Oh? Am I to be held in the same esteem as those great ones?” Valla grinned, her earlier stony expression long gone. She licked at her ale-dampened lips, and Victor felt a familiar, often ignored, warmth in his chest as he observed her.

“Yeah, ‘course you are. So, I’ve got three powerful treasures . . . things I need to use, and I’m trying to decide if I should just bite the bullet and use them all now. I’ve got that racial advancement, the epic one I bought from the warlord, and I’ve got two . . . potent hearts.”

“Two hearts? I thought you burned one for your ancestors!”

“Tes gave me another from the night brute prince. She gave it to me right before your duel, almost like she knew something would go wrong.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. What are your thoughts?” Victor had been speaking in a low tone, hunched close to Valla, and he glanced around the common room, noting that everyone was busily conversing, laughing, and living their own lives. Fainhallow was a different place from Coloss, but he still sort of wished he could block out other people from hearing him the way Tes used to do.

“I don’t know. What rank is your racial advancement up to?”

“Advanced-two.”

“Do you think an epic item is meant to be used when you are in the epic tier? Would it be a waste to use before then?”

“No idea, but that’s a good question for Khul Bach, I bet.”

“As for the hearts, what did Tes say?”

“When she gave me the night brute prince heart, she said to hold onto it until I had ‘gained more strength,’ but I have no idea how much. She also said to eat the wyrm heart first.”

“Well . . . are you feeling pressured to eat them?”

“I guess so. It’s mostly because of the weird blood I got back in that dungeon when I was tier two. I sat on it for months and could have really benefited from it a few times. If I’d had that feat when I fought Rellia . . .” he stopped speaking and frowned. He supposed Valla was the wrong person to talk about the what-ifs of fighting Rellia.

“I understand. Don’t worry,” she said, reaching over the table to grasp the top of his hand. Her fingers were warm and soft, and Victor felt an electric tingle run through his skin. He wanted to react, to turn his hand and grasp her fingers back, but he also didn’t want to do something stupid or scare her off, so he sat there and just enjoyed the feeling, nodding his head.

“Yeah,” he said, his brain slow to form the words he was looking for. “Anyway, I don’t want to wait forever to claim some strength that might help me,” he paused, licked his lips, and added, “or the people I care about.”

“So,” Valla nodded, slowly pulling her hand back, “she said to wait until you were stronger. You’ve gained four levels since then, but she also said to use the wyrm heart first. Why not go ahead with that one and then go from there?”

“I like your logic, Valla. I’ll run it by Khul Bach and maybe Oynalla if I’m not too drunk for a Spirit Walk tonight.” He chuckled and drained his second pint.

“Excuse me,” Harl said, surprising Victor; he hadn’t heard or noticed the barkeep walking up to the table. “You were wondering about airships, sir?”

“Yes!” Victor said, noisily slamming his empty mug onto the table. Was the ale hitting him that hard? It didn’t seem like it should be, not on Fanwath. He frowned as his muddled thoughts tried to make sense of it, then it clicked—he’d severely reduced his overall attributes and potency with his magical alterations. “Sorry about the noise; I’ll slow down on the ale.” He offered Harl a sheepish smile and then turned to include Valla in it. She chuckled and shrugged, sipping from her glass.

“No worries at all, sir. I wanted to tell you that I was just speaking with Master Gan-dak over there,” he gestured toward a table filled with black-robed academy personnel in the far corner and continued, “and he said that a ship is due tomorrow from Gelica, supposed to be dropping off a load of vellum and Mistvine planks for the students to practice with.”

“Oh?” Valla said. “Thank you for the information, Harl, and before he has a chance to say it, please just call him Victor. He loathes having people spoil him with honorifics.”

“I loathe . . .” Victor repeated, trying to figure out if Valla was messing with him.

“Of course, of course,” Harl clasped his hands and sketched a funny little half bow. “Very good, very good.” He nodded happily and turned to walk back to the bar.

“Damn,” Victor said, choosing to ignore Valla’s comment, “Tomorrow’s a bit early. I was hoping to stick around to mess with that ap’Gravin dude.”

“Victor, oh, silly, innocent Victor. We have the means to hire dozens of airships or buy several outright. We could have the captain of this ship wait six months, never mind a few days.” Valla’s smile widened as she moved on to her third ale.

“Huh,” Victor nodded. “You know what? If you keep out drinking me, I’m going to cancel this spell and cast Berserk to boot, and then we’ll see who can handle the most ale.”