

## Victor BK5: Ch5

### Book 5: Chapter 5: Counsel

Victor woke the following morning feeling very rested and relaxed. He stretched, unwinding the soft, white sheet from his torso; he'd somehow gotten quite tangled in the night. He glanced to his right, saw the empty bed, and wondered where Valla had gone. "Probably breakfast," he sighed, arching his back in another stretch.

When he realized he was sleeping in nothing but his underwear, a brief panic rushed through his mind as he scrabbled at the blurry memories of the night before. He laughed at himself as he remembered getting drunk, stumbling upstairs with his friend, and then stripping down and collapsing into the bed. "Nothing to worry about." Talking aloud reminded him of Lifedrinker, and he jerked his head to the side, a wave of relief washing over him as he saw her leaning against the wall next to the bed.

He sat up, swinging his feet to the floor, and yawned again. He was tempted to follow Valla down to the common room, assuming that's where she was, but he decided it was an excellent time to get some conversations in with some other people. He found his pants on the floor, clean, thanks to their enchantments, and pulled them on, along with the loose, comfortable button-up gray shirt he'd been wearing. That done, he went into the hallway and walked down to the bathroom to wash up.

When he returned to the room, Victor locked the door and sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. He turned his wrist to better see the pink gem set in his bracer, then activated it, sending Energy into the stone. As always, the ancestor shard pulled a torrent of Energy from his Core, and Victor felt his surroundings displaced by the weird, grayscale realm that existed in the crystal. Sharp angles changing the gray to white or darker gray were the only features of the strange place. Other than the hulking, brooding giant that sat before him, Victor revised.

"Welcome, scion. It's been long, but I see you've progressed in your hunt for power."

"Hello, Khul Bach." Victor smiled, noting that his "self" in this strange plane was not reduced by the spell he'd confined himself with back in the normal, physical plane. It felt good to be himself, and he wondered if he'd grow to enjoy being a giant of a man more and more the longer he constrained himself with Alter Self. "Did you notice we left Zaafor?"

"We did? No, I had no sensation of the change."

"Well, we're on Fanwath now—the warlord tried to pull some kind of stunt on Valla and me. Even Tes was surprised by him, I think. We had to run, but I'm more determined than ever to go back there someday."

"As you should be, scion. A Titan does not flee from his destiny."

"Right. Speaking of destiny, I came to you for some advice. You remember how I told you about my ancestors' kind of strange habit, you know, eating the hearts of their foes?"

“I do.”

“Well, I have a couple of potent hearts I’m supposed to eat, but I’m not sure I’m ready yet. I also have something called an ‘epic racial boost.’ Should I use that before my race is ‘epic?’”

“Why do you hesitate to consume the hearts?”

“It’s something Tes said. When she gave me one of the hearts, a night brute prince’s heart, she told me to wait until I was ‘stronger’ to eat it. Since then, I’ve gained four levels, but I don’t know if that’s all she meant.”

“Your ability comes from your bloodline, yes?” When Victor nodded, he continued, “I would use that epic racial boost now. To answer your earlier question, it won’t hurt to use it before you have reached the epic tier; you’ll gain a great deal from any sort of treasure of a tier that’s your equal or higher. It’s lower-tiered treasures that would be wasted on you.”

“And the hearts?”

“Once your bloodline has advanced, you may well feel powerful enough to take on the heart Tes warned you about, but why not start with the other?”

“Valla said something similar.”

“So, the small blue friend you told me about is still with you?”

“Yes . . .”

“Good. Gather your allies. Learn from them, form bonds, and lean on one another—you’ll need fellowship to achieve greatness.” Khul Bach nodded to himself, then shifted and asked, “Well? How go the other tasks I set you on? Has your axe skill reached the epic level? Have you made strides with your Sovereign Will?”

“I’ve been using Sovereign Will almost all the time, really only dropping it when I sleep. It’s still only ‘advanced,’ though. As for my axe skill, I’ve practiced a lot, and Karnice, before I killed him, thought it was near epic, which was a surprise to me. I thought I’d be working for years on that, considering what Polo Vosh told me about his own advancement.”

“We each face a journey unique to our own experiences and talents. Is this Polo Vosh a powerful warrior?”

“He’s one of the strongest in this world,” Victor said, then scratched his chin and shrugged. “I mean, I think he is. Really, I’ve never met anyone from the capital, and I got the impression that’s where all the oldest, strongest people live.”

“Very well. If Vosh has more axe skill than you, seek him out, and practice with him. It’s the best way to advance. What are your plans? Do you not have lands to conquer here? Put Vosh in your army!”

“I’ll, uh, try. When I get to Persi Gables, I’ll ask Rellia about him. Well, shit, I guess I could send a message to her or Lam right now. If nothing else, I could pay Polo to travel and practice with me.”

“Yes, leverage your connections and wealth. You’re learning, young warrior.” Khul Bach clapped his big hands, rubbing them together as if to signal the end of the conversation, and said, “You have your tasks. Be about them! Each minute you should be striving to better yourself.”

“Okay,” Victor sighed and shrugged. He didn’t like being dismissed so quickly, but what did he expect? Khul Bach wasn’t his buddy; he didn’t want to sit around talking about feelings or what Victor had for dinner. He supposed that if something were getting in the way of his “advancement,” Khul Bach might take an interest. “Talk to you soon, maybe after I eat all these things, ‘cause I’m close to level fifty, and I might want some advice about my class selection.”

“Good! Until then!” Khul Bach nodded firmly, and Victor severed the connection between his Energy and the stone, bringing the real world back into focus, banishing the ancestor fragment’s odd, sharply angled, gray-white expanse.

“Kinda weird he was rushing me out of there. What’s he do with his time, anyway? You’d think he’d want me to hang around as much as possible.” Victor didn’t know why he was speaking aloud; Lifedrinker still leaned against the wall near the bed, and there was still no sign of Valla. He stood up, summoned his helmet and armor from his ring, and put them on. Then he picked up Lifedrinker and, holding her crossways over his knees, sat down and cast Manifest Spirit, using inspiration-attuned Energy.

His ghostly pack of coyotes shimmered into existence, yipping and growling softly, pacing in a circle around him. “Hello, amigos,” Victor said. “Keep an eye out for me, will you? I’m going on a Spirit Walk. Let’s see if the Old Mother is as clever as always and waits for me.”

As the coyotes continued to pace or sit around him, Victor cast Spirit Walk, and suddenly he was sitting on the bare rocks of the mountains, high above the sprawling plains of the spirit realm. As always, it was twilight there, and the glittering jewels of silvery stars filled the sky, giving him pause as he stood up and turned to look at the strange, shadowy peaks that piled one behind another for as far as he could see to the west.

Victor knew the plains he could see to the east weren’t the same ones that led to Oynalla. No, he instinctively knew that he’d need to go north and find another great grassland before he could travel

to his friends. “Not far for a spirit, though,” he said, breaking into a run, racing down a rocky slope between the mountains, his mind and heart focused on Oynalla.

The mountains blurred past, and occasionally Victor saw bright spirits out there in the shadowy heights, but they avoided him, perhaps sensing his might. He could feel it, himself, the torch of his spirit as it blazed in the starry light of the spirit plane. He was without peer, at least in this part of the plane.

As usual, his journey to Oynalla was quick; soon, the mountains fell away to hills, then he was tearing through grasslands, and before he could grow weary of the joyful freedom of his speedy travel, he found himself in the grove where Oynalla had first taken him. Shadowy canopies hung above him, obscuring the stars. A babbling brook rippled through the center of the hollow, silvery and beautiful, and there, sitting in the grass beside the sandy bank, was the beautiful, young version of Oynalla.

“I’ve waited for you, warrior. It felt long to me, but was it? I think not too long.”

“Oynalla? Old Mother?” Victor asked, approaching her with no small amount of trepidation. Something was different; something was off about her, but he couldn’t quite place his finger on it.

“Hah!” she cackled, and though her voice was youthful, the tone was the same as he’d heard a hundred times while living with Tellen’s clan. “You look confused and troubled. Be not, mighty one. I’m proud of you, Victor. I wondered if you’d return and, if you did, if you’d be the same. I see your spirit is still bright, powerful, but bright. It will give me comfort to know you are still here when I move on.”

“Move on?”

“Is it such a surprise? They didn’t call me Old Mother because I was young and vital!”

Victor hurried forward to crouch before the beautiful, youthful woman. She wore a fringed, beaded vest over leather pants, and something was clutched in her hands, something he’d never seen Oynalla touch in the physical world—a shimmering short bow. “What’s going on? Is Thayla coming?”

“She’s busy, brave one. She has many new responsibilities, but she told me to tell you she’d look for you during the three nights following every new moon. Surely you can find her then?”

“Sure, I can, but why don’t you just bring her?”

“I can see you know the answer, though your mind fights valiantly to hide from it. Come, Victor; you can see the change in me, can you not? I’m not tethered to the physical plane any longer. I waited for you, but after we speak, I’ll be off, moving to my next adventure.”

“You died,” Victor said flatly, falling back to sit on his rump, something like a lump of lead forming in his gut. “Did someone kill you?”

“No, foolish boy,” Oynalla’s spirit said, reaching out to rest one of her shimmering, luminescent hands on his knee. “I was old, old long before I ever met you. Before you ask, no, I didn’t need you to try to rescue me with some racial advancement boon or another. I chose to live my natural years when I was young. Many a night did I spend in this realm speaking to old spirits, learning of their ways and where they were going. I determined back then, nearly two hundred years ago, that I’d also like to explore these pathways.”

“But the clan . . .”

“If I tell you something, a secret I’ve held here,” she touched her chest, “for a hundred years, will you keep it?” Victor nodded, and she continued, gently thumping his knee, “I was weary of my life in the clan! I didn’t want to eat some mystical fruit, grow young again, and then have to break all of their hearts by saying I wanted to leave.

“Instead, I determined to explore these realms, journey past the spirit plane, and see what was next for me. It was an easy escape without breaking any hearts. There are those in the clan who might have sacrificed everything to try to make me young again, but they all knew better than to offer it. My ‘spirit guides’ said it was my time!” She cackled, and Victor had to chuckle with her. What a crazy old woman!

“So, you’re leaving.” The lump in his belly was gone, but a hollowness remained.

“This is fine, Victor. You’re going to be fine, and when you think of me, try to imagine me like this—young, beautiful, full of energy and excitement! I’m going somewhere new for the first time in a very long time. Won’t you wish me a good journey? Will you not bless my steps with well wishes?”

“I’ll do better than that, Oynalla,” Victor said, his voice growing thick with emotion. “When I honor my ancestors and send Energy their way, I’ll count you among them. I don’t know how it will work, but I know it will. Take my offerings, and use them to make yourself great in your next life. Will you promise me?”

Oynalla’s eyes narrowed, and her lips twisted as she wrestled with his words. Finally, she nodded and said, “Shrewd one, aren’t you, warrior? You’ll keep a hook in me, but I’ll gain a benefit. Well, then. Should your spell work and connect you to me with gifts of Energy, then I’ll seek to return the favor. Should I grow powerful, ‘great’ as you put it, I will send you aid when I can.”

“It’s a deal,” Victor said, something like relief rushing through him; he was losing Oynalla in this world, but he’d still have a connection—he was confident his spell would work, though he really didn’t know why; he might think of Oynalla as a

surrogate grandmother, but she wasn't really related to him. Did it not matter? No, it didn't matter, he decided. His intent was enough. "I'm going to miss you, Old Mother."

"Young Mother now," she cackled, then stood up and smashed him into a hug, pulling his head into her belly and stroking his hair with her small, shimmering hands. "Such a big man you've become! Your spirit is so bright; you'll see a hundred thousand more sights than old Oynalla ever saw. I'm proud of you! Don't forget about Thayla and Deyni! Visit them in this realm and, if possible, in the physical world. Promise me."

"I promise!" Victor said, breathing in the scent of spices, campfires, and herbs that clung to the spirit. Tears burst into his eyes when he realized it would be the last time he ever smelled that particular combination of scents. "Do you have to go now? Couldn't you linger for a while?"

"Don't ask that of me! I don't want to become one of these sad old spirits that loiter here, watching the living, waiting for a way to interact. I want to see what's next, Victor!"

"I understand," he sniffed. He reached up, wrapping his arms around the little woman, squeezing her tight until she grunted and laughed.

"You can't keep me here that way, either!"

"I know, I know. I have my own adventures to get back to."

"Yes, you do. I know great things await you and great challenges, too, warrior. Be careful, use this," she gently tapped his forehead, "as much as you use that thirsty axe of yours. Promise me!"

"I promise!" he said for the second time. Then Oynalla pushed against his shoulders, worming her way out of his grasp. She hefted her glittering, translucent bow and offered him a quick wave.

"Wish me luck now, warrior."

"Good luck, Old . . . Oynalla. Good luck, good hunting, and may you find what you seek." He stood up and waved as she turned and started jogging away, following the little, babbling stream, and Victor felt the hollowness return with a vengeance when he wondered if that was the last he'd ever see of her. He sighed, his heart heavy, and looked around Oynalla's special place. He memorized every detail, from the stream to the trees, to the little shrubs and the soft grass. One thing was certain; he'd ensure this place was visited regularly, and if Thayla and Deyni didn't know their way here, he'd show them.

After taking one more long look around the vale, he bent to drink deeply of the brook, then stood and ended his Spirit Walk. When he opened his eyes, Victor saw his coyotes, shimmering and bright, sitting around him. Beyond them, sitting on one of the little stools the youngsters brought in the day before, was Valla. To his immense surprise, she was petting one of his coyotes sitting near her feet.

“Welcome back,” she said, not looking up.

“Hey,” Victor said, and some of the emptiness in his heart must have seeped into the word because Valla looked up sharply, and her reddish-purple lips turned down in a frown.

“What’s wrong?”

“Bet you’re getting tired of hearing about my problems. It’s nothing to worry about; Oynalla has died and moved on. I’m sad, but it was what she wanted.” As he spoke, his coyotes grew agitated and paced, their whining intensifying.

“Hush!” he said, chuckling and shaking his head. “Okay, pups, time to go. Do some hunting in the spirit plane, hmm? Catch a spirit rabbit.”

As his companions disappeared in clouds of glimmering mist, Valla stood and walked over to him. Once again, he found himself embraced from a sitting position. Valla, though, knelt and rested her chin on his shoulder, hugging him tight. “I’m sorry, Victor. I know you enjoyed speaking to her, and I know she was more to you than just a mentor. It’s a lot you’ve been through lately . . .” Victor thought she might have kept talking, maybe mentioned how he’d realized his abuela might be long-dead, too, but he didn’t give her a chance.

He stood up, careful not to bump her, then, when he was on his feet, he gently hugged her back and said, “I’m all right. Really. I’m sad, sure, but how many people get to speak to their loved one’s spirit before it departs? She’s off doing something she’s dreamed about for longer than I’ve been alive. I can’t begrudge her.”

“If you want to talk . . .” Valla pressed, pushing away from him, still holding his shoulders at arm’s length and looking up into his eyes.

“Maybe, but not right now. We’ve got a lot to do in this world before we move on, Valla, and I think it’s time we get a start on things. I’m going to take that epic racial boost now. Will you watch over me?”

“I will, but when you say ‘before we move on,’ can you elaborate a little?”

“Yeah. You’re starting to scratch at greatness the same as I am. Are you content? Will you be content to live in the Untamed Marches after we tame them with Rellia and her clan? Me? I want to see more worlds. I want to see more wonders, and I want to go back and beat the shit out of the warlord in Coloss someday.”

“I’d like to see Tes’s home,” Valla said softly.

“There you have it then. We’ve got a lot to do,” Victor chuckled, reaching into his ring and pulling out the heavy silver flask that contained the boost he’d purchased in Coloss.