

Victor BK5: Ch7

Book 5: Chapter 7: Interrogation

“Well, you’ve grown again,” Valla observed, watching Victor struggle to a sitting position. She must have been right; he seemed to be taking up more space on the floor than he remembered.

“Great,” he grunted. “Anything else different?”

“Well . . . your skin is more lustrous, your hair has a sheen I’ve never seen before, and, well, you have a sharper look to you—like, you’re all bones and muscles. It’s quite nice, really, if I’m being honest. Your eyes, too; they’re like luminous pots of honey.” Valla looked down quickly, and Victor chuckled.

“What are you, a poet? Anyway, thanks; I’m glad I’m not monstrous, at least.”

“I didn’t say that . . .” Valla choked off her words, laughing as Victor shot her a glance, eyes narrowed.

“Gimme a sec,” Victor said, focusing on the System messages:

*****Congratulations! Your spell, Inspiring Presence, has morphed to: Inspiration of the Quinametzin.*****

*****Inspiration of the Quinametzin - Epic: Prerequisites: A direct and profound connection to the Quinametzin Bloodline, Affinity - Inspiration. You infuse your being with the power of inspiration and the fierce presence of the Quinametzin Titans. Nearby allies will be granted a portion of your potency. Energy Cost: Minimum 750 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

“Huh, that’s pretty badass,” Victor huffed softly, pleased with the message. He pulled up his status sheet, wanting to see exactly how much his race had advanced:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Advanced 7

Class:

Titanic Herald - Legendary

Level:

49

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 2

“I gained five ranks to my bloodline,” he announced, then, as Valla’s eyebrows rose, he said, “Tell me what this feels like to you,” and cast his new spell.

“Ancestors!” Valla said, standing up from the bed and arching her back. “That’s amazing! I feel like we could take on anything!” Her eyes went distant momentarily, and then she said, “Victor, my strength and vitality each improved quite a lot! Nearly ten percent!”

He nodded and said, “It’s my old Inspiring Presence spell—somehow, my advancement in my bloodline jumped it straight to epic and gave it some new effects for my allies.”

“What a boon! This will be very helpful on the field of battle, no?”

“Yeah . . .” Victor’s mind drifted to the scene he’d witnessed of Yolotli and the humans begging her for help. He wondered how their battle had gone, sort of wishing he’d seen it play out.

Speaking of allies,” Valla said, bringing him back to reality as she sat down. “I had a long meeting with Yunsha and the Headmaster of the academy, Jaxin-dak. They’re holding Professor ap’Gravin in a cell, waiting for you to question him. He hasn’t been cooperative.”

“Oh? They don’t have some magic they can use to get him to talk?”

“They do, but Jaxin-dak feels their authority is lacking, and ap’Gravin has powerful resistances. Apparently, he’s something of a Mind Mage—a lesser affinity and licensed by the Empire—and Jaxin thinks he’s locked away his secrets. Ap’Gravin is demanding to have his father alerted to the charges against him. The academy leadership is dragging their feet, but they feel the word has probably gotten out. Our window to speak with the man without interference is quickly closing.”

“And they’re cool with me slapping the guy around?”

“No, no,” Valla chuckled, “not exactly. The contract you signed is gone, but when they told me they were willing to let you speak to him, they suggested that intimidation without actual harm to the man was all they would stomach.”

“Mmhmm,” Victor nodded. He closed his eyes, then cast Alter Self, feeding the spell enough Energy to reduce himself to the size of a large, but not absurdly so, human. When he finished, he lithely hopped to his feet—his improved body had undergone the transformation more efficiently, using less Energy, but it still had taken nearly half of his reserves. “Stand in front of me,” he said, using Valla as a guide to ensure he’d gotten the spell right. When he saw the top of her head came to just beneath his chin, he nodded. “Right. Well, how’d it go with the airship?”

“It’s moored to the academy wall, waiting for our departure. The captain, ap’Veral, was happy for a few days of paid rest.”

“You’re awesome, Valla.” Victor grinned at her, then dug around in his ring for his armor and helmet, donning them as she watched.

“You plan to speak to the professor right away?”

“Yep.” He adjusted his wyrm scale vest, made sure it hung just over his dragonsteel belt, and then he grunted, lifting the weighty Kethian Juggernaut helm to his head, sighing with relief as it magically transferred its mass to him.

“Intimidating, but not so much as if you’d reveal your true nature.”

“All things in time, Valla.” Victor bent to pick up Lifedrinker, slipping his arms through her harness. “Right. Let’s deal with this asshole. Then we can take off, hmm? Nothing else keeping us here is there?”

“You’re so sure you’ll get what you need from him in one meeting?”

“One way or another,” Victor growled, striding to the door, pulling it open, and making his way down to the common room. As he stepped into the room, noting the bright windows—he had no idea what time it was, but apparently, it was daytime—and the busy tables, he paused as Harl called out from the bar, “Lord Victor! I’m so pleased to see you up and about. We were all hoping for your speedy recovery.”

“Oh?” Victor asked, taking a step closer to the apron-wearing man.

“Yes! Captain Valla told us of your lingering injury; I can’t imagine how you kept from showing your pain the other night, though I figure the ale helped, eh?” He winked and chuckled, setting down his bar rag, and then added, “Can I get you something to eat?”

“Not at the moment, Harl. I have an appointment.” Victor nodded, his helmet’s angular eyeholes doing nothing to make the gesture appear friendly, and then strode out of the inn. When he and Valla were progressing across the square, he asked, “What kind of injury did you tell him I had?”

“I said you had a wyrm’s stinger in your gut, and it was slowly working its way free.”

“What the fuck, Valla?” Victor’s voice rose in outraged disbelief.

“What? I wanted to give him something to gossip about—these people have hardly heard of a wyrm, let alone seen one.” She slapped him on the shoulder and added, “Besides, I wanted to give them a good reason to keep away from your room; I told them you were delirious from the pain and venom.”

Victor shook his head, lost for words, and continued his speedy progress toward the academy.

“Where do we find this ap’Gravin guy?”

“We’re supposed to ask at the administration offices for an escort, and then they’ll take us to his holding cell.”

“Uh-huh.” Victor looked up the street to the yawning, open doors of the academy’s central hall. Students were out in large numbers, and he wondered if they were on their way to classes. He glanced at the sun, saw it was high overhead, and revised his guess; it was lunchtime. “Do you know where that is? The admin offices?”

“Yes, that’s where I met with Jaxin-dak.” Valla moved past him, and Victor followed behind. He and Valla still garnered a lot of strange looks from the students, but Victor figured it had more to do with their armor, weapons, and general lack of any resemblance to people who belonged in an academy than his size, which was nice.

“So, the contract’s gone, right? I’m not going to kill myself if I start a fight?”

“Correct, but please don’t,” Valla replied, glancing over her shoulder and offering him a pained smile. “I’d rather not have all of Fainhallow and their alumni out for blood.”

“I don’t plan to, but I want to keep my options open.”

As they climbed the steps to the entrance hall, Valla asked, “Have you thought about what you’re going to say? Do you want me to do anything?”

“I’m going to go with my gut. As for you, I’d appreciate it if you would keep people from interrupting me while I’m in with the professor.” Victor had some ideas but didn’t feel like talking about them while he walked. He’d try good old-fashioned anger and intimidation; if that didn’t work, he had some plans involving Project Spirit.

“I’ll try . . .” Valla said, though her tone didn’t elicit confidence. “It’s just that I have a feeling they’ll want a representative in there with you.”

“We’ll see.” Victor twisted his mouth into a frown and felt some rage, always quick to respond to his thoughts, seeping into his pathways. He followed Valla through side passageways and up one flight of stairs, and then they walked into a wood-paneled room with a receptionist’s desk and two doors leading off to the left and right. Comfortable-looking chairs and couches lined the walls, intermixed with bookcases and a stand where a steaming pot of tea and several pastries sat waiting on a tray.

Valla approached the petite, older, Ardeni woman sitting at the desk and cleared her throat. “Excuse me, I’m Valla ap’Yensha, and this is my companion, Victor. We were told to request access to Professor ap’Gravin here.”

“Oh?” The woman sat back, closing the book she’d been reading. “I see, I see,” she said, taking in Valla and Victor glowering behind her. “Excuse me while I check with Professor Oylla-dak.”

“Not Jaxin-dak?” Victor growled, wondering if they were about to be shoved off onto some lesser bureaucrat of the academy.

“Oh no, I’m sorry to say the Headmaster has had to leave on business. He’s gone to the academy in Tharcray for a tournament.”

“A tournament?” Valla asked, then shook her head and quickly added, “It’s unimportant. Please check with whoever’s in charge.”

“Yes, yes,” she muttered, standing up with a groan and stretching, “I’ve been sitting too long!” She walked to the door on the left and added, “Please take a seat. I’m sure she’ll be with you as soon as possible.”

Valla turned and walked over to the tray of pastries, snatching one with pink frosting, and Victor continued to scowl, pacing back and forth over the rust-colored rug that ran down the center of the large room. “Not hungry?” Valla asked, taking a bite. “It’s a little stale but good.” Victor grunted, and she shrugged, taking another bite and sitting down. “I do hope you’re not planning to bring this building down around our ears, Victor. You seem to be working yourself up to something . . .”

“I’m not planning to do anything crazy, but I’ve got a real impatient feeling in my gut, and I don’t know why. God, I hope it’s not my damn bloodline. I wonder if I’m starting to think like a Quinametzin.”

“Do you think that spell you learned from Tes, to reduce yourself, is limiting that effect at all? I wonder if you’d be smashing through walls if you were your normal self.” She licked at some frosting on her thumb, and Victor stared at her, his eyes going wide as she spoke.

“Are you serious, Valla? Are you trying to stress me out? I’m not going to lose control of myself, regardless of how big I am. You know my will stat!” While he spoke, he realized what she was doing, trying to make him think about his emotions and talk himself through them. He might be impatient and cranky, but he was still Victor; he was in control. “You’re clever; you know that?”

“Thank you,” she said, taking another bite and smiling impishly. Just then, the door through which the receptionist had gone opened, and she reappeared, followed closely by an imposing Shadeni woman. She was tall, close to Victor’s current height, with enormous, folded red wings and eyes that reminded him of a starry night sky—depthless pools of black, teeming with bright white motes.

“Valla, Victor, may I introduce Professor Oylla-dak?”

The woman stepped forward and smiled broadly, revealing long, pointed canines. She was beautiful, with a long, slender nose, high cheekbones, and full lips, but Victor found himself

viewing her as an authority figure almost immediately and didn't feel the slightest urge to flirt. "Just Oylla is fine. Welcome. I'm to show you to that scoundrel, ap'Gravin, hmm?" When Victor nodded and opened his mouth to reply, she continued speaking, forestalling his words, "No, no. No need to explain—Jaxin-dak left me with thorough instructions. Very well, follow me, please."

Valla hopped to her feet and hurried to Victor's side as he followed the professor out of the room and down the hallway. She continued to speak as they walked. "He's not far away. We have a detention cell or two for stronger Energy users here at the academy, meant to keep them from harming themselves or others while we work out disciplinary actions. Usually, they're occupied by intractable students, but ap'Gravin isn't the first professor to wait for justice in one of them."

She rounded a corner, descended a short flight of stairs, and stopped in a round, plaster-walled room lit by orange Energy lamps. Three gray metal doors were evenly spaced on the curved wall, and she pointed to the one on the left. "He's within. I'll need to accompany you for your questioning."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Victor grunted, walking toward the door.

"Pardon me?"

"Listen," Victor said, turning to her, looking into those weird, star-filled eyes, "I'm likely to get a little angry, and my aura might start to leak, and it will be uncomfortable in there. I don't intend to hurt the man, but he's not going to enjoy my company unless he's very forthcoming with the answers I'm seeking."

"Hmm," Oylla said, folding her arms and staring right back at him. "Nevertheless, I'll accompany you."

Victor frowned, finding it necessary to push his rage back down into his Core, but then he shrugged and said, "If you want to leave, don't feel bad." Then he turned and walked to the door, staring at it while he waited for Oylla to unlock it.

To her credit, Oylla didn't respond or argue. She walked to the door, held something shiny against the handle, and when it clicked, she pulled it open and gestured for Victor to precede her into the room beyond. Victor peered through, saw a man lying on the only furnishing within—a simple cot, low to the ground—and stepped through. The man was an Ardeni with uncharacteristic long black hair, a hawkish nose, and bright green eyes. His face was dotted with dark stubble, and he looked a bit bedraggled. Victor was taking in his dark black robes and noticed a gleaming red metal collar on his neck.

"You collared him?"

"Well, his abilities are a bit much for the student wards in the cell to manage," Oylla said, stepping into the room after Victor.

"What's this?" The man's voice was sharp, slightly nasal, and thoroughly outraged as he sat up, his lanky frame hidden by the folds of his robes.

"Ap'Gravin, this is Victor. He's a human who was done great harm by a man in your father's employ." As ap'Gravin absorbed her words, a deep frown etching a

furrow between his eyes, Oylla turned to Victor and said, "I'll be right here, behind you, but I'll leave the interview to you now."

"Thanks . . ." Victor started to say, but ap'Gravin's outburst interrupted him.

"What have I to do with my father's henchmen? What have I to do with some brutish human? This is preposterous, and when I have my day before the council, I'll see you, Jaxin-dak, and that fool Yunsha stripped of your honors and titles and sent packing!"

"That's enough," Victor growled, putting some rage into his voice, letting slip the leash on his aura just a bit. Ap'Gravin backed up, scooting toward the wall against which his cot rested, and his face lost some of its color, fading to a paler shade of blue. Victor rested a hand on Lifedrinker's shiny metal and stepped closer to the professor, and he spoke from his belly when he asked, "What did you take from Olivia Bennet? What did you steal to give to your father and Boaegh so they could summon me?"

"What?" ap'Gravin jerked his gaze from Victor to Oylla, and he wailed, "What's the meaning of this? Such a preposterous accusation! Is this why I'm being held here? My father will have all of your heads!"

Victor reached into his Core and pulled out a thick river of fear-attuned Energy, letting it flood into his pathways, then he fully released his hold on his aura. His eyes, usually bright and golden, filled with darkness, and a flickering purple-black halo limned his shoulders and helmeted head as he let his aura pour forth. More, he cast Project Spirit, and a dark surge of fear-attuned Energy rolled out of his chest, bathing the professor in its clinging, midnight waves.

He heard a gasp from behind him, but his eyes were focused on ap'Gravin as he cried out and tried to press himself through the wall's stone. His eyes were haunted, and his mouth hung open in abject terror. "Answer my question, pendejo! What did you take from Olivia Bennet?"

Amazingly, the man still struggled against him, even collared as he was. Victor could see him fighting against the pressure of his spell and the struggle of his will as he pushed against the waves of dark Energy, and then the professor forced out a strained reply, "I. Took. Nothing!"

Victor felt his fury surge. He was furious at this man for resisting him, but he was also angry at himself for a seed of doubt that began to nibble at the corner of his mind. He knew it was this guy who'd taken the sample from Olivia; he knew he must have an idea what his father had been up to, why Boaegh had summoned him through the universe to this world and dropped Victor into one hellacious experience after another. How was he resisting him? What tier was he, anyway? "Enough," he growled and ended his Alter Self spell.

Suddenly a great wave of Energy rushed back into his Core, and every cell in his body, freed from a self-imposed prison, surged with power and density. His body erupted with growth, his hulking shoulders and neck pressed against the ceiling as he stooped over to avoid smashing his head through the stone. He loomed over the professor, cringing on his cot. He felt his true aura fall like

an avalanche around him, eliciting another yelp from Oylla-dak and bringing a wail of despair from the ghost-white face of ap'Gravin.

Victor wasn't finished, though; he reached out a hand, grabbed hold of ap'Gravin's robe, and turned, glowering at Oylla-dak. He growled, "I need more space." Then he dragged the limp, wailing professor through the door into the larger room beyond. The ceiling was much higher there, accommodating the stairs that led up to the next level, and Victor set ap'Gravin down, standing to his full height.

Valla stood near the stairs, clearly bothered by his aura but managing it much more easily than ap'Gravin. After all, she'd been exposed to it many, many times. She stood there, one hand on Midnight's hilt, and raised an eyebrow at him, glancing at Oylla, who had followed him out of the holding cell. "What are you going to do?" her arched eyebrow asked.

Oylla, a grimace on her face, voiced a similar question, strain evident in her voice, "What are you doing? You can't take him anywhere! Don't harm him!"

"I'm not taking him anywhere. As to harm, it's entirely up to him," Victor growled, and then he cast Iron Berserk.