

Victor BK4: Ch1

Book 4: Chapter 1: Coloss

Victor watched the horizon, wondering if the great horn-plated serpent would make another appearance, but all he saw were the occasional swirls of desert sand, lifting on hot currents of air. Motion to his left brought his attention back to Valla, and he looked at her as she slowly walked in a circle on the top of the low, sandy rise. She avoided stepping in the blood trail left by Boaegh's head as it had bounced down the slope, and Victor noted her frown as she passed by the wizard's body.

"How'd he chain you up, anyway?" he asked.

"My own foolishness. I grew so heated in the chase that I threw caution aside. I charged through the door into his portal room, and the chains wrapped me in their grip—he'd set them up with some sort of warding magic."

"Then he tossed you through the portal?" Victor frowned.

"Exactly, though 'tossed' is the wrong word. He gestured with his hands, and the damnable bindings dragged me through. They're rather advanced magical items . . ." she trailed off, looking at Boaegh's corpse, then added, "Have you searched him? I dropped my sword when the chains wrapped me."

"No, let's check it out before we have to run away from a big damn snake or something." Victor knelt by the gray-robed, headless body. The robes were quite saturated with blood from when he'd buried Lifedrinker between the Pyromancer's shoulders, so he grabbed the dry part near the dead wizard's waist and flopped him over.

The robes concealed most of the body, seeming to have multiple layers that clung to his legs and arms. Still, Boaegh's fingers and hands were exposed below the wide cuffs, and Victor sucked in a breath. He'd never gotten a good look at the mage, and now that he reached to pull the rings from his fingers, he felt morbid curiosity about what his face looked like—the fingers were lightly scaled and orange with long black, pointy nails tipping each of them.

"What kinda dude was this asshole?" Victor muttered as he pulled a ring from each of his hands. He handed them to Valla, then walked down the slope toward the head that had come to rest against a dry scrub bush.

"Do you want me to bond with these?" Valla called after him.

"Yeah, but we're sharing the goods. Find your sword now, though." Victor knelt by the head, the face had come to rest facing the dusty ground, and the back only showed layers of black cloth that the wizard had wrapped around himself. Victor grabbed the sides of the head and turned it to study the face of his former tormentor. "Ugly, weren't you?" he grunted when he saw the strange, orange, reptilian visage.

Orange was an oversimplification—Boaegh had scales that varied in shades, darker along his snout and brow and lighter on his cheeks and neck. Still, overall it was orange. “Lizard or snake?” Victor wondered aloud.

“Seems more like a snake to me, but I guess the limbs make a sort of counterargument,” Valla said, looking down at him. Victor was glad to see she already had her sword in her hand. “The ring’s loaded with stuff—Energy beads, jewelry, furniture, clothing, food, scrolls, books, on and on and on. We should get somewhere safe before we really go through it. The other ring is some kind of Pyromancer charm—it increases the damage of flame-related spells.”

Valla’s words reminded Victor of the rings he’d taken from ap’Horrin, and he nodded, saying, “Yeah. Let’s figure some shit out, and then we can go through our loot from the oubliette.”

“Figure ‘shit’ out sounds about right. If we can’t find our way back to Fanwath, Rellia’s either going to have to go into hiding or die.” She pointed in a direction that Victor figured was south because the heavy, glowering yellow-orange sun was off to her right, and it had slowly been inching toward the horizon. “I think I can make out a road or track in that direction. It’s hard to say for sure.” She shrugged and added, “It could be the path of a giant snake.”

“Hang on,” Victor said as she started to trudge in that direction, “what about the far scribe books?”

“Oh!” Valla said, suddenly holding a book easily as thick as the one Victor had bought to communicate with Lam. He thought about trying to send Lam a message but figured he’d let Valla see if the magic worked first. While she was busily scratching out a message, Victor reached up and pressed his fingers against the familiar lump of Gorz’s amulet.

“Hey, you there, Gorz?”

“Victor, how are you? I’m sensing a break in continuity from when we last spoke; did we teleport?”

“You really that out of it? Didn’t you notice the conversations I’ve been having? The oubliette? The portal?”

“I’m sorry, Victor, but I find it harder and harder to remain cognizant of my surroundings between our conversations. I wonder . . .” For the first time that Victor could remember, Gorz trailed off mid-sentence.

“You wonder what, Gorz?”

“I wonder if my spirit shard is losing its anchoring to this plane of existence. I don’t know how that could be, unless . . .” again, his voice faded out, and Victor was about to prompt him, but then he continued, “unless the bindings on this

amulet are growing weaker and my greater spirit has moved further away from the Material Plane. Could it be? Am I being called to rejoin it?"

"I don't know, buddy. Is that something that can happen?" Victor was skeptical—hadn't Gorz been trapped for thousands of years already?

"I'll . . . think on it."

"Right . . ."

"Victor, I'm not seeing a response," Valla announced, interrupting Victor's commune with Gorz.

"Well, shit. Let's give it some time; it's not like we're in the same neighborhood anymore."

Valla frowned but nodded, and her book disappeared back into her ring. She turned and, back straight as a board, started marching to the very thin, very faint line of brown near the horizon. She still held her sword, naked blade resting on her shoulder, and Victor followed, Lifedrinker held crossways in his two hands.

He took a good look at his axe and grinned ferociously. She'd done him proud back in the oubliette. He'd even say she'd guided herself through the air to smash into Boaegh's back perfectly. The veins of heart-silver ran in jagged, thick rivulets from her gleaming edge through the darker, denser metal of her axe head, and he could feel the potential in her, the vibrating eagerness for battle. It felt like she was on the threshold of "leveling up," like she'd done back in the dungeon so long ago.

"Your axe looks different," Valla said, slowing down and watching him as he walked toward her. Victor glanced up from his study of Lifedrinker and smiled.

"Yeah, I think she's getting ready to evolve or whatever it's called when she advances. She's done it before," he said. "When I first got her, she was smaller—didn't have this pointy bit at the back of her axe head."

"A truly wondrous weapon," Valla said, nodding. "I love my sword, but it's not alive."

"Maybe we'll figure a way to wake it up. You think that's possible?"

"I don't know. I don't know what it's made of or what goes into creating a living artifact like your axe. I thought it was the Heart Silver that made it intelligent?"

"Well, yeah, but not all intelligent artifacts are Heart Silver, right?"

"No, but most are like your amulet—spirits trapped to serve a purpose." Valla was looking at her sword while she walked and almost tripped into a small cactus with pencil-like pads covered in dark red spines, and Victor grabbed onto her elbow.

“Careful. Who knows what kinda nastiness is lurking on those pokers.”

“They blend in with the landscape! I thought it was a scrub brush in my peripheral vision; I was going to stomp through it!” Valla said, hopping around the little cactus.

“Yeah, keep your eyes peeled,” Victor laughed. As the sun continued to set and the glare on the desert landscape faded, he looked around, admiring the bright red and orange streaked clouds hanging high in the sky. “Quite a sunset.”

“Yes, it’s lovely,” Valla replied, though she barely glanced at the sky. Her eyes were trained on the southern horizon, and she added, “It’s definitely a road! I see posts—little markers evenly spaced.”

“Shit!” Victor said, shading his eyes and staring in the direction she pointed. Sure enough, he saw little wooden posts evenly spaced along the brown ribbon of, presumably, the roadway. “You’re right! Let’s pick up the pace, eh?” He didn’t wait for a response, breaking into an easy jog he knew he could maintain for hours, eating up the miles. Valla kept pace behind him without comment, and Victor grinned. That was his favorite quality about her as a travel companion; she never complained and rarely second-guessed him.

Fifteen minutes later, they were standing on a wide, flat, dirt road next to one of the regular posts on its southern shoulder. The post was square, about four inches by four, and around five feet high. Brass letters stamped vertically into the wood read, “COLOSS.” Underneath the letters were similar brass numerals that said, “37.”

“Like, mile markers?” Victor mused.

“Mile markers? Oh, you mean it’s saying that Coloss, whatever that is, is thirty-seven miles?”

“Not exactly,” Victor said, pointing down the road to the next marker. “That one’s not a mile away, maybe more like a quarter-mile. Let’s go see if it says thirty-six or thirty-eight.” He started jogging down the road, and Valla gamely ran behind him. A couple of minutes later, he came to a halt before the next marker, and sure enough, it said “COLOSS - 36.”

“You think it’s a town?” Valla asked.

“That would be my guess,” Victor shrugged, then he snapped his fingers and said, “Check your far scribe book.” Valla nodded and produced the book, flipping to the most recent page, and her face lit up with delight.

“There’s a response!”

“Oh, sweet!” Victor clapped his hands together, then added, “Did you tell her about our, uh, trip?”

“Not yet, but I said we were out of reach. We still have fourteen weeks until the campaign is officially supposed to begin—Valla’s planning a parade through Persi Gables to kick off the march. I think we can find a way back before then, don’t you?” She raised her seafoam green eyebrows, and Victor couldn’t help chuckling at the mischief in her eyes.

“Hell yeah, I think we can!” Victor said, always game to poke the eye of authority. “Let’s not tell her until we know for sure one way or the other. If shit looks terrible, like we’ll never make it, you can warn her. Is that cool?”

“Yes,” Valla nodded.

“Well? Let’s start jogging toward whatever Coloss is, and if we see a place to rest before we get there, we can chill for the night and go through our loot.”

“Yes,” Valla nodded. “Let’s chill.” Then she started jogging as Victor’s mouth fell open.

“You . . .” he started, running to catch up. “You almost used that right!”

They ran as the sun descended behind them, and by the time the orange-streaked sky turned dark, revealing a brilliant starfield and a huge, crater-pocked moon, distinctly green in tone, they were at marker seventeen. All the while they were running, Victor could hear the sounds of distant wildlife—coughing roars, weird howls and barks, yowling, and even screeching. They never laid eyes on any more monsters, big or small, though they saw quite a few airborne birds and creatures in the distance.

“The place seems quite alive; I wonder if the denizens would view us as prey should we linger in place.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Rather get to a town and ask than do some experiments, you know?”

“Agreed,” Valla huffed. She hadn’t had much trouble keeping up with him, and he had to admit, he admired the way she could keep up a fast jog while holding her big sword at the ready.

“You think you could go faster? We have seventeen more markers, so something like four miles. I bet we could make it pretty quick if we wanted to.” Rather than answer him, Valla grinned and started to really run. Victor whooped and ran after her. As he began to gain on her, Valla’s hands were suddenly empty, and she kicked it into another gear, sprinting down the road. “Cheater!” Victor laughed, shaking Lifedrinker over his head as he ran, “I can’t put her in storage!”

“Your . . . problem!” Valla laughed between breaths. Victor grinned and boosted his agility with Sovereign Will, and then he veritably flew down the road, madly laughing as he passed by Valla. She wasn’t one to be outdone, though; as he

worked on lengthening his lead, he felt a rush of wind, and then Valla charged past him, gusts and miniature gales throwing dirt and pebbles up around her feet.

Victor laughed in dismay, pumping his legs for all he was worth, but suddenly Valla slid to a stop ahead of him, kicking up dust that he inhaled as he thundered up to her, trying to slow down. Coughing and heaving for breath, he leaned forward, hands on his knees, and tried to see why Valla had stopped.

The road continued down a gradual decline, but in the distance, where the star-speckled black sky met the dark horizon of the desert, the lights of a walled city glittered like a pile of jewels in the darkness. “That’s something else,” Victor said, even his limited experience telling him that the city was much larger than Persi Gables or Gelica.

“Coloss, I suppose,” Valla said, stretching her arms over her head as she got her wind back.

“Kinda weird we didn’t see any traffic. That place looks enormous.”

“Well, it was late afternoon when we got here. Maybe people don’t like this desert at night.” Valla glanced around meaningfully, and Victor nodded, well aware of all the creature sounds in the night.

“Let’s keep moving,” he said, starting back into a jog. “Let’s hope they take beads here—I could use a bath and a good night’s sleep.”

“If the System exists here, they’ll take beads. I think.” Valla replied, running beside him.

“Have you ever been to another world?”

“No. Rellia has, but only to a linked city where she was trying to make a trade deal.”

“Linked city?”

“She went through the System Stone in Gelica to a city in a nearby world. One that had already been traveled through in both directions—people call that a ‘linked city’ because we’ve, well, we’ve established a link.”

“How do you know it’s close to Fanwath?”

“The cost—the System charges exorbitant fees to facilitate transport between worlds, and the more distant the world, the more absurd the price.”

“So,” Victor said, smiling at how easy it was to carry on a conversation while running—no way he’d have done that back in wrestling practice, “we better hope this world isn’t distant from Fanwath.”

“Yeah, I suppose that is a concern. There were quite a few beads in Boaegh’s ring, though.”

“Yeah, I saw some bags of ‘em in ap’Horrin’s ring, too. Hopefully, we’re good.”

They both got lost in their thoughts for a while after that, and the enormous, light-bedecked walls of the city were soon looming above them, forestalling any other topic of conversation. Victor wasn’t a stone expert, but he thought the massive tan-colored blocks of the wall looked like what the Egyptians used on their pyramids. Each one was the size of a car, and the walls were higher than apartment buildings, at least the ones Victor had experience with. “How tall do you figure that wall is? A hundred feet?”

“Easily. Maybe two hundred. It’s much bigger and thicker than the one around Persi Gables. Look at that gate!” Victor followed her pointing finger, and his mouth fell open—the only reason he hadn’t noticed the enormous black iron gate was that it looked small inside the great wall. As they approached, though, he could see it was at least thirty feet high and twenty wide. And it was closed.

Great glow lamps illuminated the space around the walls; each was rectangular, about five feet by two, and poured out massive arcs of bright, yellow light. The gate had two such lamps on each side, and as Victor and Valla approached, they had to squint against the bright glare. No guards stood outside, and no voices drifted down from the high walls to challenge them. Victor looked around at the dark, moonlit desert behind them, then back at the gate and shrugged.

“Hello?” he called, cupping his hands to his mouth. Valla jumped at his shout and whirled to stare daggers at him. “What?” he asked.

“You startled me. Look, though,” she said, pointing to the left-hand corner of the enormous gate. Victor saw a smaller rectangle in the rust-flecked black iron and realized it was a person-sized door.

“Oh! So they don’t have to open the gate to let a person through.” He nodded, walked up to the smaller door, and lifted a hand to knock. Before his knuckles fell on the hard surface, though, an even smaller rectangle at eye level slid open, and big yellow eyes stared out at him.

“Who calls?” a gruff, scratchy asked.

“Hello,” Valla said, striding up next to Victor, “We’re travelers seeking shelter.”

“That right? At the east gate in the night? You have a desire for death?” the voice asked, but Victor heard the clank and scrape of a large bolt being slid aside, and the door was pushed open. “Come through, then, ‘fore a terror grabs ya up.”

“Thanks,” Victor said, stepping through the iron threshold and into a dim stone tunnel that would have looked about right passing through the Hoover Dam. Before he could take in the scene, though, his eyes were drawn to the six large

guards with spears leveled at him and Valla. They looked like burlier versions of Boaeigh—tall yellow, green, and orange-scaled serpent people clad in all sorts of exotic armor. Many wore helmets, most had other weapons bristling from their belts, and some had four arms rather than two.

“Declare your names and your intentions in Coloss,” the first scratchy voice said, and Victor followed the sound to the green-scaled serpent man on the right, the only guard leaning on his spear rather than pointing it.

“Hey, we’re honestly just trying to get home,” Victor said, and Valla stepped forward, clearing her throat.

“We mistakenly took a portal from our world to the desert nearby. We don’t know where we are and would like access to your City Stone.”

“You’re lucky, then. The Garsh Wastes,” the guard flicked one of his four hands toward the gates, indicating the area outside, “aren’t friendly. It’s good that you made your way to Coloss, but you won’t so easily access the City Stone.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Valla asked, making the assumption of a lifetime, as far as Victor was concerned. He winced and waited to see if she’d guessed right.

“Simply that the stone isn’t open to the public. Warlord Thoargh only grants access to people willing to pay.” He looked at the other five guards and motioned with his top-right arm for them to lower their spears. They complied and then disbursed around the tunnel, standing here and there near the gate, clearly still trying to listen to the spokesman’s conversation with Victor and Valla.

“We can pay,” Victor said, perhaps too quickly.

The guard grinned, though, and shook his head. “I doubt that. You’re new to this world, yes? Warlord Thoargh only grants access to people with Coloss prize tokens.”

“I can guess the rest,” Valla said, shaking her head. “This warlord—he’s the one that hands out the tokens?”

“Well, not personally,” the guard said, and Victor caught a glimpse of his long, forked tongue flicking lightning-fast between his scaled lips. “There are prize committees,” he yawned and leaned against the metal doors. “I don’t really get paid enough to educate every runt that wanders in here, though. Why not head into the city and see if you can get someone with a less important job to explain things further.” He gestured with his spear down the enormous tunnel, and Victor, his jaw hanging open at the guard’s choice of words, allowed Valla to pull him away.

“He called me a runt?” Victor said, looking around at the tunnel—it had to be three hundred feet long, and the walls and ceiling were composed of those enormous stone blocks that made up the city wall. “Is the wall this damn thick?” he asked, finally registering the absurd proportions.

“This wall puts the one around the noble district in Tharcray to shame,” Valla said, echoing his sentiments.

“I’m sure it’s thicker here at the bottom than at the top,” Victor said, trying to wrap his head around the amount of stone it would take to build a wall this size around an entire city. “What kind of Energy user can cut and move stones like this? It seems impossible that this was done by hand.”

“Earth affinity,” Valla quickly replied. “Someone much more powerful than I.”

Victor nodded and turned his gaze away from the massive stone blocks to the end of the tunnel. People, in large numbers, were moving along what appeared to be a busy street. Something seemed strange about the crowd of people, and it took Victor a minute to put his finger on it; he’d grown so used to the predominance of Ardeni and Shadeni people in Persi Gables and Gelica that the lack of red and blue skin was throwing him off.

As they drew closer, details about the city’s people became more evident. Victor had thought he was looking at adults and children, but he realized that nearly half of the people walking around out there were giants—eight, ten, even twelve feet tall. Many of the others looked human enough, but some had extra limbs, others had horns, and one guy walking by had a big cyclops-like eye.

Then there were the snake people and—surprising only to Valla—brightly carapaced insect people. The insects weren’t all green like Ksajik; some were pale orange, others were sandy-brown, and still others were golden-yellow. The people that looked the most like humans were the giants, and Victor began to understand why the guard had called him a runt.

“Victor,” Valla said, reaching to grab his wrist and slow their walk, “do you feel their auras?”

“Now you mention it,” Victor said, finally consciously acknowledging what his gut had been telling him since he’d first been confronted by the guards at the gate—It wasn’t just his suddenly less-than-impressive stature; many of these people were exuding a level of Energy, of power, that made him feel small. “Yeah, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“Kansas?” Valla looked at him like he’d lost his mind.

“It’s a figure of speech from my world—some kinda old movie or something.”

“Movie?” Valla shook her head and continued, “Never mind. The point I was trying to make was that many of these people feel like you; they have a huge presence. Let’s be careful with our words.”

“This is what I feel like?”

“Maybe to a lesser degree,” Valla said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“You’re just afraid to compliment me,” Victor laughed, and then they stepped out of the tunnel onto a busy cobbled road. Energy lamps on tall iron posts drove back the night’s shadows, and it was clear that Coloss didn’t go to bed with the sun. Victor stood there, mouth agape, staring at the crowds of strange and enormous people, at the tall stone buildings, and floating magical carts.

He’d just begun to take in the smells of spicy food and strange incense when a hand gently nudged him aside, pushing him to the edge of the cobbled path. “Hey,” Victor started, but then choked off the word as the hand’s owner stomped past him—an armor-clad man nearly twice his height. He wasn’t thin, either, and judging by the effortless way he’d brushed Victor aside, he wasn’t lacking muscle.

“Victor!” Valla hissed, again grabbing his arm and pulling him along. “Don’t stand in the middle of traffic!”

“Yeah,” Victor said, still unable to wrap his head around the size and strength of the guy that had nudged him aside. He watched the man’s mighty frame as he strode away down the street and couldn’t help wondering how he’d stack up to him in his Quinametzin form. He walked along next to Valla, trying to avoid the big guys, and that’s when he realized that the people in the city seemed to walk in lanes; the big people were on the left, toward the center of the street, and the more “normal” sized people were on the right.

As he and Valla walked along with the traffic, Victor looked at the buildings and the signs and began noticing new details. Many of the businesses had high, massive doors, and he figured that was to accommodate the giant people, but, perhaps more strange, were the occasional shops that didn’t have big doors—were they intentionally excluding the giants?

They passed by grocers, tailors, cobblers, butchers, bakeries, furniture makers, and restaurants. At the first intersection, they came to a gigantic building with a sign that read, “Weary Travelers, Welcome! The Basilisk Inn and Tavern.” The structure had a huge door which Victor took to mean giants were welcome. A stable stood next door, filling the air with the scents of straw and animal dung, but over that was the smell of roasting meats, and Victor’s mouth began to water. “Let’s go in here,” he said.

“The first inn we see?” Valla asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Hey, we can always look for something else, but right now, I’d like to get off the street and learn more about this place before we go exploring. What do you think?”

“Makes sense.” Valla nodded and started up the giant steps to the door. Victor laughed, watching her; it looked like a person trying to take regular steps three at a time. He took them in springing bounds and pulled the heavy wooden door open, gesturing for Valla to lead the way inside.

She smirked as she took the last big step, then stepped past, and he followed. The common room of the inn looked much like any other, but mixed in with the normal-sized furniture were huge tables and chairs, and the crowd was a mixture of people; many were the human-like people with their strange—to Victor—features, from horns to tusks to an odd number of eyes. Here and there, Victor saw some of the serpent people and, of course, some giants occupied the oversized furniture.

“Come in,” a thin, dark-haired man with ruddy skin said, gesturing Victor and Valla over to his counter. Victor approached him, noting how the bar was staggered—half was about five feet high, and the other half a few feet taller, clearly meant to accommodate the larger people. “New to town?” the man asked, absently wiping dry a mug with a white towel. He turned his head slightly, and Victor saw a long, curved black horn poking out the right side of it.

“Hey,” Victor replied, nodding, “yeah, we just got here. You have a room available?”

“Sure! Have a seat here, and I’ll give you something to wash the dust out of your throats.”

“Thank you,” Valla replied, climbing atop one of the open stools. Victor nodded and sat next to her.

“Where do you hail from?”

“A world called Fanwath,” Valla replied.

“Oh, new to the world, not just Coloss, hmm?”

“Yeah, that’s right. We really weren’t meaning to come here and wanted to get home as soon as possible. The guard at the gate was telling us something about how there’s a warlord or something that doesn’t allow access to the City Stone?” Victor had decided to get right to the point, hoping this innkeeper was as friendly as all the others he’d met.

“Oh, that’s true. Warlord Thoargh capitalizes on his City Stone, what with Coloss being the only city for a few thousand miles in any direction. Do you have the means to travel great distances through perilous territory?” He turned to fill a couple of mugs from one of the taps behind him, and Valla looked at Victor with a raised eyebrow. He took her expression to mean she was leaving it to him to decide how much to say.

“I guess it depends on how hard it is to get these, um, tokens they give out to access the stone,” he said as the horned man set the two frothy mugs of pale beer in front of him and Valla.

“Oh, not too hard, I’d think. You can earn them by turning in monster trophies or for winning arena battles,” he paused and glanced from Victor to Valla, “Now, don’t let that discourage you two! Even low-tier people like you can earn monster

trophies—just get with one of the monster hunting expeditions and help out; they pay helpers in scraps.”